

Giving the children of Tanzania a voice, and a future

Rich countries know the value of education. So why do they degrade developing countries' attempts to realise their ambition of education for all?

As part of the Co-operative Banks Customers Who Care "Rip It Up, Write it off!" campaign, Children's Express was invited to investigate and report on the impact of debt on the lives of young people in Tanzania, where debt repayments are four times higher than spending on education. In partnership with Christian Aid, five young CE journalists visited the country. By enabling the voices of Tanzania's young people to be heard in this way, we hope this project will foster the recognition that, like us, they deserve the best possible start in life.

"You have to educate yourself to get work, to get a job. Without education - there's nothing. You have to educate yourself to get work, to get a job. Without education – there's nothing.

Zeenat Hassan, a 17-year-old pupil at Forodhani Secondary School in Dar es Salaam summed up the views of everyone we spoke to, street kids and government officials alike. For a developing country like Tanzania, education is public priority number one.

Worryingly, the proportion of children with access to primary education in Tanzania has fallen from a peak of 96% to only 80%. Faced with a fee-charging education system that demands 10-12,000 Tanzanian shillings (about 10-12 sterling) per annum for primary schooling, rising to 15-20,000 T-sh for secondaries, street kids earning as little as 3-400 T-sh (30-40p) per day and other kids living in poverty, have a fight on their hands to secure a way in.

Kasim Masu is one of the lucky ones. He's nine years old and sleeps on a step outside a betting shop in the busy port area of Dar. But he is also the beneficiary of a bursary for his school fees from the NGO-supported Youth Cultural and Information Centre.

Though stoical, Kasim points out how a severe lack of funds for state schooling undermine children's own efforts. As we spent two days trailing him round his primary school, Jamahri, he said, "There are about forty 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.

Other features of the millions of lives like Kasim's also inhibit children's capacity to learn from what educational opportunities there are. He told us 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." At the end of a long day, a lack of energy catches Kasim up and he is often worn out by the time he has to do homework of an evening.

On the other side of town, Amina and Juanita had been talking 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. Their experience of the education they had received revealed the emotional toll of extreme deprivation. 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.

In Morogoro, a large town about four hours drive north-west of Dar, we discovered another 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. It doesn't seem unreasonable to guess that the policy is a cock-eyed mechanism for reducing the national education bill.

Fortunately for the kids in Morogoro, people like the psychologist and social worker Victor Mulimila have volunteered their time and expertise to set-up alternatives.

Working for the Faraja Trust Fund, Victor runs the Streetside School which guarantees a primary education for around sixty 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.

Things hadn't always been this way. With no expectation of going to school, prospective pupils and their relatives initially shunned Victor's attempts to recruit them. "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. 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 generating activities. This would enable the children to come to school instead of going back onto the streets to beg.

Victor is highly critical of the rich countries which continue to retrieve debt servicing payments at debilitating levels. And he's got a point. According to the UN Children's Fund, just US\$7 billion more each year for the next decade - less than the amount Europeans spend on ice-cream and people in the United States spend on cosmetics - is needed to achieve universal primary education by 2010.

He said, "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, it's getting worse. We will be dying. The rich countries have to forgive all the debts - not just to Tanzania, but to all third world countries. If they want to help, they shouldn't apply conditions that exploit us.

The prostitutes we spoke to couldn't have agreed more. They said, "We would like to move on, but we don't have the chance to. We don't know how we see our future. The way we live means we can't predict it.

We feel it's time they could.

About the team

This investigation was carried out by Oliver Robertson and Amina Kibria, 17, Juanita Rosenoir, 14, and Duane OGarro and Kierra Box, 13. It appeared in the Co-operative Bank Newsletter.

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