

Firelight Newsflash! 8 June 2009

Based in Blantyre, Eye of the Child (EYC) is nationally recognized in Malawi through its efforts “to promote and protect child rights and encourage young people’s participation in issues that affect them through lobbying, advocacy and other child rights programmes.” EYC has programs in Advocacy, Legal Protection, Training and Child Participation. The organization has been a Firelight partner since 2004.

To learn more about EYC's work, see their website:

<http://www.eyeofthechild.org.mw>

or contact them at: eyeofthechild@malawi.net.

AN OPEN LETTER ON CHILD PROTECTION TO FIRELIGHT GRANTEE-PARTNERS

FROM EYE OF THE CHILD, MALAWI

Dear Partners,

I wish to take this opportunity to say how much pleased we are to be a partner of Firelight Foundation in Malawi. As a partner, we would like share some information in child protection and invite your feedback and action.

We have selected this topic after having born in mind that issues concerning child abuse have occupied the minds of many Africans and that as an organisation we are obligated to join you in the fight for child protection of vulnerable children from all forms of abuse.

Eye of the Child was established in 1995 and only become more visible in 2004 when it received its first funding from Firelight Foundation. This period might be adequate to train a few personnel as experts in child rights in Malawi, but take it from me, there is bound to be misunderstandings, and in the process, a lot of mistakes and misinterpretations are likely to be done. That is why you and I today hear some people allege that the introduction of human rights has done more harm to our children than good.

Why this letter?

The mandate of this letter is therefore to see how can we respond to certain issues affecting the human rights of children, what child protection is all about, the role of NGO/CBOs, and the conclusion will reveal that as partners we need to join hands in the fight for child protection.

Child protection is an area that can no longer be ignored. Given the challenges, children are facing in view of fast changing community situations owing to social change, continued survival of harmful traditional practices, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and the unfolding humanitarian crisis, it has become imperative that deliberate action is made to equip stakeholders in this area with skills to ensure that child protection issues are addressed in a professional and competent manner. This is what is required of a just society. It is what society owes to the children, as it is their right to be protected and indeed, have their rights promoted.

What is child protection?

Child protection constitutes all forms of physical and /or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment for commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Child protection is much broader. It is not just about prevention of abuse but also response and securing of children's rights.

Child protection involves responding to specific situations where children are at risk of, or subject to abuse, violence, torture, armed conflict, physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse, exploitation, discrimination, persecution, exclusion, neglect or deprivation of parental or other family care, with a view to ending the abuse, neglect or removing children from the abusive situation and securing those children's full integration or re-integration to their families and communities or as a last resort, other protective environments, where all their rights can be met and protected.

It is worthy to note that there are some children who need more protection than others because of being in certain circumstances that expose them to extreme risk of basic needs and further deny them their human rights. Children in need of special protection are mainly those who find themselves in extremely vulnerable situations or whose circumstances make them vulnerable to risky behaviour or inability to enjoy certain rights for their personal development and livelihood.

Why must we involve children in child protection?

Child protection should further be about empowering children to:-

- Know their rights and responsibilities;
- Understand what constitutes child abuse;
- How to avoid situations of child abuse;
- Know what to do in case of child abuse; and
- Know where and how to seek help when child abuse takes place.

Children must also be involved in their own protection because participation is a right—every human being has a right to be involved in any matter that affects his/her life. Children have better knowledge of their perceptions and priorities and that child participation leads to more effective action. Their participation will facilitate duty bearers to know the effectiveness of child protection measures and that it is a process of empowering children

What is the role of NGOs and CBOs in child protection?

The NGOs/CBOs are supposed to provide a protective environment and ensure that children are living in safety and dignity. This helps to ensure that children are in school, laws are punishing those who exploit children, governments are truly committed to child protection, communities are aware of the risks which children face, civil society addresses certain 'taboo' issues and monitoring is in place to identify children who are at risk of exploitation.

Critical actions for building a protective environment for children can include efforts to:-

- Address and mitigate the impact of economic and social poverty;
- Mount advocacy actions and dialogue at all levels;
- Seek societal level behaviour change by challenging attitudes and traditions underlying child abuse while promoting those that are protective;
- Strengthening capacity for assessing and analyzing protection issues;
- Mobilize resources to support and build child protection capacities for those living and working with children;
- Put in place mechanisms where legal standards on child protection are known, understood, accepted and enforced;
- Develop and review monitoring systems on child protection;
- Ensure access to services for recovery and reintegration for children who have suffered abuses; and
- Promote child participation and strengthen children's own self protection and resilience.

What are the key things to know about child rights?

For us to properly manage child protection, we need to be conversant with some children's rights e.g. that those children have the following rights, among others:-

- To be treated equally whether or not their parents are married.
- Any born child in Malawi is immediately a Malawian citizen.
- To be raised by their parents if they are still alive. But if they treat them badly, children can be taken away from their parents.
- Not to be given work or treated or punished in a way that could be dangerous to them. Obviously, child abuse [including sexual abuse] is not

allowed.

The acts of violence that violates children's rights are:-

- Beating children
- Locking children up as punishment
- Forcing children to do hard or dangerous work
- Sending young children to work as domestic servants or on tobacco farms. (This puts them at risk of all kinds of abuse.)
- Not supporting our children
- Punishing children by not giving them food
- Abandoning children
- Defiling children
- Forcing young girls to have sex as a type of initiation
- Forcing children to get married so that you can get lobola or that you no longer look after them
- Not buying things children need for school or not helping them with homework
- Forcing children to get away from school to help with household chores, baby sitting or to work in the fields
- Exposing them to violence in the home [between their parents] (This makes them think violence is normal and leads to them using violence later in life.)

How must we consider society within child protection?

Social approach to child protection is required; it must focus on all aspects of social systems and practices that ensure that children are protected. Every society defines child protection in its own way as this is hugely determined by social norms and cultural practices. Social norms and cultural practices are a reflection of social systems that explain social relations between children and adults and adults and obligations associated with such relations. Child protection in social context is a reflection of the fact that children are a symbol of continuity of the family, society and nations. Socially based child protection relies on social systems that include the family, and its norms, community and kinship systems. It is very important to build secure environments for children and that this is the best way to safeguard children from abuses. Social systems and practices that ensure that children are protected against all forms of abuse and protection should be enhanced.

Conclusion

As it can be seen from above, child protection is really vital in our society. Talking about child protection alone cannot serve our children but we need to implement these programmes.

All of us were children before we reached our respective ages. We are here today because somebody somewhere took the responsibility of caring and protecting us. Let us now join hands in the fight for child protection so that our societies should have good and responsible future leaders.

Thank you.

Maxwell Matewere

Executive Director

Eye of the Child

Blantyre, Malawi

To view a presentation about EYC's work on juvenile justice, visit: [http://www.ccaba.org/resources/Maxwell Matewere - About Malawi-Eye of the Child and Legal Protection for Children %5BCompatibility Mode%5D.pdf](http://www.ccaba.org/resources/Maxwell%20Matewere%20-%20About%20Malawi-Eye%20of%20the%20Child%20and%20Legal%20Protection%20for%20Children%20-%20Compatibility%20Mode.pdf)

As part of the Firelight Foundation's Monitoring, Evaluation and Technical Assistance (META) Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org/newsflash.htm>.

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org.