

**CHILDREN'S RIGHTS' DAY (20 Nov. 2011):
THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE (CCSJ) CALLS FOR
ACTION TO BUILD A 'CHILD-FRIENDLY' SOCIETY**

As TT prepares to observe Children's Rights Day on Sunday 20 Nov, CCSJ calls for action to build a child-friendly society for our children. TT ratified The Convention on the Rights of the Child on 5 December 1991 after signing it on 30 Sept 1990.

Every child is a gift to us from God. It is said that the basic moral test of a nation is how it treats its most vulnerable. Many of our children are vulnerable. In spite of cries over the years by many in our country, we still do not have a fully functioning Children's Authority, or a National Child Protection Policy, or a National Child Abuse Register.

Our society is not 'child friendly'. So called 'barrel children' and socially displaced children roam our streets seeking to eke out a living. Some fall prey to child-abusers. Many children are parenting children. Where are the mentors or role models whom they can emulate? Many of our children continue to live with their families in squats, without the wherewithal to live their lives in dignity in our land of plenty.

The Preamble of our Constitution and international Human Rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, must inform TT's vision for our society.

All children have the same rights. However, in TT many children face discrimination and their rights are violated because of e.g. poverty and social exclusion. If we are to level the playing field for all children, then we must address issues affecting their parents/guardians/families e.g. unemployment/underemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, and family breakdown. Issues adversely affecting children in rural and urban areas must be identified and addressed. Some children face discrimination because of the area in which they live and because of perceptions about the kind of persons who live in these areas.

Too many of our children are dropping out of schools and no one seems to know why or where they are. The education system is not geared to meet the needs of our children. Chalk and talk cannot be the order of the day in the 21st Century. We will not build a knowledge-based society if our education system is not overhauled and updated to meet the requirements of our technological society/world.

Too many of our children go missing and we carry on with our lives as though we don't care. The names of Akiel Chambers, Amy Anamunthodo, Sean Luke, Hope Arismendez and others are indelibly printed in the hearts and minds of many citizens who still mourn their passing and the injustices done to them.

Too many of our children are at the receiving end of child abuse, incest, domestic violence and other crimes. Are we concerned about rehabilitating young offenders so that

they can live productive lives? Why is it that we still do not have adequate Young Offenders Institutions or a genuine Restorative Justice approach to our criminal justice system? Some female minors continue to be housed on the site of the Women's Prison sleeping separately but mingling freely with adult female prisoners during the day. Why is there no YTC in Tobago? This situation is unacceptable.

CCSJ understands that there are times when some of our juveniles are held in holding bays with adults. This also is unacceptable. We need special units in our Police Service to meet the needs of children who are in conflict with the law. Community policing will assist in this area.

We must devise better strategies to address school-based violence to 'nip' violence among our youths in the bud. How are we meeting the needs of our differently abled children? It is time to move from policy to practice. Too often we fail at the levels of implementation and evaluation of our policies.

CCSJ calls on all faith communities, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs to work with our Government to create conditions in TT that will enable each child to realise his/her potential. Let us get our priorities right - protect our children, create safe environments in which they can grow, and enhance their lives. Let's build a better TT for ALL our children.

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