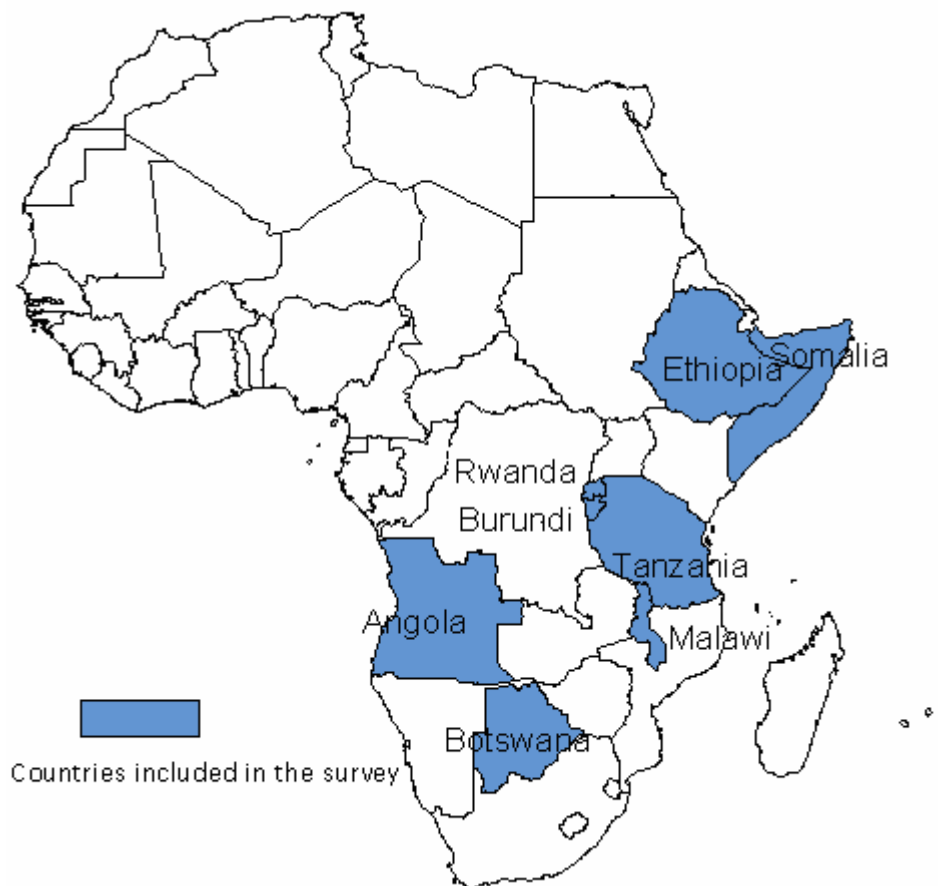


What African Children and Youth Think and Feel

An Opinion Poll of Children and Youth in eastern and southern Africa



Introduction

One of the most innovative and radical ideas in both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is the importance given to child participation, specifically the right of the child to freedom of thought and expression. Only by giving children and youth an authentic voice in bringing out their thoughts and concerns and in articulating their anxieties, hopes and aspirations can one hope to address their needs and ensure that their rights are honoured.

One way of ascertaining children and youth concerns and giving them a voice in mirroring their authentic situation is through carefully designed and administered children and youth polls. With this in mind, The African Child Policy Forum and UNICEF (Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office) collaborated on a project initially covering a small number of countries but hopefully one that would lead to the practice of regularly polling the opinion of children and youth on the African continent.

The project kicked off in 2006, with a series of polls in eight countries (Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi, Angola and Botswana). Although it is the fourth region where such polls have been introduced by UNICEF, it is the first of its kind in most of the countries in eastern and southern Africa, and will hopefully open doors to many more similar polls in future.

The polls covered more than 4000 children aged 9 to 17 years from both urban and rural populations and included a large number of questions on a wide array of subjects.

The results of this extensive survey have revealed some surprising truths while confirming old ones about African children. Most importantly, the survey has personalized the issues surrounding African children and youth, and given them an opportunity for perspective and reflection. Children have spoken out about their well-being, emotions and environment; their relationships with family and friends; their relationship with their communities, their countries and their leaders; and of course about their perceptions of the issues concerning them.

Although these children and youth are from the same age group and live in similar settings, the polls reveal both striking similarities and differences amongst the children surveyed, essentially a reflection of the influence of country-specific factors (including their environment, economic background and day-to-day experiences)

These studies record the authentic voices of African children. They are a window into their lives, thoughts and perceptions. As such they provide a means to better engage them in efforts to bring about change in their lives.

Context

The last decade of the 20th Century should have been the time African economies put themselves back on the path to growth. The long drawn-out period of structural adjustment programmes was behind, with economies trimmed down to face up to market realities. Multi-party electoral systems were spreading, and towards the end of the decade covered over three-quarters of the sub-regional population, heralding the possibility of genuine people's participation in decisions affecting their fate. The debilitating debate about which fundamental human rights came first – economic and social rights or political and civil rights – had been resolved with the collapse of the Soviet system in favour

of the indivisibility of all rights. There was greater adherence to international conventions affecting the well being of children and women. Worldwide, this was a period of unprecedented boom in incomes, propelled by technological innovations in the information and telecommunication sector. The spillover benefits were shared by many developing regions, and in many of them economic development and poverty reduction accelerated.

Unfortunately, sub-Saharan Africa failed to capitalize on any of the positive trends. Mass poverty and diseases persisted, and in some cases the situation even worsened, HIV/AIDS and increasing internal and cross-border warfare providing the dramatic backdrop.

Most economies of sub-Saharan countries either stagnated or even regressed, and income distribution is now more unequal than ever. Sub-Saharan Africa was practically the only developing region in the world where not only the absolute number of people in poverty increased but so did the percentage of people in poverty.

Children and women suffered the most, as progress in human development indicators – life expectancy, literacy, and malnutrition – achieved over the first two decades of independence, began to erode. Worse still, problems that were once thought of as un-African – sexual abuse of children within families and at school, bondage and slave-like practices involving children, child trafficking for prostitution and begging - began to be noticed. Perhaps they were always there and it may well be that greater awareness of human rights, particularly of children’s and women’s rights, and the proliferation of public-minded civil society organizations may have contributed to their exposure.

It can safely be assumed that, today during these early years of the 21st Century, the environment within which African children and youth grow is less than conducive for developing their full potential and to grow into healthy and productive adults.

Country	HDI ranking	GDP/c	live births/ woman	life expectancy at birth	(15-49) HIV Prevalence
Ethiopia	170	756	5.9	47.6	3.5%
Burundi	169	677	6.8	43.5	3.3%
Malawi	166	646	6.1	39.6	14.1%
Tanzania	162	674	5.0	45.9	6.5%
Angola	161	2,180	6.8	40.7	3.7%
Rwanda	158	1,263	5.7	43.6	3.1%
Botswana	131	9,945	3.2	36.6	24.1%
Somalia	-	n.a.	6.4	46.2	0.9%

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2006

Children and Youth’s views about the present and the future

With the exception of Botswana (HDI rank = 131), the countries included in this regional opinion poll of children and youth, all rank amongst the lowest 10% of the 177 countries listed in the UNDP Human Development Index.

Life expectancy at birth is a good indicator of the seriousness of the problems facing a growing child. Whereas a child born in the UNDP’s ‘HDI top 10% countries’ might look at a life averaging 79.3 years, a child born in the ‘HDI bottom 10% countries’ (from sub-Saharan Africa) can only expect to live 47 years. Botswana has the world’s second lowest life expectancy at birth with only 36.6 years. A child being born in Botswana today has a chance of just over 30% to ever reach the age of 40.

Still, despite these negative indicators, children according to our survey are in general happy and very optimistic about their own and their countries' development, the most notable exceptions being Ethiopia and Burundi. Whilst 78% of the children in the other countries claimed to be happy, only 45% of the children living in Ethiopia and Burundi claimed to be so!).

The majority of children and youth feel that life in their countries is now better than it was ten years ago (64%), and that it will be better still in the future (68%). Without fail, they indicate that they expect to do better themselves than their parents (79%), and they seem to have the feeling that as an individual they will fair even better than most other people in their country. This is indicative or suggestive of their personal involvement and commitment to a better future for themselves and their country.

It may also be pointed out that the countries scoring the best on aggregate in terms of where children say they are happy, believe that their country is now a better place to live in than say ten years ago and are optimistic about the future are Angola, Botswana, Rwanda and Tanzania. This may well be explained by the fact that some are just coming out of a traumatic war and conflict (Angola and Rwanda) or the others have seen the exercise and blossoming of democratic governance (Botswana and Tanzania).

Country	HDI ranking	Children stating to be happy or even very happy	Children believing their country is now a better or even much better place to live in than it was ten years ago	Children believing their country in the future will be a better or even much better place to live in	Children believing their future life to be better or even much better than their parent's current life
Ethiopia	170	55%	45%	60%	71%
Burundi	169	34%	50%	50%	66%
Malawi	165	77%	n.a.	49%	77%
Tanzania	164	79%	79%	79%	86%
Angola	160	79%	56%	70%	75%
Rwanda	159	72%	84%	89%	94%
Botswana	131	77%	75%	74%	87%
Somalia	?	86%	58%	72%	75%

Children in the region are in general very trusting of adults. Whilst their mothers and fathers are almost universally trusted with averages of 97% and 92% (fathers in Rwanda being least trusted with a score of only 76%), adults in general received an average trust level of 68%. Most interesting perhaps is the finding that the army and police, which often are associated with indiscriminate use of force, also receive a high-trust rating, with 75% and 72% respectively. Another interesting statistic is that governments also receive rather high trust ratings with an average of 76% and that the Heads of State score even higher with 80%.

Children were also asked who they look up to and who serves as a role model for them. Their response is reflected below. The figures show that, by and large, artists and athletes seem to score high while, interestingly enough; teachers and politicians are the least regarded.

	Nobody	Musical group/singer	Actor/actress/comedian	Teacher	Athlete	Politician
Angola	14%	40%	13%	3%	12%	3%
Botswana	6%	48%	9%	4%	10%	7%
Burundi	23%	42%	6%	1%	8%	6%
Ethiopia	34%	18%	2%	6%	23%	2%

Malawi	1%	53%	2%	1%	16%	16%
Rwanda	1%	36%	4%	1%	37%	16%
Somalia	24%	9%	5%	9%	12%	5%
Tanzania	4%	30%	2%	4%	14%	33%

A major finding of the survey is that a significant proportion of children would prefer to live in another country. Three out of every ten children in the region would prefer to live outside their country given the choice. Malawi at 45% and Botswana at 38% had the highest number of children that would want to migrate, with Tanzania and Rwanda scoring the lowest number of potential emigrants at 16% and 20 % respectively. Amongst the countries mentioned the US, Canada and Europe were popular prospective destinations, though other African countries such as South Africa, Kenya and DR Congo were also mentioned..

There are, of course, a number of areas that children and youth are especially worried about. Most important are problems in the family (“when something bad happens in the family”) or the lack of money or fights in the family. Poor performance at school is also a major source of concern and anxiety.

	When something bad happens in the family	When I'm doing badly in school	When there is no money	When there are fights in the family	Inability to pay school fees	When I am sick
Angola	68%	46%	41%	36%	31%	2%
Botswana	17%	36%	16%	7%	9%	13%
Burundi	19%	10%	7%	9%	6%	22%
Ethiopia	61%	27%	26%	42%	5%	8%
Malawi	40%	18%	28%	11%	9%	13%
Rwanda	39%	37%	17%	21%	20%	25%
Somalia	28%	24%	21%	12%	11%	2%
Tanzania	43%	29%	24%	18%	12%	6%

Children also showed a good knowledge of harmful traditional practices that were affecting their lives, though there was variation in levels of awareness or in the significance attached to particular problems. For example, for children in Ethiopia (59%), Somalia (57%) and Tanzania (66%), female genital mutilation figures out as a major issue for children while it is not so important in Angola and Rwanda. Early marriage is a serious concern for children in Ethiopia (58%) where it widely prevalent as well as in Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia and Tanzania. Interesting also is the fairly significant proportion of children – close to one third of children in Malawi and Rwanda, 33% in Angola, 44% in Ethiopia and 63% in Tanzania – who expressed concern about child bondage, a problem often associated with south east Asia and seldom discussed in the region.

	Male circumcision	Female genital mutilation	Early Marriage	Child bondage	Skin piercing	Widow inheritance	Polygamy
Angola	8%	6%	23%	33%	22%	7%	23%
Botswana	11%	8%	11%	7%	18%	1%	17%
Burundi	5%	1%	6%	22%	34%	1%	23%
Ethiopia	13%	59%	58%	44%	8%	3%	23%
Malawi	31%	23%	37%	28%	4%	16%	41%

Rwanda	19%	2%	37%	27%	15%	4%	27%
Somalia	15%	57%	33%	15%	8%	7%	13%
Tanzania	5%	66%	34%	63%	2%	7%	11%

What children and youth know about HIV/AIDS

Life expectancy is strongly linked to poverty but, as the low figures of life expectancies in Malawi and especially Botswana show, poverty alone can not explain it all. Here, the exceptionally high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates - respectively 14.1% and 24.1% - pose a particular danger to children.

Approximately 10% of the world population lives in sub-Saharan Africa, but the region is home to approximately 64% of the world population living with HIV¹.

AIDS impacts almost on all aspects of children's welfare, particularly on the girl child, a manifestation of unequal gender relations in the region. As parents fall ill and family incomes fall, children are withdrawn from school to tend to the sick and take over the responsibility for household activities. When both parents die - there are 5 million 'full' AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan countries and an additional 7 million who have lost 'just' one parent to the disease¹ - the burden often falls on the girl child to bring up her siblings, particularly in urban areas where the safety net afforded by the extended family is breaking down under the stress of poverty, and, it could be said, the unusually heavy burden created by the disease itself.

Orphans in towns therefore have in most cases to fend for themselves by engaging in various kinds of survival strategies that include the whole gamut of activities in the informal sector, from petty trading and shoe-shining to parking attendants. In this way, AIDS has become a major contributor to increasing child labour in sub-Saharan Africa. 'Survival sex' is often the fallback income-earning strategy of young girls (and increasingly also of boys) exposing them to the risk of contacting the very disease that in the first instance pushed them onto the streets. Survey after survey from African cities shows rates of infection amongst girls at 5-7 times that of boys, as girls are forced into sexual intercourse with older men. 'Children on the street' (i.e. those who have a home to go to at night), suffer less than 'children of the street' (i.e. the homeless), nights being self-evidently more dangerous.

In rural areas, grandparents and uncles and aunts have to assume the responsibility of looking after the orphans. In return they exact housework on their new charges, a virtual payback for their upkeep. Neglect and abuse are common and it's no wonder that many children flee from their caregivers to escape such conditions. Girls who are 'lucky' are married off to older men.

Given the enormous impact the HIV/AIDS pandemic has on the life of so many children in Africa, it is disheartening to notice how little children really know about the causes of HIV/AIDS and on how to prevent it. Only 57% of the children in the survey claimed to know something about the existence of HIV/AIDS, with Burundi and Somalia showing especially low awareness rates (31% and 20% respectively). Again, a worrying number of children in Burundi and Somalia who claimed to know about HIV/AIDS, were not able to give any of the possible causes (31% and 40% respectively) of

¹ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). *2006 report on the global AIDS epidemic*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNAIDS; 2006.

infection. Not surprisingly, these were also the children that knew least about how to prevent being infected.

	Ethiopia	Burundi	Malawi	Tanzania	Angola	Rwanda	Botswana	Somalia
A lot or some awareness of Aids								
	65%	31%	74%	83%	50%	58%	72%	20%
Knowledge about causes of HIV/AIDS								
Through infected blood	54%	20%	28%	38%	68%	45%	50%	25%
Through sexual intercourse	87%	62%	85%	86%	72%	87%	80%	43%
By using non-sterile syringes/ needles	61%	34%	49%	62%	67%	54%	32%	24%
Mother to child	14%	8%	1%	7%	43%	35%	3%	5%
Don't know	4%	31%	9%	10%	11%	6%	6%	40%
Knowledge about how to prevent being infected with HIV/AIDS								
Be faithful	48%	66%	44%	38%	65%	80%	36%	46%
Delay first sexual relationship	54%	21%	28%	52%	35%	56%	6%	28%
Use condoms	56%	32%	65%	52%	83%	62%	79%	12%
Not to share syringes/ needles	59%	43%	46%	45%	67%	42%	26%	34%
Avoid contact with infected people	23%	17%	8%	12%	28%	30%	9%	21%
Stop having sex	5%	3%	18%	8%		5%	16%	5%
Go for tests	4%							
Affected mothers to stop breastfeeding							2%	
Don't know		4%	2%		2%	1%		13%

Do they know about their rights?

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* was a culmination of a decade of negotiations and work between government and non-governmental organizations. It also heralded a critical shift in perspectives of children – from victims and recipients of welfare, to individual rights holders. The CRC has 41 substantive articles that provide rights to children covering matters ranging from child justice and child labour to education and health. All African countries have ratified the CRC, except Somalia which recently signed the UNCRC but has yet to ratify.

The *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* was born out of the feeling by African states that the drafting of the CRC missed important socio-cultural and economic realities of the African experience.² Both the CRC and African Charter recognise the importance of cultural and traditional values – though they caution the use of these to frustrate the rights they confer.³

² Bankole Thompson, "Africa's Charter on Children's Rights: A Normative Break with Cultural Traditionalism", 41 International and Comparative Law Review, no.2 (1992), pp.432-444, p.440.

³ Preambles to the CRC and the Charter.

However, the African Charter is more comprehensive than the CRC in certain provisions such as harmful cultural practices⁴; outright prohibition on the recruitment of children (defined as any person under 18 years of age) in armed conflict;⁵ the prohibition of marriages or betrothals involving children⁶; prohibition of use of children as beggars⁷ and granting girls the right to return to school after pregnancy.⁸ Interestingly, the African Charter explicitly tackled specifically African issues such as apartheid – calling for it and similar systems to be confronted and abolished.⁹

The African Charter challenges African custom and cultural relativism and affirms standards on traditional views on issues such child marriage, parental rights and obligations towards their children, and children born out of wedlock..

The African Charter has been ratified by 38 of the 54 countries in Africa including Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda and Tanzania

An important measure of the extent to which countries or regions are aware of and affirm the rights of children is the extent to which children themselves are aware of their rights. The eight countries covered by the survey scored poorly on this measure. When children were asked if they were aware of children’s rights and the two instruments, less than half (48%) claimed to know ‘a lot/something’ whilst a larger proportion (some 53%) knew very little or nothing about them. Awareness was comparatively higher in Tanzania (75%) and Rwanda (65%) and the least in Burundi (22%). A quarter of the children knew absolutely nothing about Children’s rights and they comprised higher proportions of children from Burundi (44%), Angola (31%) and Somalia (30%).

The one right that children were most aware about was the right to education, while the one in which they claimed knowing the least about was the right to information.

With such a low rate of knowledge on their rights, it is obvious that a lot of awareness raising is required at various levels of society if we ever want to achieve the fulfillment of all children’s rights as the African governments have committed themselves to by signing the UNCRC and ACRWC.

	A lot	Some	Very little	Only know the name	Absolutely don't know anything about it
Regional average	20%	28%	20%	9%	23%
Botswana	16%	27%	27%	9%	21%
Burundi	8%	14%	19%	15%	44%
Ethiopia	13%	33%	22%	6%	26%
Malawi	25%	26%	17%	6%	25%
Rwanda	29%	36%	17%	8%	9%
Somalia	23%	24%	15%	9%	30%
Tanzania	44%	31%	9%	6%	10%

⁴ Art. 21. ACRWC

⁵ Art. 22(2) ACRWC

⁶ Art. 21 ACRWC

⁷ Art. 27(1)(b) ACRWC

⁸ Art. 11(6) ACRWC

⁹ Art. 26 ACRWC.

Do children and youth feel they matter?

Underlying all the rights specified in the CRC are the Articles defined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child that are known as "general principles" - or the 4 pillars on which the CRC rests:

1. Article 2 on **non-discrimination**;
2. Article 3 on **the best interests of the child**;
3. Article 6 on **the right to life, survival and development**;
4. Article 12 on **respect for the views of the child**,

Involving children in making decisions that affect them directly is a direct consequence of especially Article 12 and a measure of the extent to which they are participating in matters that affect them. On this score, the regional average is an unsatisfactory 40%, meaning that there is plenty of work yet to be done to ensure that this right is enjoyed by the children. In this regard, Botswana (27%), Somalia (27%), Tanzania (28%) Madagascar (33%) and Burundi (36%) have a lot more to do than Angola where 68% of the children interviewed said that their views were taken into account.

Despite the largely positive relationships with parents, almost 40% of the children (37%) believe their opinions/views are not taken into consideration adequately when **decisions that directly concern them are made in the home** –this concern was particularly evident in Ethiopia (46%) and Tanzania (42%). The sense of being ignored was less pronounced in Somalia (25%).

In the survey, children were asked on what matters in the home they would like to be consulted on most:

	Anything that concerns me, my privacy	My education	Type of shoes/ clothes I want	My future, my life, my plans	The work I have to do	Selling our property.
Angola	19%	10%	6%	1%	2%	2%
Botswana	35%	13%	15%	6%	3%	3%
Burundi	22%	6%	12%	3%	6%	8%
Ethiopia	23%	18%	19%	6%	2%	0%
Malawi	15%	20%	27%	4%	4%	0%
Rwanda	26%	17%	18%	1%	2%	3%
Somalia	20%	24%	11%	6%	3%	0%
Tanzania	29%	36%	12%	3%	3%	6%

Despite the positive relationship with also their teachers, almost a fifth of the students found it difficult/very difficult to **discuss their school problems** with the teachers –particularly in Ethiopia (31%) and Botswana (28%). The lowest proportion was recorded in Malawi (7%). The reasons most frequently given as to why discussing these problems was difficult were “teachers do not listen to students” (37%), “we fear approaching the teacher” (28%) and the ‘system is rigid’ i.e. there is no platform through which they can channel their problems to the teachers.

Children feel least consulted on **matters that affect them in their community**. On average, only 17% of the children in the survey felt that they were being consulted on community issues, with the lowest rate reported from Ethiopia (4%) and the highest from Rwanda (30%).

The issues on which children and youth most frequently mentioned that they would like to be consulted were related to school/education, to development and infrastructure, security issues and on ways to support vulnerable groups in society.

	School related issues (teachers/visitation)	Construction and fair distribution of schools	Development/infrastructure	Crime/insecurity/war	Action plan to support vulnerable children
Angola	8%	4%	17%	12%	3%
Botswana	14%	3%	3%	2%	6%
Burundi	9%	5%	1%	10%	2%
Ethiopia	22%	6%	11%	4%	6%
Malawi	12%	15%	9%	1%	7%
Rwanda	8%	1%	1%	3%	9%
Somalia	12%	7%	3%	6%	3%
Tanzania	18%	8%	4%	2%	15%