

**PRESENTATION ON “ENDING THE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN: STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE”
BY MR. SAMUEL ZAN AKOLOGO AT A WEBINAR ORGANIZED BY SAFE-CHILD ADVOCACY ON
12TH JUNE, 2023 ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR.**

Introduction:

All the protocols duly acknowledged.

Let me first thank the Safe-Child Advocacy social service organization of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, for inviting me to contribute to this pertinent topic of **“Understanding the impact of Child Labour on society”**. I wish to use this opportunity also to acknowledge my dear friend, Sr. Olivia Umoh, the Director of Safe-Child Advocacy for her tireless efforts to bring liberation to, especially minors who are in all forms of deprivation, neglect, bondage and abuse.

I have been asked to focus my contribution on **“Ending the Exploitation of Children: Strategies for the future”**. My view is that while “Understanding the impact of Child Labour on society” requires an integrated and multidimensional approaches, a sort of division-of-labour arrangement for contributors to the discourse, helps to broaden perspectives and experiences. It is also possible then to establish interconnectivities, build synergies and re-emphasize common trends. I invite you, dear participants and fellow resource persons, to listen to my contribution with the mind that I may complement, reinforce or even vary from earlier perspectives. This presentation will attempt to suggest three main contexts or environments within which child exploitation occur; namely aberrations in normal socio-cultural settings, criminal exploitation and gangs, and humanitarian crises. Suggestions on some strategies from the context outlined will be made and conclusion drawn.

Context:

I would like to suggest, first of all, that the exploitation of children in the Ghanaian society largely occur in the context of aberrations, mainly due to the absence of standards and safeguards. In other words, normal relationships and practices within cultures and society, sometimes end up as grounds for abuse, exploitation and even cruel inhumane and degrading treatment towards children. The following contexts examples will illustrate this point! Consider:

1. Foster parenting where for instance, most girls in Dagomba culture are raised by their maternal aunts.
2. Socialization in Traditional family trades/ professions where children learn from family members through hands-on practice.
3. Informal apprenticeship placements with Master-Crafts persons where minors learn life skills.
4. Religious spaces like parish compounds, Qur’anic recitation centres and shrines where children may gather for recreation, learning or just for social networking.
5. Care Homes where disadvantaged children should be looked after, can end up being exploited.
6. Large extended family homes; especially in some traditional palaces where all sorts of distantly-related adults and large numbers of children of varying age categories live in the same household compound and sometimes share common sleeping spaces.
7. To some extent, our formal school system in very rural communities where children are used as help hands for teachers in farming or fishing.

Criminal exploitation and gangs have become an emerging reality also! Organized manipulation and coercion of children to commit crimes, or to be trafficked, or for ritual purposes, or sex trade, are becoming social and security cankers. Wanton access and use of the internet by children has made the issue more complex and increased the risk-exposure of children to exploitation and criminal activity.

We also know that humanitarian crises that lead to mass displacement of people and increase in unplanned human mobility, such as refugees and internally displaced persons, can heighten the conditions for the exploitation of children. The recent COVID-19 crisis where some cities like Accra and Kumasi were locked down, also revealed other dimensions of unsafe conditions for especially street children who were already in vulnerable situations. I still have memories of heart-breaking scenes during the lockdown in Kumasi while working with Sr. Olivia to provide humanitarian relief to vulnerable persons on the streets of Kumasi.

Suggested Strategies:

Strategies must necessarily be responsive to the known contexts and environments where exploitation of children occur or may likely occur. Strategies should aim to introduce standards, safety nets, law enforcement, increased security surveillance, modifications to conventional practices and oversight mechanisms. It is more preferable if strategies can be embedded in community life so that their enforcement become peer-driven and responsibility. Strategies however, need to be enabled by top-level overarching policies. As for example, Ghana's 1961 Education Act which aimed at achieving free universal primary education, made local chiefs responsible for compliance with the Act. Thus, no community member could keep their children away from school without being called to answer for it at the local chief's palace.

The implementation was further backed by practical measures that ensured that each community or contiguous communities, had a school within easy access for children. Also, policies themselves need continuity to become part of a society's culture (way of life). We know, for instance, that the discontinuation of some policies after the first coup d'état in Ghana in 1966, led to the withdrawal of many children, especially girls from school, leading to the collapse of many community schools. That's how my own primary education was temporarily interrupted in 1967, as nearly all the Dagomba children were withdrawn from Tugu LA primary and the teachers left or were probably withdrawn. Thanks to the determination of my father who had to relocate my brother and I to another village (Sang) in 1968 to complete Primary Six education to enable us go to another town (Tamale) for Middle School education.

With the above overview, I will like to propose comprehensive and integrated strategies that relate to:

- Public Policy Measures that guarantee education to all children by right and complemented by measures that keep all children in school. For instance, the school feeding initiative for schools in hunger hotspots is one good policy strategy.

- Sustained Public education / awareness programmes undertaken by the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), Religious Bodies and NGOs can address aberrations in the socio-cultural realm.
- Community Watch-Dog Committees for Child safety can be promoted by various levels of Local Government structures so that monitoring and reporting are inbuilt into the District Assembly system.
- Local Leadership, under the auspices of Traditional Rulers can be a sustainable strategy for ensuring the safety of children at the community level.
- Security and Legal enhancement and enforcement is the most appropriate strategy in the context of organized criminal activities that target children for abuse and exploitation.
- A proactive media responsibility, partnership and actions could also improve communication that keeps this pertinent issue in the public domain for attention.
- That the exploitation and abuse of children continue to occur in Ghana where everyone professes a faith, is an indictment to religion. Most studies acknowledge the importance that various faiths place on children. We need a strategy that mobilizes and unites all faiths in Ghana on Child safety and against child abuse.

Conclusion:

Regrettably, poverty remain one of the drivers of child labour in our society today. This should not be an extenuating factor in our condemnation of child abuse. However, addressing poverty of parents can be helpful to minimize child labour.

All religions need to take firm positions against child abuse. While the historical record on child abuse cases of the Catholic Church have been shameful and heart-breaking, recent efforts under Pope Francis have been bold and commendable. For instance, since 30th April, 2023, an updated version of the Church's norms to prevent and counter sexual abuse against minors and vulnerable adults, has been in force, through the Motu Proprio "*Vos estis lux mundi*". Notable improvement of the new norms is the expansion of its scope to include lay Catholic Leaders. In this regard, it seems to me appropriate that the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference take steps to review and update their Child Protection Policy and find ways to enhance its operation.

Recently, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) made a serious call for the protection of children online. I think that this is a pertinent call even for Africa where internet communication is expanding. Families need education on how not to discourage their children from the benefits of online learning but instead find ways to monitor their children's online activities. Fortunately, there is now much help to ensure this.

The World Day Against Child Labour should offer stakeholders the opportunity to regularly review the changing trends to find solutions and responses. Current strategies may not necessarily be fit for purpose in future but may nevertheless be good reference points. Hence, our search for strategies must be ongoing based on analysis of the trends and dynamics. Thank you for the audience.

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