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**Response to call of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for submission of written contributions of the elaboration of a study on the situation of the violations and abuses of human rights rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization.**

**Introduction**

The Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA) Coalition[[1]](#footnote-1) of agencies and individuals was formed in 2012 to provide a specifically Christian response to the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations made against children, and the resulting abuse and harm. We believe that churches have a significant role to play in ending this abuse against children, and we empower church leaders to address the issue. The SCWA Coalition was part of the group of organisations which advocated for the Human Rights Council resolution 47/8 on “the Elimination of Harmful Practices related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks”.

SCWA has developed a *Model of Change* which is research–based and rooted in relationships of trust and respect. It primarily engages church leaders, although the approach has also proved effective with school and community leaders, local authorities, and the police. SCWA has partnered with local collaborators in D.R. Congo (Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kasai, and Goma), Togo, and Nigeria (Calabar). It has further connections in Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania.

SCWA’s approach is profoundly concerned with children’s rights, protection, and welfare. However, to engage with church leaders, we have found it more helpful to promote these through employing theological themes and motifs which will have a particular resonance with the values often espoused by religious leaders. SCWA has developed comprehensive and participative training resources which enable church leaders, their congregations and wider communities to examine their own beliefs and practices in a way that leads to changed attitudes and behaviours, and empowers those who have been trained to care for and protect children who are accused of witchcraft.

SCWA’s resources are contextualised for specific sub–Saharan African nations, although they can be adapted for use in other nations.

**Submission under section IV — Data collection**

SCWA’s collaborators have carried out focus group research (in Kinshasa in the D.R. Congo, in Calabar and Eket in Nigeria, and across all regions of Togo) into beliefs around witchcraft, causes of accusations, and the consequences for those accused. Most of this research is local to a specific area, samples are relatively small and it is largely qualitative rather than quantitative. The research relating to Togo is somewhat more extensive. Focus groups vary — some are mixed, some are male or female only, some adult, some children and youth. This is specified in each set of data.

This research has informed SCWA’s training materials but is unpublished. Collated data can be made available on request.

**Submission under section V — Challenges and opportunities**

1. **Key challenges**

Accusations of witchcraft and the associated abuse and stigmatisation are endemic and normalised in many nations globally, including some in sub–Saharan Africa, which is where SCWA’s work has been focused. This presents the following challenges:

1. Such practices are not generally questioned in the communities where they occur, and there can be hostility towards any attempt to do so. Hostility is often framed in terms of respect for cultural norms, or opposition towards ‘colonial’ thinking from the northern hemisphere directed towards the southern hemisphere.
2. Monetisation of these forms of harm provides a strong incentive for communities and individuals to resist any attempts to eliminate them.
3. Often those who challenge prevalent beliefs and practices are themselves put at risk of being accused of being witches, or of being ostracised by the community. This includes church leaders.
4. Addressing this abuse can prompt highly confrontational approaches which tend to shut down dialogue and to make it harder to engage with those who are involved and who perpetuate such practices.
5. Frequently, there appears to be little impetus on the part of local government or judicial authorities to eliminate these practices. Indeed, much anecdotal evidence suggests that such bodies and individuals are often actively engaged in perpetuating them.
6. Many international NGOs working in affected communities do not recognise this issue and/or are reluctant to address it.
7. Lack of regulation relating to self–appointed ‘pastors’ and ‘churches’ allows individuals to exploit these titles as a front for such practices, even though they are contrary to the ethics and values of the Christian faith in support of children’s rights and welfare.
8. The victims of these practices are typically the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society, particularly children, but also elderly, and people living with disability or mental illness. Their rights and value as human beings are often dismissed, which leaves them defenceless in the face of abuse and stigmatisation.
9. The Nigeria–based “Nollywood” film industry is a powerful conduit for spreading harmful attitudes and practices across nations, including driving the shift towards accusations against children in nations, such as Tanzania, where they were historically focused on elderly women. These films are widely distributed and popular, including among diaspora communities.
10. Lack of official data around these forms of abuse and stigmatisation result in heavy reliance on qualitative and anecdotal evidence.
11. Lack of funding for training and other interventions and for the long–term evaluation of impact of interventions can make it difficult to identify the most effective approaches.
12. **Promising interventions**

SCWA’s approach is one of open dialogue and of providing a mechanism whereby individuals and communities can critically examine beliefs and practices under a wider safeguarding and child protection umbrella. The Coalition recognises that some churches have been and are involved in accusations of witchcraft against children and have used and continue to use harmful ‘deliverance’ practices. SCWA also recognises that local churches are highly influential and can be a force for positive change in their communities. SCWA believes that a confrontational approach shuts down dialogue and does not result in change, whereas, in our experience, a relational one can bring about lasting transformation in whole communities.

* 1. **Model of Change**

The *Model of Change* is a five–phase process, available in summary and full formats online.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is possible in some contexts to adopt a fast–track approach, omitting phase three. In general, lasting change takes time and it would be rare to see significant transformation in less than two years.

**Phase One** of the *Model of Change* is **identifying and building a relationship** of mutual trust and respect with a team of local church leaders of influence and integrity who are already committed to child protection and to seeing an end to child witch accusations and related harm. Sometimes it is appropriate for non–church leaders to be a part of this group, provided they are also committed to a faith–based approach. As an example, the group with whom SCWA is collaborating in Calabar includes church leaders, health workers, and the human rights organisation BRCI (Basic Rights Counsel Initiative).

As this relationship develops, the local team forms a Planning Committee to implement the remaining phases of the *Model of Change*. The relationship is one of equals, with the local Planning Committee recognised as having the greater expertise and influence in their context, and with SCWA providing expertise in the participative training approach and follow–up.

**Phase Two** involves **focus group** **research** to identify prevalent beliefs and root causes of child witch accusations in the local context, establishing a baseline understanding of the local situation. SCWA has found that it is essential to avoid assumptions about what drives accusations in a particular nation or locality. Although there may be common factors (such as poor understanding of normal child development and the impact of trauma, or fear of spiritual powers), the phenomenon of accusations of witchcraft is nuanced and there are local, regional, and national variations which need to be understood and addressed in any intervention. Suggested questions can be adapted for a particular context, and focus groups are led by peers who note responses without comment. There is no attempted intervention to challenge beliefs and practices at this stage. The research results are analysed to draw out key recurring themes, which will be addressed at a later stage of the process.

**Phase Three** is to **facilitate dialogue through an Action Forum**, allowing church and community leaders of influence to discuss issues and to receive theological input regarding specific drivers of accusations, particularly where religious texts are being misinterpreted or misapplied to justify harmful attitudes or practices. For this input, SCWA works closely with theologians from African nations, or who have lived and worked extensively there, and who have significant theological and/or anthropological expertise in this field. This exploration of anthropological and theological perspectives has been a crucial groundwork for the development of the primary training resource, *The Heart of the Matter* (see below). However, now that the resource is freely available, Phase 3 may be omitted in order to fast–track the process, moving from Phase 2 to Phase 4.

**Phase Four** is to hold an **interactive training workshop**, ideally over five days, primarily for church leaders, who make a commitment in advance to pass on what they learn in their churches, communities, and networks. SCWA is aware of workshops which have been attended by school leaders, health workers, community leaders, and representatives of the local authorities and police, with positive outcomes. This five–day workshop would generally be facilitated by members of the local Planning Committee, using the interactive SCWA resource *The Heart of the Matter* (see below). SCWA can provide an online two–day training for local facilitators, preparing them in how to run a workshop effectively, utilising an interactive and participative methodology, rather than a more common didactic approach. One outcome of the workshop is that each church, school, or other body represented, produces a simple child protection declaration and process, with a view to actively championing safeguarding principles in the community, particularly with regard to children who are accused of witchcraft.

**Phase Five**, the final stage in the *Model of Change*, concerns **cascading of impact.** Those trained are expected to pass on the teaching in their churches and wider communities. Some emerge as competent trainers who can facilitate further interactive workshops. The Planning Committee is encouraged to remain in touch with participants it has trained, to support and advise them and, to seek evidence of impact in the form of changed attitudes and behaviours, a reduction in accusations and related abuse, advocacy for individual children, and for the implementation of wider child protection practices.

* 1. **“The Heart of the Matter” training resource**

SCWA’s *Heart of the Matter* interactive training material, [[3]](#footnote-3) with associated audio resources,[[4]](#footnote-4) is available online.

Each of the seven modules addresses key themes identified during the focus group research into root causes and drivers of accusations. SCWA uses the language of ‘child protection’, rather than ‘safeguarding’ since this is more widely understood by grassroots communities in the sub–Saharan African nations where SCWA’s work has been focused to date. SCWA and its collaborators have found that churches and communities are less defensive and more willing to engage when the topic is introduced indirectly under a ’child protection’ banner, rather than when people are directly challenged or confronted about child witch accusations.

Some further contextualisation is required when the material is used outside its original context of the D.R. Congo, particularly in the final module’s focus on local legal frameworks. The core resource is available in English, French, and Kiswahili, with a Lingala version to follow once finalised. SCWA has published a version of Module 7 contextualised for the Calabar (Nigeria) context, and can assist with contextualisation for other nations.

SCWA has found that the degree to which each of the seven themes is in play may vary. Local issues and nuances should also be addressed in the context of the interactive training.

***The Heart of the Matter:* Course Outline**

1. Children as gifts of God.

2. Personal responsibility, and the tendency to put blame on others.

3. Normal child development and the impact of trauma.

4. Spiritual powers, fear of malevolent forces and the occult.

5. The role of Pastors, with practical recommendations on how to respond to accusations of witchcraft made against a child.

6. The child in the community.

7. Child rights and the role of the law in the child protection.

**Additional resources:**

Further to requests from our collaborators on location, SCWA has now added training on *Sickness, Health and Healing[[5]](#footnote-5)* and *Mental Health Matters[[6]](#footnote-6)* to address the links between physical and mental illness and accusations.

* 1. **Outcomes**

In 2017–18, SCWA conducted a pilot study of *The Heart of the Matter* in four areas of the D.R. Congo (Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kasai and Goma) and in Togo, reporting on the immediate impact of the *Model of Change* and of the training resource, and on the situation after twelve months and beyond. The results of the pilot are published in a report entitled *Getting to the Heart of the Matter[[7]](#footnote-7)* and the Annex to the report entitled: *One Year On.[[8]](#footnote-8)* In brief, there was clear evidence of both immediate and longer–term impact.

SCWA has an ongoing relationship with the teams in Kinshasa and Goma, and with a new group in Calabar, Nigeria. SCWA has seen progress over several years in the former two, and an early positive impact in Calabar.

**Caveats:**

* In the areas in which our *Model of Change* is being used, SCWA is aware of no official statistics about rates of accusations and associated abuse, so most impact data is qualitative.
* SCWA makes its resources available free of charge through its website and cannot track who is using them or with what results. The priority is to equip the local, grassroots churches to respond to accusations of witchcraft, which necessitates this approach. SCWA operates on a shoestring and currently does not have financial resources to conduct extensive monitoring and evaluation studies in country.

**Impact:**

Immediate impact across all locations is typically in the form of changes in attitude towards children accused of witchcraft. Responses include statements of regret about past involvement in accusations, assertions of the need to protect and advocate for children, and commitments to passing on the training in churches and wider communities. There have been several cases (in each nation where SCWA has been working with local church leaders) of pastors taking in children who have been thrown out of their homes onto the streets because of witchcraft accusations. Some church leaders have worked with local authorities to find foster homes for such children. Roll–out of the teaching has been impressive; for example, the *One Year On* Annex quotes the report from the team in Kasai, who indicated that the 12 people who were originally trained had, within the first year, passed on their learning to 3278 people. Children report feeling safer in their churches and communities and, anecdotally, there has been a perceived reduction in the number of children accused of witchcraft, and a greater willingness to challenge accusations.

**Example: Goma case study**

SCWA works with a local NGO in Goma called “Laissez Vivre les Enfants” (LVLE), led by Revd Jean–Paul Aruna Masudi. SCWA was already in partnership with LVLE through one of its member organisations, The Bethany Children’s Trust. The Revd Aruna Masudi and his team were deeply concerned about the pervasive nature of witchcraft accusations and serious related harm in Goma and surrounding areas.

LVLE ran an initial pilot workshop of *The Heart of the Matter* training in August 2017. Immediately following this, 90% of the participants reported that they needed to change their beliefs and practices, and there was a strong desire for the rapid spreading of the teaching, particularly in the villages, where accusations and abusive ‘deliverance’ practices are particularly visible. One year on, the Goma participants were still actively engaged in passing on the training at multiple levels in their families, neighbourhoods, churches, and communities. Individual testimonies from the group include the following, cited in the annex of *Getting to The Heart of the Matter: One Year On*.

*“There are parents who come to us in the church for help when they think their children are witches. I follow the approach taught in* The Heart of the Matter *for how to respond in these situations. It is usually not hard to get to the bottom of what is really causing the problem in the family or the difficult behaviour of the child and once that has been addressed, parents say that their children’s behaviour has totally changed, as has their belief that their child is a witch.”*

*“It has given me the courage to go into my community to challenge the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children.”*

Since then, LVLE has systematically carried out training using *The Heart of the Matter* in hundreds of schools, churches, and communities in Goma and in the surrounding areas of Masisi, Karisimbi, Monigi, and Nyiragongo. The majority of those trained have adopted child protection declarations and processes as a result. The impact of the work in these communities drew the attention of the local authorities and the police who were so impressed that they asked LVLE to include them in the trainings and to work with them to enforce child protection in the so–called ‘prayer rooms’ which are unregulated epicentres of abuse. As a result, formal “Synergies” have been created in Masisi and Monigi, as collaborations between LVLE, trained churches and schools, the local police, and administrative authorities. They are implementing formal action plans to address witchcraft accusations and the related harm in their districts.

This represents a major breakthrough and a model to replicate elsewhere.

Carolyn Gent (Chair)

The SCWA Coalition.

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1. « https://stop-cwa.org/about » and « https://stop-cwa.org/vision » [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/59 » [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/45 » [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/55 », and « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/56 » [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/60 » [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. « https://www.stop–cwa.org/resources/61 » [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. « https://stop–cwa.org/resources/40 » [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. « https://stop–cwa.org/resources/57 » [↑](#footnote-ref-8)