

POLITICAL COMMITMENTS FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: Global and African promises

The last century has been marked by an increased focus on promoting the interests of children. From the development of comprehensive child rights instruments, to global targets and regional goals to improve child wellbeing, many African governments have signalled their intention to improve health and education, provide better protection and reduce poverty and hunger. As a result, the last ten years have seen considerable progress in child wellbeing in many countries as governments translate political rhetoric into concrete budgetary allocations for the benefit of their children.

For example, parts of Africa have seen impressive reductions in infant mortality, large increases in immunisation coverage, a significant increase in children's access to primary and secondary education, with a narrowing gender gap. Yet, millions of children still die of preventable causes, access to treatment of potentially fatal illnesses remains low, and many pupils do not complete their primary education or go on to enjoy the benefits and opportunities that secondary education affords.

African governments have a moral and economic imperative to invest in the sectors and programmes that impact on children and to continue to build on the momentum of the past decade. Below are some of the key commitments Africa has promised their children - promises that will only be fulfilled through adequate and sustained budgetary commitment.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights for children — civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Agreed in 1989, it signalled that the world recognized children have human rights too, and it stated that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and highest attainable standard of health and education on the basis of equality of opportunity.

The Convention is a universally agreed set of non-negotiable standards and obligations which lay out the basic human rights that children everywhere have;

- The right to survival
- The right to develop to the fullest
- The right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation
- The right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life.

The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care, education, legal, civil and social services.

As of November 2009, 194 countries have ratified the Convention.

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)

Adopted by the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1990, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is a comprehensive framework outlining the basic rights of the child (defined as under 18 years of age), protection to be provided to children against various forms of social, economic, cultural, and political abuse and exploitation, and mechanisms of implementation.

It created an African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Committee of Experts) to promote and protect the rights established by the Charter. As of February 2009 the Charter has been signed by 45 of the 53 countries in Africa.

The Abuja Declaration

In April 2001, African Health Ministers met at a special summit in Abuja, Nigeria, under the auspices of the then Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU). The summit concluded with the adoption of the Abuja Declaration, which outlined the continent's response to HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis (TB) and other related infectious diseases.

The core commitment made by African governments in the Abuja Declaration was to spend 15% of their national budget on the health sector.

Only four countries have met this target so far (Liberia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia).

Dakar Education for All Declaration

In 2000 a global framework was adopted by 164 governments reaffirming their resolve to expand learning opportunities for every child, young person and adult. It stipulates that governments allocate at least 7% of their GDP to education by 2005; increasing to 9% by 2010.

Core goals include ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

It also includes commitments to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Only six countries have met the 9% target. The average spending on education is only 4% of GDP in Africa.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The UN Summit on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) held in September 2000 witnessed 189 governments agree eight core goals with targets that are the most broadly supported, comprehensive and specific development goals world leaders have agreed upon. With a target of meeting these goals by 2015, many of them affect and impact on children's wellbeing.

Specific child focused targets include to;

- Reduce under-five mortality by two thirds from its level in 1990
- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education
- Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling
- Eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education and empower women
- Reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters
- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases
- Reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.