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## **Breaking the spell: responding to witchcraft accusations against children**

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## **Introduction**

Witchcraft allegations against children have become the focus of increased international attention in recent years. Recent reports by Phillip Alston, Gary Foxcroft, Jill Schnoebelen and Alexandra Cimpric representing respectively, the United Nations, Stepping Stones Nigeria, UNHCR and UNICEF have all highlighted increasing concerns regarding violence and abuse towards children accused of witchcraft.

Accusations of witchcraft cause direct violations of children's rights. Children are isolated or even rejected from their family and community, end up living on the streets, become victims of different forms of trafficking, suffer from physical and mental health problems and trauma due to the abuses they have experienced (AFRUCA, 2009). Already vulnerable children become even more vulnerable as a result of witchcraft accusations. Cases of children being harmed, abused or killed due to accusations of being a witch or for the purpose of witchcraft have been documented in many countries around the world, though the vast majority of cases investigated to date have been African. This paper focuses on African case studies.

There is growing concern within UNHCR around the issue of children being accused of witchcraft within the refugee and IDP communities which fall under the UNHCR mandate and the abuse that they receive as a consequence. UNHCR's Policy and Evaluation section therefore asked the authors of this report to research the issue in more depth and to provide recommendations based on the results of their findings.<sup>1</sup>

This research involved a thorough review of both academic and grey literature, individual interviews with key stakeholders – primarily professionals involved in international and national level NGOs working in child protection related fields – and a review of pertinent international human rights treaties which could provide a normative framework to guide international responses to the issue.

Additionally, a questionnaire was developed and sent to UNHCR field offices where reports of accusations of witchcraft had occurred. Responses from UNHCR offices were extremely limited. Information specific to UNHCR was therefore mainly retrieved through document review and not through personal or phone interviews with UNHCR field staff. It is important to recognize that this placed a significant limit on the process of data collection.

After offering a general overview on the role of children in witchcraft, this paper turns to consider UNHCR's growing concern with accusations of witchcraft against children identified as persons of concern.

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this report was carried out as part of a group project required for the Master of Advanced Studies in Children's Rights at the Institute Universitaire Kurt Bosch located in Sion, Switzerland, and the University of Fribourg in Fribourg, Switzerland. The authors of the report are all graduate students as well as professionals in various occupations dealing with children's rights and welfare. The authors would like to thank Maria Riiskjaer from the Policy Development and Evaluation Section and Ron Pouwels from the Community Development Gender Equality and Children Section in UNHCR for the support and guidance they offered through out the research process.

Next, the authors analyse witchcraft accusations and children within a human and child rights framework, including refugee law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). The document then covers UNHCR responses and the response of civil society to date. It concludes with recommendations for future action, suggesting how UNHCR can better formulate policy and practice to address the growing concern of child victims of witchcraft accusations.

### **The practice of witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft**

Belief in witchcraft has a long history and is a widespread phenomenon throughout the world (Behringer, 2004). Although beliefs vary among time and place, the question of their validity or existence in certain cultures of the world is not contested. Indeed, “[a] belief in witchcraft is not necessarily problematic” (Schnoebelen, 2009). It becomes a problem, however, when the belief in witchcraft leads to accusations that ignite acts of persecution, including psychological, emotional and physical abuse (AFRUCA, 2009).

In May 2009, Philip Alston, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, made witchcraft a priority in his annual report. He considers witchcraft to be an issue of particular importance because there have been numerous cases in recent years in which those accused of witchcraft have been persecuted and killed. He identifies the lack of information and attention given to this issue and acknowledges that in many countries the numbers, scope and patterns of killings remain unknown (Alston, 2009).

Internationally, various civil society organisations and NGOs such as Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN)<sup>2</sup> have also documented a sudden increase in witchcraft accusations as well as the human rights violations arising from such accusations (Foxcroft, 2009). According to Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director of Stepping Stones, witchcraft accusations are deeply rooted in African cultures and in some African countries.<sup>3</sup>

However, an extensive literature review also identified such accusations in other parts of the world, such as Nepal, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria, Bolivia, Guatemala and Haiti (Alston, 2009; Foxcroft 2009; Schnoebelen 2009). In Western Europe, belief in witchcraft existed mainly in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and was often linked to witch hunts that occurred in those times (Alston, 2009). However, more recently, there have been some cases identified amongst immigrant populations in England and France.

In some states witchcraft is punishable by law (Alston, 2009). This issue of national legislation related to witchcraft and associated crimes will be further discussed below. “Personal” or “communitarian” justice frequently prevails in the form of public beatings, murder, burning, isolation and other forms of violence (Alston, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> A UK-funded NGO working to promote the protection of vulnerable children impacted by witchcraft accusations in the Niger Delta region (Nigeria)

<sup>3</sup> Cases of children or women being accused of witchcraft have been documented in many African countries, such as Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda (Alston, 2009; Foxcroft 2009; Schnoebelen 2009)

Exorcism and rituals of purification are also used to deliver “witches,” by violent means such as burning, starvation, beatings and isolation. Victims of witchcraft accusations are often discriminated and even rejected by their family and community, left in isolation and abused, both physically and psychologically (Clayton, 2006).

### *Deconstructing western assumptions related to witchcraft*

To better understand the social phenomenon of witchcraft and identify possible measures to respond to the related cruelty, it is important to develop an anthropological and sociological approach alongside a human rights framework. First of all, it should not be assumed that witchcraft accusations are simply related to ancestral or traditional beliefs. A recent unpublished UNICEF anthropological study about the representations of sorcery and contemporary practices on children in Africa confirms this view (Cimpric, 2009). Cases of witchcraft accusation have been identified in “modern” (i.e. developed) countries.

Additionally, in many African countries sorcery forms part of social relationships in urban areas where school enrolment, Christianity and/or Islam are more pronounced than in rural areas. The incidents of witchcraft in urban areas, especially in Africa also seem to contradict the assumption that witchcraft beliefs are typically rural phenomena (Foxcroft, 2009; Cimpric, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2009).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), “urban witchcraft” began in the 1980’s (USAID, 2002). Traditionally, belief in an invisible world is very common. In the context of economic and social crises – such as that experienced in the DRC from the 1980s – witchcraft is an easy “excuse” to explain the misery and misfortune of the family (Foxcroft, 2009; Save the Children, 2006).

It is important to deconstruct one further assumption, namely that it would be Euro-centric to view witchcraft to something intrinsically negative. Edward E. Evans-Pritchard was one of the first anthropologists to study witchcraft among the *Zandé* in Southern Sudan before the Second World War, when it was still under Anglo-Egyptian rule. He concluded that one should differentiate witchcraft and sorcery. Witchcraft, according to Evans-Pritchard, referred to powers inherited by one person and used privately.

In contrast, sorcery identified a socially recognized person capable of acting in favour or against people. Over time the two distinctions have almost disappeared both in language, as well in anthropological studies. Presently, it is now recognized that witchcraft and sorcery have a negative social connotation which overrides any positive perceptions that might have been previously associated with witchcraft (Cimpric, 2009).

### *What is witchcraft?*

It is difficult to concretely define the nature of witchcraft as it is a complex phenomenon characterised by a wide range of beliefs and practices across different cultures. Thus, witchcraft remains an “amorphous and manipulable” phenomenon, comprising “an array of traditional or faith healing practices” (Alston, 2009). The Encyclopaedia Britannica gives a definition of witchcraft as “the exercise or invocation of alleged

supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery or magic” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010)

Hutton points out the following five features said to be commonly upheld amongst witchcraft believer: (a) witches use non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to others; (b) harm is usually caused to neighbours or kin rather than strangers; (c) strong social disapproval follows, in part because of the element of secrecy and in part because their motives are not wealth or prestige but malice and spite; (d) witches work within long-standing traditions, rather than in one-time only contexts; and (e) other humans can resist witches through persuasion, non-physical means (counter-magic), or deterrence including through corporal punishment, exile, fines or execution. (Hutton as cited by Alston, 2009).

In order to better understand witchcraft from a social point of view, the anthropologist Frederick de Boeck, when discussing African society, refers to the existence of a “second world” (De Boeck, 2000) which relates to an “invisible world” (Cimpric, 2009)<sup>4</sup>. In the imagery and perceptions of many populations, two worlds coexist: the “visible” world of the day and the “invisible” world of darkness. According to de Boeck’s analysis of urban life in Kinshasa, these “two worlds” do not simply coexist, but the invisible world is able to invade the visible world. Accusations of witchcraft are “proof” of the invisible extending into the visible.

Affirming that “all misfortunes are due to witchcraft” does not mean that one should exclude scientific or rational explanations based on facts or trials (Evans-Pritchard’s affirmation cited in Cimpric, 2009). The “theory of double cause” supports and strengthens De Boeck’s assertion that two logical worlds coexist (Cimpric, 2009). If medicine can explain how a young person died and what provoked his/her death, it does not explain why that person died and not another, or why he or she died at this point in time. In other words, witchcraft complements a rational explanation given by the visible world (which tells us how it happened) with a complementary explanation of the “second world”, apparently invisible to the first.

This logic demands that the community identify the witch. The witch is assumed to have caused, even if apparently unaware, the harm suffered by the perceived victim. Identifying the witch is generally achieved through a process of designation through which the community or even the relatives identify who caused the harm. An accusation typically follows an accident, such as death or a difficult situation (*e.g.* unemployment, illness or misfortune) (Save the Children, 2006; Cimpric, 2009). In the past an accusation of this sort was amended by expulsion of the witch, while in the past decade it has also been resolved by violent retribution against the accused person.

The final part of this process (*i.e.* determining who is responsible) is complicated. As one author notes, “one can not predict who will be suspected and attacked next” (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). It is at the same time true that, “although everyone in the world could probably be suspected to be a witch, they never accuse publicly rich and important people”. It is usually one of the most vulnerable members of society (Cimpric, 2009, p. 13). From available research, it is widely recognised that most of the persons at risk of witchcraft accusations are women, the elderly and children or those “who are somehow ‘different,’ feared or disliked” (Alston, 2009).<sup>9</sup> Although the criteria

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<sup>4</sup> An expression referred to by the African philosopher Achille Mbembe (cited in Cimpric, 2009)

on which these accusations are based remain rather vague, they seem to be common across all genders, ethnicities and social classes (Save the Children, 2006).

### *The roots of witchcraft accusations in the African context*

This paper focuses on the issue of witchcraft – notably accusations of witchcraft against children – on the African continent. Although such accusations of witchcraft do occur in other regions of the world, including Haiti, Nepal and Latin America, the vast majority of existing research is concerned with African witchcraft.

African society has changed dramatically in the past four decades. Societies which previously consisted of rural populations, traditional beliefs, social and economic relations regulated by the principle of reciprocity and clearly defined gender and generational relationships, started to transform into urban sprawls, capitalism, and the breakdown of traditional relationships (Save the Children, 2006). This dramatic shift is at the core of what is considered a post-colonialist crisis defined by political instability, civil wars, diffusion of extreme poverty and fear of the other.

This “multi-crisis” that many in Africa have experienced (a term coined by Filip De Boeck, 2000) has resulted in tense social relations without any effective and socially approved outlet for that tension (Foxcroft, 2009). Poverty, lack of access to basic resources and services, instable governments and the onset of HIV and AIDS are frequently mentioned as root causes of witchcraft accusations (Ballet, Dumbi and Lallau, 2007). Foxcroft also states that “these social vacuums provide a fertile breeding ground for witchcraft allegations” (Foxcroft, 2009).

The concept of “social capital” is also useful when seeking to understand the social practice of witchcraft accusation. Robert Putnam considered social capital as a set of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic commitment that relates to trust: such norms regulate cohabitation, rule networks of civic associations and are related to elements that improve the efficiency of social organisations. Social capital enables the promotion of initiatives undertaken through common agreement, which are determined to be useful to the community (Putnam, 1993).

Golooba-Mutebi makes use of the concept “social capital” by pointing out that Mozambican refugees have higher levels of social capital in comparison with their South African hosts. It is this South African community – generally perceived to be more “modern” that experiences witchcraft-related violence against weak people, rather than the poorer Mozambican migrant community (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). This coincides with the view that it is sharp economic and social differentiation within communities, rather than poverty itself which causes social tensions and conflict which might manifest in accusations of witchcraft.

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<sup>9</sup> Jill Schnoebelen and Aleksandra Cimpric go further and identify albinos and persons with HIV as extremely vulnerable groups within the Great Lakes region in Africa. Aleksandra Cimpric subcategorizes the main children target groups at risk as twins, disabled children, difficult children. This sub-categorisation, although interesting, has not been considered for the purposes of the present study because it is considered too specific to the African context.

Using these ideas as a framework, it is easy to see how IDPs and refugees may live in communities that make accusations of witchcraft. The past decade has seen a notable shift in witchcraft accusations towards the most vulnerable of society's groups; children (Foxcroft, 2009). The next sections of this document highlight the causes and effects of witchcraft accusations among specific groups of children, including refugees, IDP and returnee children of particular concern.

## **Children and witchcraft**

In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRCee) acknowledged that violence against children accused of witchcraft was increasing. It expressed concern that a large number of children are being labelled as witches and suffering serious stigmatization as a consequence (Alston, 2009). At the UN level, the Human Rights Council (HRC), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRCee) and the Committee on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)<sup>10</sup> (Alston, 2009) have acknowledged the prevalence of witchcraft accusations against children and the consequent abuses suffered.

### *The profile of children accused of witchcraft*

Children accused of witchcraft do not fit one single profile. Some are targeted because they are physically “different” – such as persons with disabilities or albinos – or because they are “difficult” – undisciplined or rowdy children. Other targeted groups include children with psychological disabilities or epilepsy, or children who do not have parental carers and are therefore the “responsibility” of others, creating a burden for the caregiver (Save the Children, 2006).

In the case of the DRC, it appears that girls from economically-challenged backgrounds and especially vulnerable family situations (orphaned or separated parents) are more likely to be targeted than other children. For the families of these children it is an excuse to not have to feed another child. They are easy prey for pastors who take advantage of the situation and provide child exorcism activities that are very lucrative, as highlighted in the following quote:

In today's circumstances, self-made preachers can easily set up their pulpits and mete out predictions for those seeking an easy fix for their grief and misfortune. When prophecies fail, the preachers might easily blame continued misery on spurious causes, such as witchcraft, often turning on children as the source because they are easy to blame and least able to defend themselves. A family seeking the advice of their preacher might, for example, be told that their handicapped child is causing their continued misery, citing the child's disability as a clear indication that he or she is a witch (USAID, 2002).

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<sup>10</sup> In the context of the reporting procedure for Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and India and the universal periodic review for Gabon.



Most children accused of witchcraft believe that they are witches because they have been repeatedly told so by the adults in their lives; at times through forced confessions by pastors.

The prevalence of child witchcraft accusations is related to the broadly changing status and image of children in Congolese society. Children today form the majority of the population and occupy a significant place in society (Devey, 2007). It is important to recognize these demographic pressures when considering the changing capacity of the family to care for children within the multi-crisis African context. Additionally, the growing socio-economic inequalities within African societies, exacerbated by processes of industrialization, have deeply affected the system of reciprocity which has historically been at the core of African society and parent-child relations.

De Boeck echoes these general observations in his study of witchcraft in urban Kinshasa in the late 1990s (De Boeck, 2000). De Boeck asserts that the majority of children in developing countries do not enjoy Western levels of protection and support in their individual development process, but instead are actively responsible for their own life and survival. De Boeck describes five such categories of children :

1. *The “kadogo” or child-soldiers*: In 1997, when Kabila took power (following the downfall of Mobutu), child-soldiers entered Kinshasa, some among them not older than 10 years old. This was “a totally new and quite shocking event for the majority of the inhabitants of the capital city” (De Boeck, 2000: 46).
2. *The “bana Lunda” which means the “children from Lunda”*: These are children and teenagers who have migrated to the northern part of Angola in order to make money by getting jobs in diamond mines. On their return to their hometowns, they have greater financial power than the adults within their families. The child can afford material securities that adults cannot and consequently acquire social power within their family and community. The resulting jealousies are at the origins of witchcraft accusations.
3. *The “bafioti-fioti” launched by the Congolese musician superstar Papa Wemba*: These are little girls that provocatively dance during local *tourné* or in video-clips that explicitly encourage the message that many street-children are witches. SSN’s (2009) research has also identified that the widespread viewing of Nigerian local movies has contributed to the belief in child witchcraft in *Akwa Ibom* state due to the portrayal of children and the promotion of beliefs in such superstition (Stepping Stones, 2009).
4. *Children in church*: The revivalist churches fulfil a dual purpose: they play a part in determining who is a witch and they work to “cure” those witches. It is at the culmination of the therapeutic process, when the child is asked in public to confess to being a witch, that the child also plays an active role in social order. In accordance with the logic of the “second invisible world”, which claims that witchcraft in modern times can also be transmitted via harmful food or drink offered by an adult-witch, the child is asked to identify who gave him/her the substance and transformed him/her into a witch. It is at this point that the child can make use of his/her social status as a witch to control relationships with others adult members of the family or of the community.

5. Street-children: Relatives or parents generally, even after the deliverance, are still frightened by the supposed child-witch. As a result of this fear, many observers estimate that up to half of children on the streets of Kinshasa or in Angola are there because they were accused of being a witch.

De Boeck's categorisation of adults' perceptions about children in an African urban context allows the reader to better understand how a background of poverty and conflict impact upon adults' and children's behaviours.

The role of children has thus been altered in the past forty years due to the dramatically changing context of economic insecurity, HIV and AIDS, and other macro and micro factors affecting families on the African continent. In today's society, children play an active role on the street, in the army, in the economy, in mass-media and music and also in family relations. In all these contexts the child is not perceived as simply a vulnerable person in need of protection and care, but as a social actor in a deeply troubled society.

#### *Who accuses children of witchcraft?*

Pastors are the main group who accuse children of witchcraft (Save the Children, 2006). Revivalist churches (*"Les Eglises du Réveil"*) and witch doctors have exploited the phenomenon of witchcraft for the purpose of economic profiteering from religion (USAID, 2007). "The massive boom in Pentecostal churches preaching the gospel of child witchcraft, demonic possessions, deliverance and exorcisms has led to a huge rise in accusations of witchcraft against children" (Foxcroft, 2009). Their influence has to be taken into account when looking at the increased belief in identifying children as witches.

Some 'pastors' are diagnosing children as 'witches' largely for "economic self gain and personal recognition" (Foxcroft, 2009). "Many people believe the economic benefit derived from exorcising these children could be an incentive for many fraudulent pastors and a plausible reason for the rise in the number of children who are so branded" (AFRUCA, 2009). Parents who cannot care for their children are the other main group of accusers. Step-parents or other caregivers frequently accuse them as they do not want to care for the children of a previous spouse or other community member (Save the Children, 2006).

In urban areas, wives or concubines generally do not know each other and live in different parts of the city, each one having children born by a common father. If one of the wives dies, because of traditional reciprocity culture, the other wives are required to take care of children born during the relationship. In a context of food constraints, this child is perceived as a burden for the enlarged family and generally neglected (Cimpric, 2009).

In the case of death of the father of the child, the situation becomes even worse for the child and the family starts operating according to a "*centrifugal logic*" with a tendency to expel vulnerable and/or undesired members (Molina, 2006). Generally people who believe in child witches believe that a mysterious, spiritual spell is given to a child through food and/or drink. The child who eats this spell is then called out in the night where his/her soul will leave the body to be initiated into a gathering of witches and wizards. The initiated child will then have the spiritual power to cause widespread

destruction, such as murdering innocent people and causing diseases. In this context, all accidents and misfortunes are perceived to be the handiwork of so-called “child witches” (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2007 cited by Foxcroft, 2009).

### *Impact of witchcraft accusations on children*

Children accused of witchcraft are frequently mistreated, left without parental care, isolated, tortured, persecuted and even killed. Many of them have been abandoned by their families, and are living in the streets or in institutions (Alston, 2009; USAID, 2002). SSN’s research in *Akwa Ibom* State revealed that when children are accused of being a witch, “their parents or guardians abandon them: often they are taken into the forest and slaughtered, bathed in acid, burned alive, poisoned to death with a local poison berry, buried alive, drowned or imprisoned and tortured in churches in order to extract a confession” (Stepping Stones, 2009).

Furthermore, these children are more vulnerable to abuse and trafficking with some girls exposed to sexual exploitation (Afruca, 2009) or domestic servitude (ECPAT, 2009). The Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses that the family is the best environment for a child to be raised, and the parents are the primary caregivers of the child and offer them the best protection. Thus, once a child is rejected and abandoned by his or her family, he or she loses his/her first line of defence.

### **Child accusations of witchcraft: a growing concern for UNHCR**

In recent years humanitarian organisations and the UNHCR have become increasingly aware of protection concerns relating to witchcraft allegations amongst populations of concern. Jeff Crisp, head of the UNHCR’s Policy Development and Evaluation Service, recently noted that in some countries, “accusations of witchcraft constitute some of the most serious refugee protection problems encountered by UNHCR” (Spindler, 2009). Foxcroft also “believes that [...] witchcraft accusations will increasingly become an issue of pressing concern for the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations working with refugees, asylum seekers and trafficking victims in the years to come” (Foxcroft, 2009).

Although the available academic and grey literature on the topic offers only scattered estimations about this social phenomenon<sup>12</sup>, a research paper commissioned by UNHCR in 2009 highlighted the link between witchcraft accusations, associated risk of persecution, the cycle of displacement and what this means for those in the refugee field (Schnoebelen, 2009). This study documented the global diffusion of violence related to witchcraft accusation, and is an excellent compliment to the information contained in

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<sup>12</sup> Advocates estimate that 60% of the presumed 25,000 street children in Kinshasa have been kicked out of their homes due to allegations of witchcraft, making it a key cause of homelessness among youths. In Tanzania, where the murder and persecution of people accused of witchcraft is better documented than in most other countries, the Minister of Social Affairs estimates that there may be as many as 50,000 children being held in churches waiting for exorcism; in Nigeria, the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network estimates over 5,000 children have been abandoned because of witchcraft accusations in the area where it has worked since 1998.

the recent Alston report on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions<sup>13</sup>.

### **Violence and witchcraft**

The need for UNHCR and local partners working with IDPs and refugees to address the issue in a well-planned manner is reinforced by the increasing number of documented abuses suffered by children because of witchcraft allegations occurring in areas where UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations regularly operate (Foxcroft, 2009). It is important to note that in the course of Schnoebelen's research, no evidence was found that communities adopted witchcraft beliefs subsequent to flight. Actually, as Foxcroft writes, "it is of great importance for practitioners to understand that witchcraft belief itself does not necessarily translate into a protection concern" (Foxcroft, 2009).

Rather, it is the point at which this belief system leads to accusations of witchcraft that the issue becomes particularly problematic as violent abuses of human rights often take place (Foxcroft, 2009). As, Gerry Hall writes: "[the] killing of alleged witches violates the most basic right of every human being in the most obvious manner. It is not the belief that kills them, but the action taken as a consequence of belief" (quoted in Cimpric, 2009).

### **Location and witchcraft accusations**

The following section focuses on children accused of or related to witchcraft in relation to the physical or geographical locations where witchcraft allegations most frequently occur. Foxcroft identifies and describes three such scenarios:

#### *Conflict and post-conflict scenarios*

"In conflict and post-conflict societies such as Liberia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, there has been a massive rise in witchcraft accusations, especially against children" (Foxcroft, 2009). This is not surprising as the connection between war and witchcraft has been documented by many authors, many of them included in the Schnoebelen report: "witchcraft beliefs operate in many African conflicts, including Uganda, DRC, Angola and Liberia" (Schnoebelen, 2009). During the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, witchcraft eradication movements acquired strong political power. Local African National Congress (ANC) leaders were caught between the pressure of their constituents, who wanted assistance in combating witchcraft, and their political superiors, who required that they oppose witch-hunting.

The Holy Spirit Movement in Uganda promised to cleanse the Acholi of the evil spirits and witchcraft that had caused so much trouble, while more recently "with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) the proliferation of spirits has been even greater" (Włodarczyk, 2004). Mai-Mai soldiers in Northeast DRC who used amulets and charms for protection were believed to have liberated the local populace from Mobutu Sese Seko's forces using supernatural power.

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<sup>13</sup> See Philip Alston, *Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. A/HRC/11/2 27 May 2009.

Both the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the total Independence of Angola (UNITA) tried and executed witches, as Angolan refugees testified in Namibia. Liberian fighters wore amulets for invincibility and ate human flesh and organs, including the heart, to acquire the power of their victim (Schnoebelen, 2009).

It is important to remember that almost all of these countries have seen high numbers of children recruited as child soldiers. Consequently, many child soldiers are affected by how the military make use of the belief in witchcraft. Child soldiers can be victims of witchcraft accusations, be the accusers or simply make use of it in order to increase their credibility or power within the group. According to Włodarczyk; “religious belief and practices in contemporary African warfare can be said [...] to be significant for establishing legitimacy as a fighting force to the mobilisations of active and passive support, to the maintenance of discipline within the armed force and for purposes of intimidation of the enemy and the civilian population” (Włodarczyk, 2004).

In the end, however, Włodarczyk stresses that witchcraft allegations of warriors and child-soldiers do not happen or are revealed only during war times; “to assume that in warfare these beliefs are relegated to a purely instrumental means to an end would seem to ignore evidence that in peacetime it plays a central existential role” (Włodarczyk, 2004,). Belief in witchcraft and its powers pre-exist war and do occur in peaceful times. During war, those believed to be witches are perceived as powerful by allies but are feared by others (enemies) who believe they are at risk of attack.

#### *Displacement resulting from environmental devastation*

Foxcroft (2009) highlights how economic and social deprivation resulting from extensive environmental problems in the Niger Delta has contributed to witch hunts in the area. He describes the devastation that was caused by oil spillages in the sea, rivers and streams which resulted in the poisoning of staple crops and contamination of water. Communities lost their livelihoods and suffered from disease, illness as well as death from contaminated water. This led to a social crisis involving poor health, food scarcity and unemployment, which has resulted in a new witch hunt taking place as people blame witchcraft for their misfortune (Foxcroft, 2009).

#### *Displacement arising from public health crises*

As previously mentioned, Foxcroft agrees with Schnoebelen and Cimpric that there is no doubt but that a significant correlation between levels of witchcraft accusation and public health crises exists. Numerous witch hunts have been triggered by health crises in the past, including during a tetanus epidemic in Benin and following dysentery and malaria deaths in Papua New Guinea and Tanzania (Schnoebelen, 2009). Today, the spread of HIV and AIDS and the consequent social crisis of increased morbidity caused by ineffective health care solutions and facilities, fits well into local notions of witchcraft (Bawa Yamba, 1997). This scenario has played out in communities in the DRC, Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

## **Witchcraft allegations within the displacement cycle**

According to Schnoebelen, it is evident that allegations of witchcraft “may surface throughout the displacement cycle: during flight; while in a camp or urban refugee setting; during repatriation; or once resettled” (Schnoebelen, 2009). The literature review reveals that because of displacement, resettlement, asylum, migration or even trafficking patterns, witchcraft allegations are now spreading to areas where they appeared to have disappeared with the arrival of “modernity” (Western countries), or where previous manifestations were rare and less cruel.

### *During flight: internally displaced children*

According to Foxcroft (2009), instances of forced exile are relatively common in the Niger Delta region. Witchcraft accusations can have a significant impact upon the numbers of internally displaced persons in various countries around the world. Such individuals or groups are forced to leave their homes due to violence against them stemming from these beliefs. Foxcroft has identified numerous cases of people, mainly women and children, being forced to leave their communities due to witchcraft allegations.

Schnoebelen and Alston both refer to “witch camps” in Ghana which have received wide press and international attention. Approximately 5,000 women live in isolated and extremely difficult conditions: these camps are locations where women accused of witchcraft can seek refuge and protection from persecution by their own community or family (Alston, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2009). Witch sanctuaries also exist in South Africa. Many case studies cited in the Save the Children’s (2006) report about child witches in the DRC refer to children that have been forced to leave their own family environment because of witchcraft, or after being branded as witches by a pastor of a local revivalist church.

### *Settings of displacement: refugees and IDPs*

Accusations of witchcraft also arise within refugee or IDP camps. Instances have taken place in southern Chad (UNHCR, 2008), Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, the DRC, Sudan and Sierra Leone (Schnoebelen, 2009). UNHCR itself, through a groundbreaking participatory assessment with children living in refugee and returnee situations in Southern Africa, published a document testifying to older children not attending school because of fear of rape, assault and murder if accused of witchcraft by strangers during the journey to or from the camp. (UNHCR, 2008).

### *Repatriation and reintegration*

Accusations of witchcraft, and the associated violence of it, have also been documented by Schnoebelen amongst Ugandan returnees, Sudanese refugees returning from Uganda and Burundians returning to their homes. Accusations have also been made against youth in Sierra Leone, particularly amputees, who have been abandoned by their family and friends because they were considered victims of demons or evil spirits. There are also documented instances of witchcraft accusations and ritual killings in the

reconstruction setting of post-conflict Liberia, an issue that first affected internally displaced people, women and children (Schnoebelen, 2009).

#### *Witchcraft allegations as a claim of persecution among asylum seekers*

Witchcraft accusations can serve as the basis of asylum claims throughout the developed world. Foxcroft cites the recent asylum claim made by the footballer Alhassan Bangura of Sierra Leone, a case which served to highlight the role of witchcraft belief in asylum claims. Bangura's father was the head of *Soko*, a secret society with witchcraft associations. Being the eldest son, Alhassan was expected to take over the leadership when his father died. When he reached the age of 15, the society approached his mother to demand his involvement (Foxcroft, 2009).

“The Soko society was a cult in which its members dismembered parts of their bodies and inflicted pain as part of their extreme rituals”, said Bangura in his deposition to the tribunal; “I was totally against this cult's activities” (The Guardian, November 2007). As a result of his refusal, death threats were made against Bangura, causing him to flee to Guinea where he met a man who intended to traffic him to Europe and prostitute him. He eventually arrived in the UK where he has become a well-known football player, using his public profile to highlight the role of witchcraft in certain African communities.

In response to an increasing number of witchcraft claims from Ghanaian asylum seekers in the UK, the UK Home Office has developed its operational guidance note, highlighting that some applicants may make an asylum and/or human rights claim based on ill-treatment amounting to persecution on the basis of having been attacked by witches or having been the subject of a witch's curse or hex. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has also conducted a number of brief country condition analyses related to witchcraft, indicating that this has been the subject of various asylum claims (Foxcroft, 2009).

UNHCR Kuala Lumpur also provided information regarding the use of a Focused RSD Form (FRF) for Liberians who claimed fear of return due to the practice of black magic amongst their tribesmen (Schnoebelen, 2009). Additionally, there were two US asylum cases in 2008 which dealt with occult-related claims by Kenyans (Schnoebelen, 2009).

#### *Witchcraft and its connection with child trafficking*

Witchcraft accusations against children have also emerged as a leading cause of abandonment of these children by their families, especially in urban areas with a high number of Pentecostal or “revival” churches and religious sects, such as in DRC and Angola (Cripe, Curran, Lockett, Verhey, 2002). Once on the street, these children are vulnerable to child traffickers, ritualists and rapists (Foxcroft, 2009).

Schnoebelen and Cimpric make reference to this issue in their papers highlighting the case of an albino child whose head was found in the luggage of a man trying to enter the DRC; most likely the child's head was to be used for ritualistic purposes (Schnoebelen, 2009; Cimpric, 2009). Research by SSN has also linked the increasing levels of child abandonment leaving children vulnerable to child trafficking, to witchcraft accusations

(Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2007). A discussion paper edited by ECPAT UK confirms this, noting that some of the African children abandoned because of accusations of witchcraft have later been trafficked into the UK for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude (ECPAT UK, 2008).

Qualitative research carried out by Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) volunteers – a Nigerian NGO and local partner of SSN - has highlighted how witchcraft accusations can lead to children being displaced from their communities to live on the street where they become vulnerable to traffickers. Indeed, in the Niger Delta Region, an area where the belief in child “witches” is especially strong, cases of traffickers dressing as police officers, falsely arresting children and then putting them on a boat to Gabon where they are forced to work on plantations have also been documented by CRARN (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2007).

Many of the previously cited cases fall within the sphere of UNHCR Guidelines on trafficking and refugee claims relating to children.<sup>14</sup> These Guidelines specifically recognize that “unaccompanied or separated children, are especially vulnerable to trafficking” (UNHCR, 2006) for sexual labour, service exploitation or for other purposes similar to slavery because of their membership to a particular social group, as in the case of children accused of witchcraft.

#### *Witchcraft in high income countries: the UK experience*

Witchcraft related to child abuse and killings has received increased media attention in the UK in the last few years. In 2000, Victoria Climbié, an eight-year old child from the Ivory Coast was abused and murdered by her relatives because they believed she was possessed by evil spirits (BBC, 2005). In 2001, the torso of a Nigerian boy was found in the Thames, the result of what was believed to be ritual killing. In 2005, three Angolan adult refugees were found guilty of child cruelty after abusing “Child B” for months because the child was considered to be a witch (Schnoebelen, 2009).

In order to address public concern regarding these high profile child victims of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, the Department for Education and Skills in UK commissioned Eleanor Stobart to lead a study to gauge the extent, nature and geographical breadth of child abuse linked to accusations of “possession” or “witchcraft” (Stobart, 2006).

Thirty-eight cases involving forty-seven children were identified and analysed. According to her report, boys and girls were equally targeted, with most victims being between the ages of 8 – 14 years. The study also found that accusations of witchcraft are often directed at children considered difficult or different. At least fourteen of the forty-seven children involved had some degree of disability, imperfection or blemish.

In such cases where children were determined to be in danger or suffering abuse by their accusers, they were removed from the family and placed in foster care (Stobart, 2006). A common feature of witchcraft in both the UK and developing countries is that

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<sup>14</sup> We refer to UNHCR (April 2006). Guidelines on International Protection No. 7: The Application of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees to Victims of Trafficking and Persons At Risk of Being Trafficked. HCR/GIP/06/07, Retrieved 1st March 2010 from <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/443679fa4.ht>



the children who are accused of witchcraft present a series of similar traits: a disability, challenging behaviour such as skipping school, talking back to adults; nightmares and bed wetting etc.

The report cautions that witchcraft beliefs are not confined to particular countries, cultures or religions, and the phenomenon is not found solely within recent migrant communities (Stobart, 2006). However, it is important to note that all but one of the families involved were first or second generation migrants and that, although the families were migrants, half of the children accused of witchcraft were born in the UK (Schnoebelen, 2009).

### **Witchcraft accusations and children within a human rights framework**

This section considers how issues related to witchcraft, magic or divination are taken into account in the existing human rights (HR) treaties which specifically address refugees, internally displaced persons and children.

The 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees does not specifically mention witchcraft. However, it may offer grounds to consider witchcraft or witchcraft allegations as qualifying an individual for refugee status because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to identification as a member of a “particular social group” (UN 1951).

There has been considerable debate regarding what constitutes a “particular social group”. It is clear that any such group must have a common unifying element. Implicit in the notion of MPSG is the idea that people in the relevant country perceive the individuals as a social group. In other words, the existence of a MPSG will depend ultimately on the external perception of that group, the presence of a common characteristic which is apparent and meaningful to others in that society. (Australian Government, 2007).

MPSG is also defined by UNHCR<sup>16</sup> as a group of people that is perceived to or actually do share a common characteristic (other than the risk of being persecuted) which is innate or unchangeable or still fundamental to the identity of this group.. The Australian Government in its study on the linkage between MPSG and witches, however, also confirms that a social group may be created through the immutable perceptions of its persecutors. As a result, children accused of witchcraft can be legitimately considered as members of a particular social group at risk of persecution.

Other human rights treaties do not specifically deal with the issue of children accused of witchcraft, but have articles which could apply to this specific population of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) makes no reference to children accused of witchcraft or victims of witchcraft beliefs. However, Cahn suggests that article 19(1) of the CRC could protect children accused of witchcraft as it “requires that governments implement measures to prevent children from being maltreated, including mental violence” (Cahn, 2006).

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<sup>16</sup> Refer to UNHCR, “Guidelines on International Protection: Membership of a Particular Social Group within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees”, HCR/GIP/02/02, 7 May 2002.

## **Reference to witchcraft allegations amongst human rights bodies**

As recalled by the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (Alston, 2009) the relationship between practices of witchcraft and human rights is very complex. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of the most relevant bodies concerned with human rights.

### *The universal periodic review*

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) has raised issues about the fight against traditional practices such as sorcery and infanticide and so-called “witch children” in Gabon. More importantly, the Review has alerted the international community on the risk of social exclusion for child victims of witchcraft allegation. Social exclusion is particularly dangerous for children as it can lead to a lack of access to education or health services (HRC, 2009).

### *The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*

Considering the states parties reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Committee considered problems linked to the prosecution of witches on several occasions and, in particular, in 2007 noted with particular concern the prosecution of witches in India and recommended that the state party adopt measures to eliminate the practice and to rehabilitate the victimized women.

The Committee, in examining the report on Ghana, received information regarding the presence of some 2,000 alleged witches and their dependants in some camps and requested the government take legislative and awareness raising actions to demystify these practices (HRC, 2009). Given that many of the women accused of witchcraft are likely to be mothers, children will be secondary victims of these accusations.

### *The Committee on the Rights of the Child*

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRCee) has also been active in denouncing the harmful practice of witchcraft accusations against children. For example, in 2004, the Committee requested the government of Angola to eliminate the mistreatment of accused children and to prosecute the perpetrators. In 2009, the Committee expressed concerns that in the DRC a large number of children are labelled as being child witches and consequently suffer serious forms of stigmatization. The Committee particularly stressed the violent aspect of these practices and has denounced the fact that some children had been kept as prisoners in religious buildings and exposed to torture or ill-treatment (HRC, 2009).

### *Civil society organizations*

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have also voiced concerns regarding child witchcraft and witchcraft accusation. Amnesty International raised concern over the more than 500 attacks against women in 2008 in Papua New Guinea that resulted in

torture and murders. In Nigeria, CRARN, a civil society organization, claims that an increasing number of children have been abandoned or persecuted on the grounds that they are accused of being witches or wizards (HRC, 2009). UNICEF has also recognized the growing issues surrounding child victims of witchcraft accusation by commissioning the 2009 study to look at the issue.

### **Witchcraft accusations of children within a child rights framework**

Neither the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) nor the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) include specific references to children accused of witchcraft (UN, 1989; African Union of Human and People's Rights, 1990). Both of these child-rights-based legal frameworks include articles that could be pertinent in cases where children have been accused of witchcraft resulting in the violation of one or more of their rights.

The treaties also include specific articles related to duty bearers such as the state or parents that have the responsibility to guarantee children's rights and to protect and care for children whose rights have been violated. This is especially true given the violent reactions of people towards children accused of witchcraft. These children frequently suffer abuse, in some cases extreme abuse, such as bleach in the eyes, by parents, relatives or pastors acting as exorcists (Aguilar Molina, 2006 in Schnoebelen, 2009). The CRC and the ACRWC are important as they provide a legal, child-rights-based framework specifically addressing the rights of children and the responsibilities of duty bearers to protect children, including child victims of witchcraft accusations.

Given that every country – other than Somalia and the U.S. – has ratified the CRC, and that a large number of states on the African continent have ratified the ACRWC, these instruments should be used more readily by governments, non-governmental organizations, human rights organizations and the children who are themselves victims of witchcraft allegations in an effort to raise awareness, and to ensure the provision and protection of children's rights where they are accused of witchcraft.

The following section will highlight the articles within the CRC and the ACRWC that address both the responsibilities of key duty bearers (*i.e.* the state and parents) to protect children, as well as the rights that children have as rights holders. All of the articles highlighted could be referred to and cited in cases where children are accused of witchcraft and thus, suffer abuse, neglect or discrimination.

#### *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) contains specific articles which pertain to the care and protection of child victims, religious persecution and protection from violence, all of which are directly relevant in the protection of children accused of witchcraft and suffering abuse, violence, neglect or discrimination as a result of the accusation.

Article 2 (2) of the CRC specifically states that; “states Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the

child's parents, legal guardians, or family members” (UN, 1989).

This article is particularly relevant in the case of children accused of witchcraft who are then discriminated against or punished (*i.e.* abused) due to stigmatisation.

Additional articles of the CRC which highlight the role of duty bearers – specifically the state and parents – to protect children’s rights might also be relevant in situations where children suffer abuse, exploitation, neglect or discrimination as a result of an accusation of witchcraft. In particular, Article 20(1) sets out the protection of children without parental care and their right to special protection (UN, 1989).

To date, there is very limited research and documentation about whether or not the CRC has been called upon in cases of child victims of witchcraft. Unfortunately, it appears that only a very limited juridical response against perpetrators has occurred. Using the CRC as a framework from which to build advocacy campaigns, policies and rehabilitative and support services appears to be an important step in addressing the growing concern related to child victims of witchcraft allegations.

#### *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) also contains provisions which could be used to address the issue of children accused of witchcraft, their protection and the role of duty bearers to both guarantee the rights of children as well as protect them once their rights have been violated (OAU, 1990).

This is especially important as accusations against children in several African countries have dramatically increased in the past decade and the reactions against those children are increasingly violent (Aguilar Molina, 2006 in Schnoebelen, 2009). These include Article 12 (Children with Disabilities); Article 16 (Protection against Child Abuse and Torture); Article 21 (Protection against Harmful Social and Cultural Practices); Article 23 (Refugee Children); Article 25.2(a) (Separation from Parents and provision of alternative care) and Article 26.2: (Protection Against Apartheid and Discrimination) (OAU, 1990; Belser, E., et al, 2009)

As with the CRC, there is limited documentation relating to how the ACRWC has been used to support children accused of witchcraft and suffering the associated violence. Yet given the relevance of many of the articles in the ACRWC to the protection of children against witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft, the ACRWC should be considered an important tool in developing policy related to the topic. If the three treaties; UNHCR 1951, CRC 1989 and the ACRWC, 1990 are utilized and referenced together, they provide a very elaborate HR framework from which to build an appropriate protection response to the issues of child witchcraft and witchcraft accusation.

#### **National legislation pertaining to witchcraft**

In recent years, many countries have also adopted various measures in domestic legislation aimed at preventing and tackling child witchcraft accusations. In some countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe it is now illegal to accuse someone of

witchcraft. In Cameroon<sup>21</sup> and Tanzania it is illegal to practice witchcraft. In other cases, child protection systems take direct steps to protect the child and prosecute the perpetrators, such as in the case of the UK.

In addition, where the legal system is silent, traditional or customary law are often used, including strategies which vary from mediation to deadly punishment (HRC, 2009).

It is worth noticing that some commentators are sceptical as to the value of such judicial approaches: the evidence from some HR reports counsels against the criminalization of witchcraft (HRC, 2009). The reasons vary but include difficulties in defining with accuracy the conduct to be proscribed, ensuring respect of rights, such as freedom of religion, and the empirical evidence that shows that sometimes criminalization is conducted with no respect for due process protection.

Law is critical in holding to account those who commit abuses against children on the basis of the allegations that they are witches. Nevertheless, it is clear from the aforementioned examples that legal responses within the international and domestic civil and criminal systems are only able to provide at best a partial solution to the problem of child involvement in witchcraft.

### **Witchcraft accusations and the response of UNHCR**

UNHCR's practices in relation to children accused of witchcraft vary from region to region. Culture appears to help guide UNHCR as it confronts these allegations. For example, in 2005, UNHCR and *Instituto Nacional da Criança* (INAC) held six child protection seminars in various Angolan towns. These training seminars, which addressed the issue of children accused of witchcraft, were open to police, political leaders, church officials and civil society groups (UNHCR, 2005, cited in Schnoebelen, 2009).

Another example of UNHCR's practices in refugee camps involved a three-year-old albino girl in Tanzania. The International Rescue Committee Field Coordinator raised protection concerns and the girl and her mother were transferred following two attempted kidnappings of the girl. In light of this case, UNHCR and the Tanzanian government conducted evaluations in order to develop best-practice policies (Crothers, 2008 cited in Schnoebelen, 2009).

In Chad, in the Gondje camp, a man and his son had to be relocated to another camp because of witchcraft allegations (UNHCR, 2007 cited in Schnoebelen, 2009). Numerous witchcraft allegations have been reported in Chad's refugee camps and UNHCR has therefore organized several meetings in order to address this issue with the aim of increasing community cohesion and raising awareness to the danger of accusing people of witchcraft without evidence. (UN News Service, 2007 cited in Schnoebelen, 2009) UNHCR has reported that for some months there have been no further accusations of witchcraft and that the meetings have had a positive effect (UNHCR, 2007 cited in Schnoebelen, 2009).

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<sup>21</sup> The Cameroon Penal Act, paragraph 251 states: "Whoever commits any act of witchcraft, magic or divination liable to disturb public order or tranquility ... shall be punished with imprisonment ... and with a fine ..."

In a further example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2007) has reported that several Congolese refugees from DRC fled to South Sudan following accusations that they were practicing witchcraft. UNHCR and the authorities are working together to protect and prevent further violence against these refugees.

Another strategy employed by UNHCR is highlighted in the case of Sierra Leone. The eight refugee camps in Sierra Leone are governed by refugee-recommended by-laws and a Grievance Committee (UNHCR, 2005). These by-laws are intended to be a conflict resolution mechanism. The design of this system is similar to the traditional justice systems that the refugees used in their countries of origin and the by-laws have a provision that treat witchcraft and adultery by both men and women as punishable offences (UNHCR, 2005).

Although information about witchcraft accusations against refugee, IDP and returnee children is limited, it appears that UNHCR has started to take steps regarding the issue by organizing training seminars, collaborating with governments, etc. UNHCR's current responses to witchcraft allegations against children are executed on a case-by-case basis rather than as part of any strategic policy initiative.

### **The work of other organizations**

Several organizations around the globe work to protect children who have been accused of practicing witchcraft. One such organization is Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN). SSN is a charity organization dedicated to "supporting the rights of vulnerable and exploited children such as the so-called child 'witches' and 'wizards' of the Niger Delta" (Newsletter Issue No. 6, *n.d.*). SSN works with local community organizations and has developed programs that provide education, shelter and health care to these children.

This organization also campaigns for the best interests of these children through advocacy and research at local, national and international levels. Based on SSN's experience, Foxcroft, Programme Director of SSN, reports that witchcraft accusations have a significant impact upon refugees and IDPs. SSN have documented a number of cases, mainly involving women and children, who have been forced to leave their homes and communities due to allegations of witchcraft.

As mentioned by Foxcroft, UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service has itself identified multiple instances of witchcraft accusations within refugee camps, most notably in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, DRC and Sierra Leone, and should therefore take further steps in this regard (Personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Another organization operating in Nigeria is the Childs Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN). CRARN is a charity organization founded in 2003, operating in *Akwa Ibom* State. The purpose of this organization is to reduce numbers of street and abandoned children, to stop children being "branded" as witches and wizards, to prevent children being killed for these reasons, and to facilitate the rehabilitation of abused children.

CRARN has developed several programmes designed to counter witchcraft accusations against children: one such programme is the CRARN Children Academy. This facility

provides street and abandoned children with access to education. The Academy is currently training about 120 children that would not have otherwise had the opportunity to access formal schooling. Another programme is the CRARN Children's Camp, which was established to rescue children from violent gangs that seek to kill them because they have been identified as witches and wizards. The camp provides the children with accommodation, food, medicine and security (<http://crarn.tripod.com>).

CRARN has formed, together with the State Government of Nigeria and SSN, the PACT Campaign. "Preventing Abandonment of Children Today" is a programme that aims to prevent abandonment in order to prevent children being accused of witchcraft. The programme promotes six steps to combat this practice:

- (i) continued awareness campaign programmes by all stakeholders in media outfits, workshops, sermons, and advertisement, in order to bring the message to the grassroots level;
- (ii) increased legislation and provisions for criminal sanctions and prosecution against people who abandon children;
- (iii) Encouraging parents to consider children as a blessing from God and not as a terror or curse;
- (iv) reporting cases of abandonment to the police and the Children's Welfare Department of the Ministry of Women Affairs so immediate action can be taken against the parents and to save the life of the child;
- (v) embarking upon a strategy by the government to eradicate the belief in witchcraft before the year 2015 ;
- (vi) implementation of the Child's Right Act (<http://crarn.tripod.com>).

Africans Unite against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) is a registered charity in the United Kingdom. The mission of the organization is centred on promoting the rights contained in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and aims at promoting the rights and welfare of African children ([www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)). AFRUCA devotes much of its energies advocating against witchcraft abuse toward children. They have developed a four-pronged approach to this fight: (i) working with parents; (ii) working with faith organizations; (iii) influencing policy and practice on safeguarding African children, and (iv) engaging policy makers and influencing practice (AFRUCA, 2009, p. 21).

In order to educate the public about various human rights issues that affect African children AFRUCA has developed a series of booklets. One is entitled "*What is witchcraft abuse?*" which provides a general overview on the issue of children accused of witchcraft and contributes to sensitizing people to this issue.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is an international NGO with Special Consultative Status with the UN. IHEU submitted a written statement entitled *Witchcraft and witch-hunting in Africa* to the Human Rights Council in August 2009. This document confirms that some unscrupulous pastors are taking advantage of parents that fear the involvement of their children in witchcraft.

IHEU also campaigns against the production of movies and books portraying children as witches because these materials help to account for the increase of abuse against children. IHEU also advocates for greater investment in education to eradicate witchcraft accusations (<http://www.iheu.org>).

There are also several websites that advocate against the violence associated with witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft. For instance, the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) is a website information organization that was created because of a “response to the widespread torture and killings of children, women and elderly people that is taking place around the world due to the belief in witchcraft” (<http://www.whrin.org.uk>). The purpose of WHRIN is to “put the issue of human rights abuse that occurs due to the belief in witchcraft onto the agendas of key policy makers and implementation partners around the world.”

The Witchcraft, Displacement and Human Rights Network is another website that aims to provide information and documents on the issues of witchcraft, displacement and human rights. (<http://maheba.wordpress.com>).

### *UNICEF*

In the past few years, UNICEF, as the main UN agency for the protection and improvement of children’s rights and welfare, has begun to tackle the issue of children accused of witchcraft. It commissioned a study on the impact of witchcraft accusation in Angola (All Africa, 2008). More recently, UNICEF commissioned research on African children victims of traditional beliefs (Cimpric, 2009). More generally, UNICEF has started to take action in countries where there have been allegations of witchcraft made against children.

For instance, in Nigeria, UNICEF has established collaboration with CRARN and other concerned actors including local and national authorities, civil society, NGOs, members of the private sector, etc. UNICEF has also developed with its partners a strategy of social mobilization for building a consensus on the negative impact of the stigmatization of children accused of witchcraft and eradicating this phenomenon (UNICEF, 2008).

This brief survey shows that a large number of organizations are currently engaged in advocacy and protection work intended to protect children accused of witchcraft and help their rehabilitation. UNHCR could benefit from their knowledge and experience and initiate or strengthen cooperation with these organizations. There are various steps UNHCR could take to assist and protect children accused of witchcraft.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

It is clear that a growing number of children are being accused of witchcraft and enduring the violence and abuse that are often a result of the accusation, especially in situations where public health, poverty and religious strife are occurring. There have been several cases of children accused of witchcraft who are also IDPs, refugees or newly arrived refugees in Western countries.



The following recommendations should be considered in an effort to effectively address the questions of witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft against displaced children:

First, develop training programmes for key UNHCR staff and partners, especially in geographic areas where witchcraft accusations have occurred. Training should include:

- Awareness building: what are the root causes of witchcraft allegations and accusations; signs to look for in victims; procedures to address the issue and to support the victims;
- Identify specific case studies and use them as examples;
- Provide documentation about the topic including, but not limited to, the reports by P. Alston, G. Foxcroft, J. Schnoebelen and A. Cimpric.
- The training curriculum could be developed, jointly, by UNHCR and NGOs specialized in the topic area such as Stepping Stones. Ideally, UNHCR would identify a staff member in each region to become the point person on issues related to witchcraft.

Second, use relevant articles in international and regional human rights treaties (*e.g.* CRC, ACRWC) when developing advocacy campaigns, programme and judicial responses to witchcraft and allegations of witchcraft..

Taken together, the UN Treaty on Refugees, the CRC and the ACRWC create a strong normative framework from which to develop domestic policy and programming to address the rights of the child victims and the responsibilities of duty bearers including parents and the state.

Third, encourage UNHCR, UNICEF, immigration departments, INGOs and local NGOs to share their experiences in order to foster mutual learning about how to approach and respond to cases of children who are victims of witchcraft accusations or those who require assistance because of fear of retribution.

Fourth, UNHCR and other relevant international and national organizations should work with local justice systems to promote and facilitate judicial and protective environments (*e.g.* police and courts) where victims feel comfortable and safe making statements against their perpetrators. Literature shows that many abusers are never formally charged and have relative impunity, because of the secretive nature of the abuse and fear of secondary victimization of the child should they try to find a judicial solution to the issue. UNHCR and other partners, such as UNICEF, should work to improve responses in order to encourage child victims to disclose abuse.

Fifth, in refugee-hosting countries, UNHCR should promote and facilitate information sharing regarding services, programming and responses to the issue of witchcraft accusations of children within newly arrived populations. Domestic judicial and child protection systems should also recognize the issue of witchcraft or spiritual-based beliefs within newly arrived, immigrant or refugee populations, and develop appropriate tools to address the issue.

Sixth, it is strongly recommended that internal UNHCR policy include specific references to cases of persons accused of witchcraft, and develop procedures for responding to adult, child and the elderly victims. This policy and procedure should be developed within the UNHCR protection framework. A clear plan for policy dissemination and awareness building should be developed.

Seventh, in order to advocate for and encourage states to adopt specific domestic legislation, policy or programmes which addresses victims of witchcraft accusations, it is strongly recommended that UNHCR support and promote efforts by states, NGOs, communities and parents to provide protection and rehabilitation services to child victims, both in the country of origin as well as in the receiving country

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## List of Acronyms

<b>ACRWC</b>	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CESCR</b>	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>CHI</b>	Child Helpline International
<b>CRARN</b>	Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>CRCEE</b>	Committee for the Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>ECPAT</b>	End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes
<b>FRF</b>	Focused RSD Form
<b>HRC</b>	Human Rights Council
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Persons
<b>INAC</b>	<i>Instituto Nacional de Crianças</i>
<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>MPLA</b>	Popular Movement for the Liberations of Angola
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>SSN</b>	Stepping Stones Nigeria
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNITA</b>	National Union for the total Independence of Angola
<b>UPR</b>	Universal Periodic Review
<b>US</b>	United States of America
<b>ZANLA</b>	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army