

# Tanzanian street children book helps mirror our nation

**D**isplayed on one of the tables during the London Diaspora conference three weeks ago was a fifty page book about street children at Dogodogo centre, Dar es Salaam.

I am not sure how many of the three hundred plus attendees picked up a copy since reading books is not one of our best qualities.

What I hope is that people who care (and those who matter) will eventually know about this wonderful publication, which I have been enjoying very much.

Written by Kasia Parham the beautifully illustrated edition (funded by UNICEF, edited by Louise Hoole) has a rare angle that drives outside the usual road of majority of our books.

This is partly because of an almost inexistent industry. Our publishers do not market books very well and the industry is quite poor with bad readership and literature focussing only on school text manuals more than the general public.

"Dogodogo: *Tanzanian Street Children Tell Their Stories*" has an international cast. The book is available to buy on Amazon (one of the biggest online global shops), at 11.86 Dollars; which means it will find readers worldwide; therefore help bring attention to Tanzania.

Such attention is ironically, not just about the problem of homeless children and the work of Sister Jean Pruitt, an American lady who established the centre in 1992, but to unknown Tanzania too.

Then there is a foreword by Cherie Blair, wife of former UK prime minister, who visited Tanzania three years ago. Highly

impressed by the centre, Mrs Blair commends the children, Sister Jean and staff who are helping "turn the tide of a nation."

In 2008, David Miliband, the UK foreign minister wrote in his Ministry's blog that the centre was an inspiring story.

Kasia Parham and her illustrators have done a smart job.

Smart in the sense that the book multi-tasks. It is first and foremost a mouth of eight Tanzanian boys who recall how they came to end at Kigogo centre. Each story makes you understand why they became homeless, each one helps lay out the social make up of this staggering, struggling society. To assist these tales is a map of Tanzania showing where each child came from, exactly.

If you were living in Amsterdam, Cape Town or Tokyo and you had just bought the book (via Amazon) and did not know Tanzania; you would somewhat swallow that information.

Through their experiences you would find answers to such questions as why did

these kids run away from home? How did they end up stealing, hiding in buses, trekking on long journeys from as far as Mwanza to Dar es Salaam, crying and desperate? The causes are clearly painted and as crisp as their tears. Broken families caused

by poverty, fighting and squabbling parents, abusive stepfathers, lack of school, bullying, etc. Edward for example, recalls a hardworking father who was once well-off but had Juju (witchcraft) thrown at him then turned alcoholic and abusive. How many believe in Juju?

Edward spells it on page 14: "The witch doctor had a fight with the bad spirit and he tried to send it away with special words and medicines. He said there was an old lady in the village who was a witch. She hated our family because we were new-comers and we were happy and successful. She was jealous, so she had put a bad spirit in our home to harm us."

In these few sentences the little boy manages to summarise not just culture and



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beliefs of a nation but also relationships between rich and poor, town and country rift, village and urban, plus the various dynamics of families in current Tanzania.

The other significant angle regarding this manual is that all stories end well. Finally, the street children acquire education, some even rejoin their parents who thought they were dead like Isaac from Dodoma.

Unfortunately, for girls, the story is tragic. None ever reach Dar es Salaam, according to the centre, "many are picked up and exploited whether sexually or economically."

The book's well illustrated images manage to portray a beautiful people, not the usual rubbish beamed by overseas authors painting an ugly Africa, but well drawn faces of African children and adults in their grandiose, almost majestic aesthetics.

What is the lesson?

Without sounding Eurocentric, patronising even post colonial we all (media, publishers, writers, policy makers) need to learn how to use the written form to voice social matters, poverty and issues of development.

Such work only succeeds through collective collaboration. Eventually it helps everyone; those suffering, those helping them, those seeking information and those keen to help.

Find more about this remarkable work at: [www.dogodogocentre.org](http://www.dogodogocentre.org)

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