

## Spotlighting the Rights of Children in Zimbabwe: Roles and Challenges for Non-Governmental Organisations

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### Abstract

*Over the last decade, the degenerating quality of service provided by the state and the ever-increasing child abuse cases in Zimbabwe have emerged as key areas of concern to Non-Governmental Organisations. Consequently, Non-Governmental Organisations have stepped in as alternative agents that perform a vital and positive role in promoting the rights of children. The purpose of this study was to examine the role played by a selected non-governmental organisation and the challenges it faces in promoting the rights of children in Zimbabwe. The study was conducted using a blend of the key informant interview technique as well as document study. Seven participants were purposively drawn from the selected non-governmental organisation. The findings indicated that, as a consequence of the failure of the government in Zimbabwe, the non-governmental organisation has performed a primary role in promoting and addressing the rights of children in the country. The strategic interventions by the non-governmental organisation took the form of educational assistance, legal protection, HIV/AIDS mitigation programs, psychosocial support and material support. The study also identified a cocktail of challenges that negatively impact on the operations of the non-governmental organisation. Accordingly, several recommendations were put forward.*

**Keywords:** Children's rights, non-governmental organisation, Zimbabwe

### 1. Background of the Study

The aim of the present study was to investigate the role played and the challenges faced by a selected non-governmental organisation (NGO) in promoting the rights of children in Zimbabwe. The abuse and exploitation of children in Zimbabwe and other developing countries has increased exponentially in recent years (Chakawarika, 2011). Evidence to this effect includes the upsurge in the number of rape cases being reported, the escalation of destitute children on the streets and increase of children in orphanages. For instance, a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2010) chronicles that at least 60% of rape survivors brought to the attention of authorities are children, with the majority being girls. Between 2005 and 2010, over three thousand cases of child abuse were recorded by the Zimbabwe Republic Police whilst the Victim Friendly Courts in the country heard over a thousand cases of child sexual abuse. Additionally, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation News (2013) reported that children in Zimbabwe face a threat to their well-being due to the fact that the number of children who are either murdered or sexually abused continues to increase in the country. It is generally also acknowledged that most of the cases of child abuse are not reported to authorities. Consequently, a need exists for the special protection of children considering that they are the most valuable assets of the future.

Another challenge facing Zimbabwe pertains to the deterioration of social welfare services, which was triggered by the economic and political upheavals that the country has faced in the past decade. This has culminated in the haemorrhage of child protection protocols and policies, which have not been updated for many years. Additionally, the country has been subjected to incessant volleys of sustained brain drain which left a deficit in the available social welfare professionals who were prepared to take up an active role in government statutory institutions (Mudzisingwa, 2002). As a natural response to these phenomena, a plethora of NGOs began to proliferate and they eventually became alternative

voices on children's rights and other social welfare issues in Zimbabwe (Chakawarika, 2011). The present study was intended to investigate the role performed by one of these NGOs as well as the challenges it encountered in protecting children's rights in Zimbabwe. The study is significant in that its findings may provide useful information on the contribution of NGOs as alternate providers of social services in developing countries, especially those that have faced unfortunate economic and political blizzards at national level.

## 2. Related Literature

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Three dominant theories that attempt to account for social development of children are Socio-Cultural Theory, the Liberal Theory and the Right Based Theory were considered as theoretical anchors in this study. The Socio-Cultural Theory postulates that children cannot develop voice and identity unless the space, support and opportunities are available for them to develop their own views (Smith, 2002). The theory further upholds that social interaction and participation leads to the internalisation of the tools for thinking and enhancing the competence of children. As such, the theory calls for children to participate in matters affecting them, in order to develop relevant solutions to their problems. The Liberal Theory advances the notion that children should have all the rights that adults presently have; it also claims that children are not disqualified from having rights by virtue of their lack of capacity that adults do have (Cohen, 1980). The theory also argues that the denial of children's rights is one of the significant elements in a culture that serves artificially to maintain children in their childlike state of dependence, vulnerability and immaturity. The Right Based Theory mandates state members to protect and promote children's rights through promoting principles such as non-discrimination, participation, survival and development, protection and promoting the best interest of the child (Hodges, 2001).

### 2.2 Child

It is important to have a clear definition of what a child is. The Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 1 defines a child as anyone below the age of eighteen unless stipulated otherwise by laws applicable to the child. Therefore it gives member states a leeway to either increase or decrease the age limit without violating their rights. The African Charter on the Welfare of Children defines the same child as anyone below the age of eighteen (Ncube, 1998). However, the cultural definition according to customary practice in Zimbabwe states that a person is regarded to still be a child if he or she remains under parental authority rather than chronological age (UNICEF, 2005). Therefore, there are manifest inconsistencies at, national, regional and international level in the definition of a child; and it is these loop holes which can be manipulated in the violation of the child's rights.

### 2.3 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

An NGO is a not-for-profit organisation that is largely self-governing rather than depending substantially on the state for its funds (Korten, 1990). They are usually idealised as organisations through which people help others for reasons other than profit and politics (Frantz, 1987). In Africa, NGOs have gained prominence as the leading practitioners of development (Graff & Louw, 1992). Since they have a comparative advantage over the government, NGOs tend to contribute to institutional pluralism by complementing the state (Garutsa, 2001). Although African governments have responded indistinctly to the presence of NGOs, it is generally acknowledged that NGOs have the potential to raise economic resources that could be used for economic, social and political development (Bratton, 2000). Nevertheless, most African governments perceive NGOs as a threat to their power and influence over the public, due to the political pluralism connoted by popular development action (Edwards & Hulme, 1992).

As highlighted by Moyo, Makumbe and Raftopoulos (2000), the government has not always been able to address or take the responsibility of protecting the rights of children. The delivery of adequate social services such as improvement of access by the majority, the provision to basic needs such as safe drinking water, education, health and sanitation to mention but a few are typical examples of areas where child development gaps are noticeable (Clark, 1991). Through NGOs, private citizens have sought to augment state efforts by upgrading the standard of these social services (Bebbington & Farrington, 2000). This is supported by Pearce (2000) who argued that in Africa, where a functioning public sector never existed, NGOs have arisen to "fill in the gaps" and to act as a response to failures in the public and private sectors.

In Zimbabwe, NGOs are governed and regulated through the NGO Bill of 2004, which has been described by

Moyo (2005) as a draconian piece of legislation. In a nut shell, the NGO bill banishes a broader range of NGO activities and provides the government with direct and excessive control over all NGOs. This inadvertently affects NGOs that work on promoting Children rights, especially in cases where the activity is not approved by the government.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study followed qualitative design using the case study design approach. The qualitative approach was adopted by the researchers because it offers rich descriptive first-hand information obtained from a limited number of individuals and allows flexibility by (Bryman, 2001)

#### *3.2 Sampling*

The non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. Sampled elements were interviewed at their work places. The study utilized this technique to select seven respondents from the selected NGO, who were extensively involved with the protection of children's rights. These included the director in the child protection department, the operations manager in the department and other five staff members from the same department. Use of the purposive sampling technique ensured that participants were chosen on the basis of their in-depth knowledge of child welfare issues.

#### *3.3 Data Collection Techniques*

In the study, data were collected using a combination of the key-informant interview technique as well as the document study approach. The key-informant interview method of gathering data was chosen for the study because it enables the researcher to gain valuable information from key informants by virtue of the position they hold in social, political and administrative realms (McKillip, 1987). It also enables one to ask long questions and the ability to provide room for probing for clarity (Sage, Butler & Howell, 1980). After clearance was obtained from management at the selected NGO, participants were interviewed in May 2013 at the organisation's regional offices NGO in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. The interviews ran from 15 to 25 minutes per session. All interviews were recorded using an electronic voice recorder. The principal researcher transcribed the interviews from the voice format to word.

In the document study approach, books, papers, minutes of meetings (e.g. official statistics), diaries, eye-witness accounts of events, pamphlets, transcripts of speeches, newspaper articles, papers and other documents that were produced by the selected NGO were used as sources of information used in this study.

### **4. Findings**

After the analysis of the data, it emerged that the selected NGO had played a significant role in the following areas:

#### *4.1 Provision of Food*

The selected NGO and its partners initiated the supplementary feeding initiative in which porridge enriched with vitamins was distributed on a daily basis to all children under the age of five. This program was implemented in partnership with community mothers, health workers and pre-school teachers. As observed by Tollfree (2004), supplementary feeding remains one of the critical roles performed by NGOs to avert malnourishment and starvation of children. A notable challenge though, is that the program was unable to reach all of the intended recipient children.

#### *4.2 Provision of Health*

It emerged that another role played by the selected NGO in promoting children's rights was in the area of children's health. A typical example is the Young Child Survival and Development program (YSCD), which was aimed at accelerating the accomplishment of the health Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The YSCD program contributed to the increase and sustenance of vaccination coverage in the entire country. The selected NGO also contributed to the resuscitation of the health system by procuring and distributing more than 90% of all essential medicines to various health

facilities around the country. Additionally, the selected NGO partnered with the World Health Organisation in countering a possible outbreak of measles, leading to the successful vaccination of over 3, 2 million children aged between nine months to fourteen years between 2005 and 2012. The selected NGO also launched the National Child Survival Strategy which was aimed at reducing the infant mortality rate by 25% in five years. Furthermore, in its quest to promote children's rights in Zimbabwe the selected NGO initiated the Water supply and Sanitation program in the late 1990s. Through the program, safe drinking water was made available to approximately 40% of the rural population. In this case, over 164 boreholes were sunk and 900 boreholes were rehabilitated which benefited approximately 500 000 people. Additionally, over 3 000 latrines were constructed which benefited approximately 200 000 people. However, the program later failed in the early 2000s, as a result of the harsh economic and political environment in the country. Despite this setback, the Water Supply and Sanitation Program was later transformed into the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) program which was aimed at contributing and ensuring access of clean and safe drinking water. The program enabled at least 50% of the rural population and school children to live hygienically in their respective communities.

#### 4.3 Provision of Social Protection

The selected NGO also played a significant role in the protection of children's rights through its flagship program known as the Child Protection Program (CPP). The aims of the CPP are captured through the following excerpt from one of the participants:

*"This program was aimed at increasing the proportion of children that are protected from violence, exploitation, and abuse. This was to be achieved through the continual support of the Victim-Friendly (VF) unit. The system benefited 4,000 child survivors (mostly girls) between April and September (UNICEF 2010). In the program 250 boys and 2,600 girls received specialised support through eight dedicated hospital-based VF Clinics and fourteen VF Courts were partially established through the support of the SC to assure the use of child-specific legal procedures for children in contact with the law. Also, the police including health and education professionals were trained in child-friendly techniques to work with child survivors of sexual abuse".*

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, the selected NGO also worked in conjunction with UNICEF and managed to train 9,000 community members on gender-based violence. This was after an analysis of child sexual abuse data which revealed that the majority of survivors are adolescent girls, with a mean age of approximately 11 years. Almost three-quarters of survivors know their perpetrators but only a few cases reach the court system (Child-line Report, 2010). Many survivors of sexual abuse have either been neglected or abandoned by their families, emphasising the need for improved services to assure girls' right to protection linked to strategic justice and social protection sector interventions in 2011 and 2012. Reported cases of violence, exploitation and abuse against women and children remain very low, highlighting weaknesses in available justice and welfare systems of the country that responds effectively in addressing abuses.

#### 4.4 Provision of Education

In their crusade to promote the rights of children in Zimbabwe, the selected NGO embarked on sustained education initiatives through a program known as the Basic Education and Gender Equality (BEGE) program. The following excerpt from the program director at the selected NGO captures the goals of the BEGE initiative:

*"We initiated the BEGE program in order to promote the right to education and the purpose of this program component was aimed to contribute to the increase net primary and secondary attendance ratios by 10%, increase completion rates in primary and secondary school by 10%, incorporate life and survival skills in primary and secondary education and improve quality and relevance of primary and secondary education in order to increase the grade 7 pass rate by 25%".*

BEGE was implemented within the ambit of the Education Coordination Group, which consisted of all key education partners and was chaired by the government. Additionally, in its bid to provide education, the selected NGO established the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) in the year 2000. The program managed to support over 514,000 children, against a target of 560,000 orphans and underprivileged children by paying their school fees. Furthermore, the selected NGO procured and distributed above 13 million teaching and learning materials in core learning subjects and stationary storage facilities to 2.7 million children in all 5,600 Zimbabwean primary schools and 2,300 secondary schools. This resulted in the improvement of the pupil to text book ratio from 1:10 to 1:1. Ten Early

Childhood Development model centres were equipped with materials and 12,000 children at 25 primary schools benefited from construction of new classrooms and improved water and gender-appropriate sanitation facilities.

## 5. Challenges

The progress made in the promotion of children's rights was not made without severe obstacles. Major huddles have been the unreliable energy supply (both electricity and fuel) and challenges in obtaining Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) supplies locally since the organisation has to import the resources needed for the program. The critical skills shortage of experienced social workers in the country hindered national efforts to reach vulnerable children in the whole provinces and hampered the hampered the full realization of the child protection program. The following excerpt from one of the respondents captures this issue:

*"The numbers of social workers in the country has dwindled due to the brain drain that the country continues to face. This is affecting service delivery since only a handful of social services personnel are expected to save the whole entire nation."*

The polarised political and media environment, limited financial and human resources capacity of government that has existed in Zimbabwe over the past decade has also presented an avalanche of operational problems to the selected NGO. Another participant had this to say:

*"Most donors were unwilling to channel their funding through the government system as required the Non-Governmental Organisations Bill because of the possible misappropriation of funds by the cash-strapped government."*

Not to be left out are impediments related to barbaric legislations such as the NGO Bill and the Private Organisation Act, which were initiated to suppress the activities of NGOs. The laws gave the government absolute authority to approve and disapprove any NGO's year span plans in an arbitrary manner. NGOs were required to register with government first before launching any humanitarian operations. The government was also vested with the power to indiscriminately cancel the operational licence for any NGO. Resultantly, the effectiveness of the selected NGO was slowed down on several occasions due to late response by the state, which may be attributed to bureaucracy and red tape red tape in the government system. On the overall, these constraints resulted in recurring delays in implementing the launch of strategic plans by the selected NGO and generally added complexity to the development environment

## 6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the role played by a selected NGO in promoting the rights of children in Zimbabwe and the challenges it faced in doing so. Empirical evidence from the study revealed that although the government has a social and legislative mechanism that is in place which is aimed at promoting the rights of children, it has been ineffective in this regard, as evidenced by the erosion of social services. The study showed that NGOs stepped into this gap as alternate suppliers of social services. The selected NGO endeavoured to promote children's rights by placing children at the nucleus of the programs they provide.

The study exposed that the selected NGO, through its programs, has managed to play a crucial role in upholding and promoting the rights of children in Zimbabwe. Programs such as the BEGE program and the revitalisation of the BEAM program contributed to the achievement of universal education to all children. The supplementary feeding program provided food to children at a time when there were scarce food reserves in the country. Through the Young Child Survival and Development program, the NGO provided health services in the form of child vaccination facility whilst the National Child Survival Strategy effectively reduced the infant mortality rate in the country. Other keystone programs include the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) program which provided clean water and hygiene service to children and the establishment of Victim Friendly Clinics for child justice services in cases of sexual abuse.

The study also established that the selected NGO faces major challenges that militate against its operations. Examples include the shortage of electricity and fuel in the country, a repressive regime that crafts legislations that do not favour NGOs, the shortage of qualified social workers, and the polarised political and media environment.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations may be put forward. At macro level, it is important for the

Zimbabwean government to expedite the provision of child-protection rights in the country. Since legislation to this effect is already in place, the mandate is for the state to ensure the full implementation of the tenets of the legislation. Free social services as well as subsidised services should be accessible to children living in difficult circumstances. Macro-economic and political fundamentals that led to the brain drain of professionals such as qualified social workers have to be addressed in order to boost the numbers of social workers in the country.

On the legislative front, a revision of brutal legislative pieces such as the NGO Bill as well as the Private Organisation Act could facilitate a harmonious relationship that determines and positively directs the bond of the two institutions in order for them to be effective and efficient in discharging their obligations of promoting children's rights in the country. It would also be helpful if media laws in Zimbabwe are revised in order to allow NGOs to publish their findings and effectively communicate and provide education to the public concerning contentious issues on human rights especially the rights of children.

At micro level, NGOs should strive to work with the government's social services arms to ensure that child protection committees, at all levels, receive training on child protection issues. It is important for NGOs to employ more qualified personnel who understand the implications of certain situations, particularly those related to children's rights, and can therefore be effective. NGOs could further increase their activities in rural areas by crafting strategies for improving collaboration between rural and urban districts. This will enable them to effectively reach out to children who have not been receiving assistance from NGOs. Since these programs need monetary resources, efforts to solicit more donor funds should be scaled up. Despite the challenges they face, such actions are likely to trigger positive results on most fronts.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide Questions For Personnel At The Selected Ngo

**Topic:** Spotlighting The Rights Of Children In Zimbabwe: Roles And Challenges For Non-Governmental Organisations

1. How many years have you been working with this organisation?
2. What is the mission of this organisation?
3. How does your organisation define a child?
4. As an organisation why did you choose to focus on promoting children's rights?
5. What role as an organisation are you playing to promote children's rights?
6. What programs and projects you carrying out to promote these rights?
7. As an organisation are you achieving the intended goals and objectives?
8. What challenges are you facing in doing this?
9. What alternatives are you using to overcome these challenges?
10. As an organization, what do you think are the ways to mitigate these challenges?
11. The government has enacted some laws to regulate the activities of NGOs, are these laws allowing you to conduct your activities freely

