

Class wars

The findings of an investigation in Tanzania into Third World Debt and its effect on children.

When a Children's Express team visited Tanzania to look at the impact of debt, they found themselves returning over and over again to the desperate state of education and confronted the local World Bank representative with what they found.

Kasim Masu is nine years old and sleeps on a step outside a shop. We moan when we have to share a textbook between two of us, but in Tanzania, there's only one book to a class and it's often outdated. When we caught up with him at 7am in the Youth Cultural and Information Centre (YCIC), set back from the dusty streets in downtown Dar-es-Salaam, he was ironing his uniform for school. Funded largely by overseas agencies such as Christian Aid and Comic Relief, the Centre aims to develop sufficient confidence, trust and skills in young people to enable them to take control of their lives.

Kasim is just one beneficiary of the projects pre-school literacy booster classes and their bursaries for school fees. Faced with fees of 10-12,000 Tanzanian shillings (\$16) a year for primary schooling, street kids and other children living in poverty have a fight on their hands to secure a way in. One of the most valuable aspects of YCIC is that it acts as a bridge, enabling vulnerable kids to make the transition to school.

Like all the young people we spoke to, getting a decent education was top of Kasim's list of wants. His personal ambition? He wanted to be clever so that he could become a pilot. Oliver commented: It was as though it was his dream to literally fly away from his current life, and he saw education as the way to do it. At one point, he felt he'd be able to do it, and then he said he wouldn't, and then he said he would again. I don't really know what to think of his chances.

Though stoical, Kasim points out how a severe lack of funds for state schooling undermines children's own efforts: There are about 40 children in my class. We have some pencils, chalk and exercise books. But we have no sports equipment, the toilets are graffitied and there is no glass in the windows.

We don't have enough, but we just keep going with what we have. Parents pay for some things, but the government should pay for it all because they have more money than parents like mine. If your parents can't pay for equipment, you get expelled from school. I have friends who haven't been able to pay their fees. That makes me feel bad.

But the cost of schooling is not the only factor inhibiting the capacity of children like Kasim to learn. He told us that he has only one simple meal each day: I eat nothing until I go home when I have ugali (a stiff porridge made from flour and water). I would like to eat more, but that's what I get so that's enough. I eat the same thing every day with seven of my friends. If I can't pay, sometimes my friends share. Otherwise, I go without.

To people living in the developed world, the enormity of improving the education system in a country such as Tanzania, where six times the education budget is spent on debt repayments, may seem overwhelming. But Kasim's suggestions were modest. I would like a bigger classroom with an electric fan and more desks. I want to be more comfortable, he shrugged.

His school's problems made the constant complaints we hear about British schools seem distinctly less significant. Kierra said: We moan when we have to share a textbook between two of us, but in Tanzania, there's only one book to a class and it's often outdated.

Lost legacy

On the other side of town, we talked to half-a-dozen teenage girls who lived in rusting iron container ships in the Ferry area of the harbour. They scrape together a living through prostitution and feel their lives are the legacy of an education system that has failed them. When asked if there is a way out of prostitution, they said, There isn't, because we haven't been to school. We can't do anything else.

Some had their education terminated at the age of eight when a parent died and their family broke up. Others came from families who simply didn't have the money to send them to school. One girl told us: When we did go to school, we didn't have uniforms, we didn't have books, we didn't have pencils. We didn't have anything to make us happy. We wanted to be like the others. We wanted to be able to compete with the others who go to school with uniforms and things like that.

Yet, despite the great sadness we felt listening to the girls' stories, we discovered that their enthusiasm to learn how to better their lives themselves wasn't dampened by the obvious lack of opportunities to do so. They said: We would like to proceed with our schooling. We would like to study in America. We don't know anything about it. We just know the white people we see coming from America have a good life. It would be better if we were there. Here it is a hard place, a horrible place.

The second stage of our journey saw us travel to Morogoro, a large town about four hours drive north-west of Dar-es-Salaam. There we discovered that fee-charging isn't the only major barrier to education. If a child isn't enrolled in school by the time they are seven or eight, it turns out they don't get another chance. We couldn't find out why the Government is so inflexible on this issue, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to guess that the policy is a cock-eyed mechanism for reducing the national education bill.

Streetside schooling

Fortunately for some kids in Morogoro, there is an alternative. Psychologist and social worker Victor Mulimila runs the Streetside School which guarantees a primary education for around 60 children. There is now enough money to pay Victor and when we met him and his pupils, they were about to move from an open-air yard, where breeze blocks were the only furniture and the seasonal rains would frequently wipe out lessons, to a purpose-built classroom.

As we had found in Dar-es-Salaam, the pupils were motivated and hard-working. Comparing their attitude to those of his own classmates, Duane was in awe. He commented: They know what to do and how to get on with their work. I looked at their maths books and they had so many ticks! You can see from what they do and the way they speak that they are learning.

Things weren't always so. Prospective pupils and their relatives initially shunned Victor's attempts to recruit them. We would walk the streets looking for kids and people shouted at us, he explained. People said we were thieves, that we wanted to keep their kids. The children would run away and cry, thinking we wanted to take their lives. Now all that's changed, but there are still lots of kids to help. We've also noticed that, slowly, some kids have stopped coming. When you make enquiries, you find that most are breadwinners. They are sent to the streets to look for whatever they can find to feed the family at home. We want to

find money to provide loans to the parents so they can start their own income activities. This would enable the children to come to school instead of going back onto the streets to beg.

The Streetside School, like YCIC, is funded by foreign aid agencies. Victor is angry at the Government for their lack of involvement. It seems as if the Government has withdrawn its obligation to these people as far as social services like education are concerned, he says.

Ethics vs economics

But he directs his greatest criticism at the rich countries which continue to demand debt interest payments at debilitating levels. What we collect from taxes and other sources of income, we use to pay back our debts. Social services have been deteriorating because all the money which is supposed to pay for them is being paid to rich countries. The way I see the future, its getting worse. We will be dying. The rich countries have to forgive all the debts not just of Tanzania, but of all Third World countries. If they want to help, they shouldnt apply conditions that exploit us.

Victor and the other Tanzanians we spoke to may well ask whose interests the international community and its agents have at heart. When we asked Ronald Brighish, the country representative of the World Bank, what would happen were Third World debt to be cancelled, he simply said: Very little one way or the other. The finances of the Bank would be very badly affected and we would eventually cease to exist. Nothing then, about the likes of Kasim and the girls at the Ferry. Nothing about ethics only economics.

We probed what impact he thought the Banks policies have on street kids. We dont know, quite frankly, he said. He felt it was up to a community to decide whether to waive school fees for those who cannot afford to pay, that this process was equitable in a way that protects the poor. However, he later conceded that kids like Kasim can fall through the cracks. We said surely every one of the large and growing number of street kids will fall through the cracks, and he replied, Apparently.

The World Banks apparent unconcern notwithstanding, the prostitutes we spoke to were clear that something had to change. We would like to move on, but we dont have the chance to, said one. We dont know how we see our future. The way we live means we cant predict it.

We feel its time they could.

About the team

This article was produced by Oliver Robertson and Amina Kibria, both 17, Juanita Rosenoir, 14, and Duane OGarro and Kierra Box, both 13. It was produced in partnership with The Co-operative Bank and Christian Aid, and published in [issue 315](#) of [The New Internationalist](#).

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