

Unheard Voices: Somali children speak out

NAIROBI, Wednesday, 6 December 2006 - An opinion poll conducted in May among Somali children from across the country gives voice to their dreams, aspirations and opinions.

The poll initiated by UNICEF in partnership with Africa Child Policy Forum is the first of its kind in Somalia: a country that has not known peace for close to 16 years. It sampled 531 children (286 boys and 245 girls) aged between 9 and 17 years old, in four key urban and rural locations (Merca, Beletweyne, Bosaso and Hargeisa).

The poll indicates that parents are crucial in instilling important values and indicates that the following are the most important values instilled by them: 'respect for others', 'telling the truth', 'not stealing' and "being responsible.'

90% of Somali children sampled, enjoy a remarkably good relationship with their parents and appreciate them most for their love, the fact that they communicate with them and generally take good care of them.

According to the poll, two-thirds of the children believed that elections are a 'very effective' means to improve the state of things in the country. Rural children expressed the most confidence in elections as a way to the improvement of the country's state of affairs. Though none of the children had ever experienced an election, it is notable that the majority supported a democratic electoral process.

On the topic of 'young people's participation' only 17% of children said they were consulted on matters affecting them in their community. One third said they were never consulted, while 45% did not know of any system of consultation.

Among issues on which they would like to be consulted, education received top billing. Issues which most concerned them were the need for more schools (12%) and for improvements in educational standards (12%). Other matters on which they wanted to be consulted were insecurity, hygiene and health matters, and health information.

Despite the country's insecurity, 60% of the children said that they wanted to continue to live in Somalia. A third said they would consider living in another country. When asked the places to which they would like to emigrate, 23% favoured the USA (23%) 24% indicated Britain and 17% opted for Asia.

The cultural practices considered most harmful by the children were female genital mutilation (57%), early marriage (38%); male circumcision; child bondage and polygamy.

No particular person emerged strongly as a role model for the children, although they identified the following as people they looked up to: traditional and religious leaders; athletes, musicians; and teachers. 25% of children polled said they had no 'role model'.

In their vision for Somalia the majority of children – almost 75% - were positive that in future, the country will be a better place to live in. Their confidence was founded on hopes of 'good governance' (37%); 'less delinquency and violence' (25%); 'better education' (24%); 'better economic situation' (22%); and 'less poverty' (10%)

Only 10% were not optimistic about the country's future and expressed concern about the 'worsening economic situation' and 'more delinquency in society'.

UNICEF Representative for Somalia, Christian Balslev-Olesen commenting on the poll noted, "This outcome of this poll comes at an opportune time. As Somalia looks to its future we have documented evidence of their articulated priorities and goals. The previously unheard voices of Somalia's youngest citizens can now be heard. Preparation for responsible adulthood begins with the age appropriate participation of young people in their communities. Participation begins by giving children the space to voice their opinions. We urge Somali parents, community leaders, authorities and the international community to listen".

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