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Zimbabwe: Forced evictions leave thousands of children without access to education

The Zimbabwean government must ensure that children living in the settlements it created to re-house those made homeless by its mass forced eviction program six years ago are able to go to school, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

'Left behind: The impact of Zimbabwe's mass forced evictions on the right to education' shows how thousands of children and young people forced from their homes during Operation Murambatsvina are unlikely to access adequate schooling.

"These government-created settlements were supposed to offer the victims of forced evictions a better life," said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International's deputy Africa director. "Instead the victims have been driven deeper into poverty while denial of education means young people have no real prospect of extricating themselves from continuing destitution."

"The government's removal of people from places where they had access to education, and its subsequent failure to provide education has struck a devastating blow to the lives and dreams of thousands of children," said Michelle Kagari.

The government justified its 2005 mass evictions program, Operation Murambatsvina, by claiming that the communities evicted were living in deplorable conditions. They set up a housing scheme named Operation Garikai (Better Life) to re-settle several thousand of the 700,000 victims of the eviction program promising them better access to services.

Thousands of children and young people were forced to move away from their schools, in some cases school buildings were destroyed by the eviction program.

Many families were left destitute because their homes and sources of livelihoods, such as markets and small businesses, were destroyed during the forced evictions, so they could no longer afford the school fees and costs of uniforms and stationary.

Six years on, the majority of those allocated land and or housing under Operation Garikai are living in plastic shacks or other poorly constructed structures with no access to roads, public transport or job opportunities.

Many young people told Amnesty International that after the evictions they were forced to find work to help feed their families. In one settlement called Hatcliffe Extension children as young as 13 seek construction work in neighbouring communities to earn a living. Many young women said that when they were unable to attend school they decided to get married.

Irene, a 21 year old living at Hopley who married in 2007 aged 17 told Amnesty International:

"I decided to get married so that I could have someone to provide for me. I could not get a job. I did not want to go into sex work like most of the girls who dropped out of school."

In some settlements, such as Hopley and Hatcliffe Extension, community groups and individuals have set up unregistered schools to provide some education for children. However,

a lack of trained teachers, furniture, stationary and no supervision from the Ministry of Education mean that the quality of education is poor.

Fatima, a young woman from Hopley said:

"While we send the children to community school I am still concerned about the quality of the education. There is barely any learning going on. There are no books and trained teachers. It's just sending the children to while up time since we really have no alternative."

Amnesty International also found that children attending unregistered community primary schools at Hopley settlement risked not being able to sit exams as the examination board does not recognise the unregistered schools as examination centres. Children who don't sit the exam cannot enrol for secondary education and end up dropping out.

"It is appalling that a government can get away with making life harder for its poorest and most vulnerable people. The Zimbabwean authorities must immediately use all available resources to adopt and implement a national education strategy which ensures that all children access free primary education," said Michelle Kagari.

Notes to Editors

- Amnesty International is calling on governments globally to take all necessary measures, including the adoption of laws and policies that comply with international human rights law, to prohibit and prevent forced evictions.
- This work is part of Amnesty International's global Demand Dignity campaign, launched in 2009. This campaign aims to expose and combat the human rights violations that drive and deepen poverty. For more information visit www.amnesty.org/demand-dignity.