Violence against children carries a huge cost for Africa: Governments must act urgently
28 July 2021, by Rongedzayi Fambasayi

Every day, millions of children experience violence in one form or another. It is a global problem that cuts across color, class, educational status, income, ethnicity and origin.

It has immediate, long term and irreparable impacts on the life, survival, physical and psychosocial development and well-being of children. Violence against children also has financial implications for families and the state.

The scale of violence against children, including recent forms such as cyber bullying and online abuse, is worrying. The impact of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and closure of schools has also exposed children to domestic abuse and violence. And violence is escalating in conflict, emergencies and humanitarian settings.

Recently the African Partnership to End Violence against Children and the African Child Policy Forum launched three comprehensive reports assessing the status of violence against children in Africa. They examined the progress and challenges, national capacity to address violence against children, and home-grown solutions to eliminate it. These reports are based on the obligations specified in a number of international and African regional laws and commitments in development policies. Among them are the Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 and Agenda 2040 Aspiration 7—which condemns violence against children.

Progress towards ending violence against children is slow and uneven across Africa. Challenges and setbacks persist because of weak technical capacity, poor financing, weak institutional structures and poor multi-sectoral coordination. Budgets for child protection systems are low, and weakly integrated into the national budgeting process. Ending violence against children is a long-term mission which requires multiple approaches, strategies, actors—and investment.

The cost of inaction

As child rights and policy researchers, we work to hold governments accountable to their obligations and commitments to children. Our Progress and Challenges report notes that violence puts a strain on economies. It "drains national budgets and limits social expenditure," slows economic development and erodes human and social capital.

The failure of governments to act to prevent violence has immediate costs. For instance, sexual exploitation creates a high cost in professional medical services, psycho-social support, criminal justice and legal services. It includes healthcare treatment, disability rehabilitation, counseling, and access to justice for the survivor, among others.
In South Africa, for example, studies estimate the economic value of violence against children in 2015 to have totalled R173 billion (US$13.5 billion) – or 4.3% of the country's GDP. In the case of Nigeria, it is estimated that cumulatively the country lost earnings of more than 967 billion naira (US$6.1 billion) – 1.07% of the country's GDP—as a consequence of inaction. This figure excludes the enormous costs on both families and the government emanating from the recent abductions of girls in Nigeria.

The findings of the studies suggest that in the long term, an individual's future earnings and employability could diminish due to poor school performance as a result of the experience of violence as a child. Violence has implications for a country's human capital, GDP and productivity.

Violence against children has an inter-generational impact. Failure to adopt deliberate and decisive preventive measures could create the conditions for a troubled childhood, which could shape an adult who could become a threat to society and national security.

**Investing in prevention**

Clearly, investment in preventing violence against children is a long-term strategy for a sustainable future.

Governments should act urgently to end violence against children all over the continent.

They need to make a deliberate commitment to this in their annual budgets. One area that requires investment is coordinating structures to link the plans and actions of government departments, civil society, NGOs and other stakeholders.

Another area to invest in is research, knowledge generation, data collection and evidence-gathering. This is pivotal to effective responses. Governments need to understand the trends, prevalence and status of violence against children nationally and locally.

Most important is investment in effective programs to support families and put them at the forefront of prevention and protection. These programs could include positive parenting to protect children from corporal punishment, neglect, harmful cultural practices, trafficking and other forms of violence within the family setting.

Further, governments should commit to and invest in safe schools, especially public funded schools. Schools present an opportunity as they are the spaces where the cognitive, ethical and social development of children takes place.

Owing to the impacts of COVID-19 and school closures, children have been spending more time on the internet and using online platforms. Increased online presence opens a door for online child abuse. This can be online recruitment into child prostitution, child labor, child trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Governments should invest in cross-border measures to prevent the exposure and exploitation of children. Private businesses also have a part to play in ensuring that children are safe online.

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