

Death in debt's shadow

Children's Express goes to Tanzania and investigate HIV/Aids

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The spread of HIV and Aids in Tanzania, East Africa, has now reached pandemic proportions, say government health officials in Dar-Es-Salaam. According to latest figures from the World Health Organisation and United Nations AIDS Agency, around fifty per cent of all hospital admissions are due to AIDs and 730,000 children have been orphaned as a result of the disease.

While the rate of infection is stabilising in the west, this isnt the case in developing countries. Poverty and a lack of education force youngsters onto the streets and there are now about 800 child prostitutes in Tanzania. Young girls are nearly twice as likely to be at risk of infection from HIV as young men.

In the Ferry harbour area of Dar-Es-Salaam, teenagers with little or no education live in the rusting hulls of deserted cargo boats. They are surrounded by piles of rubbish and some have fibreglass wadding for beds. They work as prostitutes and look tired and weak, older than their years.

Do the figures worry them? Yes, we feel frightened but what can we do?" Do they know anyone with HIV or Aids? Yes, but they try to hide it, they are frightened they will be shut away, shunned, that no one will help them. They dont know where to go or what to do, so they just keep quiet.

Asked why they do this job, they reply, We dont have any money. We dont have anywhere to go. We have nothing. To carry on with our lives we decided to do this business.

The girls earnings are meagre. Some nights they earn nothing at all. They say theres no alternative because they dont have the knowledge or skills to work in the formal economy.

Crippling levels of debt repayments to rich countries have fuelled the rise in Aids, according to Professor Paul Biswalo, an educational psychologist at the University of Dar-Es-Salaam who has written extensively on the subject. "We have so little and even that little has to go on paying debt to the IMF. We don't have the ability to test for HIV and Aids here. We cannot afford good nutrition or good medication and as a result, the disease is increasing at an horrific rate in sub-Saharan Africa."

Tanzania currently spends less on health and education combined than on debt repayment, with forty per cent of all taxes going to the IMF and World Bank.

"We are often told that we have tended to allocate more for curative services than preventative services, said Dr Ahmed Hingora, a senior advisor from the Ministry of Health. But if someone tells us to shift resources from one part to the other, we can simply say there is nothing to shift, because there is a general under-funding of the entire sector. If, instead, we default on debt servicing, we are not going to get any more loans."

Only three US dollars are spent on health per head each year and government officials admit it is too little.

The girls in the harbour think more could be done. The government should be begging those countries to relieve debt, they should improve the standard of life of Tanzanian citizens. Primary school children should not pay for their schooling. They should move on the gender issue. They should do anything to improve the lives of women for women of tomorrow.

About the team

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