Indexing Child-Friendliness

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by The African Child Policy Forum
with annexes and statistical tables
ISBN: 978-1-9047

Introduction

For well-known historical, political and developmental reasons, the State is central for the realization of child rights and child wellbeing, more so in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Our governments have an impressive record in their formal accession to the relevant international treaties on children. But the extent of their commitment varies widely, and the gap between promises and reality remains wide in many countries. Why? How well are African governments doing in meeting their repeated commitments to protect, promote and respect the rights and wellbeing of children? Which governments are doing well and which ones are not? How do African governments rank in relation to each other? What is it that relatively ‘poorly-performing’ countries can emulate from ‘well-performing’ ones?

These are some of the questions addressed in a pioneering report released by The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), a leading pan-African child rights advocacy organisation. The African Report on Child Well-being 2008 is available in both English and French and it is the first of what ACPF promises to publish on a biennial basis. The report assesses, scores and ranks the performance of all 52 African governments (those not covered being Somalia and Saharawi Arab Republic) using a common set of indicators and a path-breaking Child-Friendliness Index developed by ACPF. Finally, it spells out the specific policies and interventions that account for differences in child-wellbeing outcomes among countries and the good practices that child-friendly governments may adopt.

Why this Report?

This report is special for several reasons, not least because it is the first of its kind in the region. It is comprehensive and an appropriate response to African realities and needs. A couple of explanations illustrate this point.

Africa is a very young continent, the youngest in the world. Children under 18 constitute some 51.5 per cent of the population, with the ratio being as high as 54.8 in Nigeria, 55.2 per cent in Ethiopia, and 60.8 per cent in Uganda. That it is so can be a blessing but, if unattended, a potential curse. The extent to which African governments respect children, protect them from harm and abuse, and provide them with opportunities for a healthy, well-fed and educated child population is a necessary foundation for a modern productive and knowledge-based economy that can effectively participate in today’s globalised world.

Similarly, the way we raise and treat our children at home and school is critical for what they will be as adults and citizens. A child growing up in an environment where he sees his mother beaten by the father, where differing views and opinions are not tolerated, and where choices are not negotiated is unlikely to be the builder of a peaceful and democratic order. The wellbeing of children is key for the kind of Africa we want to build. Yet, in far too many countries, children are not given the place they deserve at home or in the larger community. We have to combat and correct this reticence and complacency through various advocacy means, including speaking out against child rights violations and government complacency.

Secondly, there is the unfortunate fact that we do not have a sufficiently supportive public environment or public opinion in much of Africa. Where are the African voices that speak out against child rights violations, say in Darfur, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Uganda? Regrettably, the voices we have heard in the past and which we continue to hear today are those of individuals and organisations outside our region. This has several explanations, of course, but is nonetheless unacceptable. We need to speak out for ourselves and claim our place on the human and child rights agenda.

Another factor why this kind of report is valuable and timely is in its contribution to remedy current weaknesses in the
It is being free from fear of violence – better with the African psyche and attitude. Child wellbeing is likely to be less if the report uses ‘child wellbeing’ as the analysis it contains. Information on the condition and status of child rights organisations at the country level, and the messages emerging from country-based and comparative policy analyses, and the interested reader and policy maker will benefit from a full reading effort. Thus, a country may find itself doing well and being protected, and another may find itself doing worse and being targeted. This approach helps us to look at various areas where a particular government is doing well or poorly, and which ones are doing better, and which ones not? Children? How well are they doing? Which countries? And ranked together. But what, you could rightly ask, do these countries have in common except that Mozambique have long coast lines, and that Switzerland and Malawi are land-locked countries? And so on.

The State of Africa’s Children
Slowly but surely, Africa is changing. And, though still far from claiming its destiny and its future, it is in many ways making a beginning. Africa is witnessing the emergence of a consensus that the responsibility and accountability to extricate its people from old unbridled authoritarian ideologies and from the interwoven problems of conflict, poverty, hunger and illiteracy. Though unfortunately threatened by the world-wide economic financial crisis, Africa’s prospects for a better future continue to brighten as many governments have begun to use in initiating and implementing legal and budgetary reforms aimed at creating an Africa which can be a better place to grow up in.

There is then the problem of violence against children. According to the composite Child Protection Index, Eritrea, Mali and Mauritania are among the countries which have the highest proportion of children living with disability – estimated to be as high as 8 per cent of 2-9 year-olds in Egypt, 16 per cent in Ghana, 23 per cent in Cameroon and Sierra Leon, 31 per cent in Central African Republic and 35 per cent in Pakistan. This means almost one in every three 2-9 year old children in these countries lives with one form of disability or another. Yet, children with disabilities remain invisible and seldom talked about.

There are many forms of violence and exploitation to which children are exposed. These include state sanctioned terrorism, sexual exploitation, rape, trafficking in children, and girl children. According to an ACPF survey of girls surveyed reporting being victims of one from violence or another. FGM (female genital mutilation) has been deeply ingrained and probably marries a community.

The Child-friendliness of African Governments
Given their huge proportion and demographic importance, and their potentially critical role in ensuring sustained development for their countries, how important are children on the policy agenda? Or, how committed are African governments to the wellbeing of their children? How well are they doing? Which ones are doing better, and which ones not? Why? In other words, which African governments are child-friendly and which ones are not?

In order to answer these questions, ACWF’s Child-friendliness Index was created to assess the extent to which African governments are committed to child indicators and to assess the individual and relative performance of all 52 governments at a point in time (2004-2005) and over time (i.e. between the periods 1999-2001 and 2004-2005).

The other new and important feature of the report is the problem of children’s rights in Africa, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho. Similarly, significant improvements in the provision of safe drinking water were observed in Angola, Burkiná Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Mali and Mauritania.

One example illustrates this. First, although grounded on child rights principles, the report uses ‘child wellbeing’ as the organising concept and the central objective of policy. The concept of child wellbeing is likely to be less contentious and more attractive for public discourse in Africa – perhaps less emotive and less abstract than child rights or ‘child welfare’. It is likely to resonate better with the African psyche and attitude.

Child wellbeing means various things. It is child’s right to be loved, healthy, safe and happy. It is about opportunities to grow and learn. It is about positive social relationships, and about being and feeling secure. It is also about being respected, about being given a voice and being heard. It is about seeing free from fear of violence – corporal, sexual or any other form of violence. This breadth and depth of the concept makes it all the more attractive, and gives it dynamism in setting objectives at a point in time and over time.

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South Africa and Algeria – and those with a low economic status – Kenya, Malawi and Cape Verde. Rwanda and Burkina Faso have also done very well, coming eleventh and twelfth, respectively, in the Child-friendliness Index ranking, despite their low economic status.

These and the other countries that emerged in the top ten or twenty did so mainly for three reasons. First, they put in place appropriate legal provisions to protect children against abuse and exploitation. Secondly, they allocated a relatively higher share of their budgets to provide for the basic needs of children. Finally, they used resources effectively and were able to achieve favourable wellbeing outcomes as reflected on children themselves.

At the other extreme are the ten least child-friendly governments in Africa, these being Guinea-Bissau, preceded by Eritrea, Central African Republic, Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Liberia, Chad, Swaziland, Guinea and Comoros. Of course, the political and economic situation and the underlying causes vary from one country to another. But, by and large, the poor performance or low score of these governments is the result of the actions they took or failed to take, specifically to fail to institute protective legal and policy instruments, the absence of child-sensitive juvenile justice systems, and the very low budgets allocated to children. Government expenditure on health as a percentage of total government expenditure was only 3.5 per cent in Guinea-Bissau, compared with a median average of 9 per cent for the region. Central African Republic also spent only 1.4 per cent of its GDP for education in 2006, compared to the regional average of 4.3 per cent around that time.

Let us consider another example: Eritrea, the country that scored the second lowest in the Child-friendliness Index. Eritrea scored the lowest in terms of budgetary allocation. Military spending was extremely high, at 19.3 per cent of GDP in 2004-2005, proportionally the highest on the continent. At the same time, overall provision for the basic needs of children was correspondingly low. These two factors accounted for Eritrea’s poor performance in the overall ranking.

A recurring explanation or excuse given by governments for inadequate action is their limited financial capacity, the low performance of their economies and lack of resources. To what extent is this true? Comparison of the Child-friendliness Index ranking with that for economic status revealed that national commitment to the cause of children is not necessarily related to national income. The Child-friendliness Index shows that, despite their relatively low GDPs, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda and Burkina Faso are among the best performers in Africa; they are among the twelve countries that have made the greatest effort to put in place an adequate legal foundation for the protection of their children and for meeting their basic needs. On the other hand, relatively wealthy countries, with relatively high GDPs – Equatorial Guinea and Angola, for example – are not investing sufficient budgetary resources in ensuring child wellbeing, and so have not scored well in the Child-friendliness Index ranking, coming out 38th and 35th, respectively.

The Child-friendliness Index data strongly confirm the fact that governments with a relatively low GDP can still do well in realising child rights and wellbeing. The missing factor is political will, reflected in misplaced priorities and the closed vision of governments as to what constitutes the long-term interest of their countries.

**Challenges in Indexing Child-friendliness**

The construction of indices to measure states of development or progress is fraught with many conceptual, methodological and statistical problems. This is true of almost all indices that deal with social, political and development issues, e.g., governance, economic performance and wellbeing. So also, with the child-friendliness index developed by ACPF.

The concept of friendliness itself is a highly value-loaded term. Friendliness is more than the provision of laws or budgets. There are important elements that constitute friendliness and contribute to the friendliness of a society, state or community. But how do you measure or quantify the socio-cultural and psychological parameters as well as the ecological and politically-induced environmental factors that can have a bearing on individual and community wellbeing in a sensible and convincing way?

Moreover, there are equity issues. For example, a government’s budgetary allocation may give us an idea of how much a government is concerned with children’s issues at the macro level. But it does not necessarily indicate whether or not the allocated money is expended on children, or whether that allocation takes into account distributional concerns, for example, between rural and urban communities or between the poor who need government support and the not-so-poor who could probably manage without it.

There is also the concept of voice or what, in child rights circles, is called child participation. This is an important, though complex, issue. But how do we ensure that we have appropriate indicators to capture the voices of children? Finally, there is the usual problem of getting the right statistics and statistics that are comparable and current. These are some of the weaknesses of the current report, and these difficulties need to be addressed if we are to have a more complete view of the African landscape, and measure and compare the progress of African governments.

**Conclusion**

The Report confirms what many of us have long suspected. Yes, there are considerable challenges facing governments in Africa, but change and progress are possible and feasible even at very low levels of development. You do not have to have oil and diamonds to provide a better country for your children. The experience of the child-friendly governments shows the importance of a two-pronged approach: (a) adoption and implementation of effective laws and policies; and (b) a policy of child budgeting that prioritises the needs of children.

When all is said and done, three things matter: an African vision based on and around children as the foundation of a sustainable social, economic and political progress, and therefore one that puts them at the centre of public policy; laws that protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and exclusion; and, finally, budgets that provide for the basic needs and full development of children.

So, what our children need is Politics that puts them first, Laws that protect them, and Budgets that provide for them.