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**MUSEUM RESTORING DIGNITY IN MALAWIAN CHILDREN**

*Article 31 of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.*

**INTRODUCTION**

It is an honor for me to have this opportunity to share with you my experience on this important topic today. Malawi is a small country in Southern Africa with a population of about thirteen million. It is one of the ten least developed countries in the world. Malawi faces many challenges such as high rates of HIV/AIDS and malaria, issues of hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, high population density and severe pressure on land from agricultural practices. The rural areas suffer the most from these challenges, where over 80% of the population lives below the poverty line and 36% are illiterate.

My museum is at the centre of developing education programs concerning cross cutting issues like malaria prevention, HIV/AIDS, food security, children's rights and poverty. The Museums of Malawi established in 1957 is a government department under the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture. Its mission is to collect, research, preserve and disseminate information to the public regarding natural and cultural heritage of Malawi. The museums' mission is not just through research and collection based activities, but also through human interaction and interpretation. The Education Department of the Museums of Malawi educates people on the same through permanent exhibits and public programs. Today the Museums of Malawi have become agents of change in human rights; they mirror events in society and become instruments of change by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage restoring dignity in society.

Development is a priority of the Government of Malawi and poverty eradication is a Millennium Development Goal shared by the United Nations, the Commonwealth, NGOs and the people alike. Malawi has always been ranked among the poorest countries on the UN Human Development Index (UNDP 2007/2008). It is these high levels of poverty that perpetuate the abuse of human rights and social justice. The Museums of Malawi, in collaboration with other stakeholders, has embarked on a campaign to promote children's rights and social justice through the lens of culture. Slowly, there is increasing awareness that there is a direct link between culture, children's rights and development. In my paper, I will explain the Museums of Malawi's role in promoting children's rights and social justice. It will show how poverty in Malawi infringes on children's rights and how the museum addresses them. Programs are offered at the museum itself, but also as mobile outreach programs that move between Teachers Development Centres and schools.

## WHAT SPARKED THE PROGRAM OF RESTORING CHILDREN'S DIGNITY IN MALAWI?

Realizing how important children are to the future of a nation, the Museums of Malawi initiated a program with school children. The Museums of Malawi visited fifteen schools and asked over 900 school children to name the most significant issue they faced in their lives. The resounding response was poverty. The aim of the visits was to find out what problems affected children in their daily lives. Further the museum found out how children comprehend poverty and its effects on their rights and how they could take action against it. The visits to schools led to the production of the Culture Connection Magazine. This magazine gives children's ideas and perceptions in form of poems, short stories and some artwork that depict their feelings in response to how culture can combat poverty.

Education is critical for development. One of the fundamental objectives of the museum is to educate and it is only the museum that has the capacity and the ability to impart cultural education effectively as it houses the tools and materials for doing so in its collections.

Malawi has an estimated population of 13 million. Out of these are children under the age of 15 representing 45.9% of the population. In 2009 186,157 students in grade 8 sat Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations. 54,000 were selected to secondary schools which are only about 29% of total number of candidates who sat the examinations. This means that 71% were left behind.

For many years teachers have neglected to teach art subjects under the pretext that such subjects are not examinable. This attitude has a big impact on the country's economy and future lives of our children. Teachers also infringe the rights of the children by imposing subjects children have no interest or potential in. This has resulted in little appreciation of the arts which can be a source of industry and jobs in Malawi. It should be remembered that culture (arts) is a multi-million dollar industry in which people have become rich.

## WHAT IS POVERTY TO A MALAWIAN CHILD?

It is argued that poverty is the *denial of human rights* (lack of dignity, respect, happiness etc). This has become famous because of what is now called the Human Rights Approach to Development. This approach takes in consideration the principles of Human Rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most widely ratified convention in the world, is built on the same principles but varied to include others to reflect children's interests. The argument here is that anyone who is not enjoying his / her Human Rights as laid down in those documents is then living in poverty. As part of this approach all people are classified into rights holders and duty holders. The children by the nature of their age can only be rights holders and all adults and corresponding institutions are duty bearers. There are obligations that go with such responsibility. These obligations require each individual to strive to respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of the rights holders (children in this case). It is failure to do our role that leads to the child being in poor situation they are found in – thus poverty. From the cultural perspective, failure to teach art subjects in schools also leads to denial of children's rights and hence to poverty.

## WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN?

I wish to respond to this question by using an example of the now emerging challenge of orphans in the country. Malawi, like many other countries in sub Saharan Africa, has got a high

number of orphans. The main reason for the large number of orphans in Malawi is the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has caused disintegration of hundreds of thousands of families. Media reports indicate that there are over one million orphans in Malawi today.

Children orphaned by AIDS are at risk of deprivation (denied of their rights) and become locked in a downward spiral of poverty. To obtain cash, family possessions such as livestock, furniture and even land are disposed of. Children drop out of school because they cannot afford. The roles of parents and children are now reversed, as young children take on the responsibility of supporting and caring for their brothers and sisters. Within the home, young girls carry the burden of food preparation and childcare. Orphans and other children living in poverty not only lack basic education but also are extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and to economic exploitation.

Impoverished children become transmitters of poverty, parents to the next generation. In a vicious cycle, malnourished girls grow up to become malnourished mothers who give birth to underweight babies and illiterate parents cannot support children in their learning process. These children then run the risk of becoming the next generation of the poor who will be denied of their basic rights.

### *WHAT DO THE MUSEUMS OF MALAWI DO TO ADDRESS THIS SCENARIO IN MALAWI?*

Children stand at the centre of the solution of poverty. The intergenerational transmission of poverty cannot be broken unless children's basic capabilities are developed from birth.

Promoting healthy lives, providing quality basic education, protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence, and combating HIV/AIDS, are the key pillars of the World Fit for Children agenda. The ultimate objective is to create a child friendly world:

- Where all children get the best possible start in life
- Where children have access to quality basic education
- Where all youngsters have ample opportunity to grow to their full human potential.

A child-friendly world is also one where the human rights of children are respected, where democracy flourishes and where poverty is not an insurmountable barrier to human progress.

In a bid to restoring dignity of the children in Malawi, and recognizing that some Malawians have excelled and become rich through arts, the Museums of Malawi has launched a program targeting the Ministry of Education Officials, Teachers Training Colleges, teachers and students in schools. We believe that if art subjects are taught and regarded in the same way as the so-called core subjects in Malawi, there will be more employment opportunities for the youth and perhaps better livelihoods which will restore their dignity.

### **CONCLUSION**

Museums have a responsibility to provide services to their communities. Most people think of exhibitions when they think of museums. Exhibits are the heart of museums. However, public programs are in an excellent position to address contemporary issues such as human rights. By doing so, we make museums work for development.