



# ROOTS, REALITIES & RESPONSES

LESSONS LEARNT IN TACKLING WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN

a report by the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

January 2017

Lord, you know the hopes of the helpless. Surely you will hear their cries and comfort them. You will bring justice to the orphans and the oppressed, so mere people can no longer terrify them.

Psalm 10:17–18

**Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA)** is an alliance of individuals and agencies responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or the threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft.

## Coalition members

**The Bethany Children's Trust** enables and equips churches and communities in Africa and beyond to respond to the needs of marginalised children, to address beliefs, practices and circumstances that cause children harm, and to create environments where they can flourish.

**Safe Child Africa** is a UK-based charity which exists so that all children in Africa can live a happy and safe life, without fear of violence, abuse or neglect.

**Urban Saints** exists to reach children and young people all over the world and see them transformed through the love of Jesus Christ.

**SGM Lifewords** is a global family of organisations, producing Bible resources and programmes so that everyone everywhere can experience the Bible as good news for their lives, and for the world.

**CCPAS** is the only independent Christian charity in the UK providing professional advice, support, training and resources in all areas of safeguarding children, vulnerable adults and for those affected by abuse.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the globe, children are accused of being witches. As a result, they are subjected to unimaginable abuse and torture: some are even killed. In some African nations, this phenomenon has become a societal norm.

Communities in the grip of poverty, violence and conflict are prone to the belief that social ills are caused by dark forces which inhabit humans. In the search for someone to blame for their problems, people tend to scapegoat the most vulnerable in society: children are easy prey. Suspicion and fear spread like wildfire.

Small organisations in affected communities, such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are struggling to meet the complex needs of the large numbers of children subjected to these accusations. Few governments or agencies have engaged with the issue with any great commitment or effectiveness.

At the very heart of the issue are strong cultural and faith-based beliefs. Some church leaders are complicit in the 'deliverance' rites which subject accused children to often brutal and sustained torture. Many other church leaders are working tirelessly to stop the abuse.

Yet, all too often, efforts to tackle this abuse have been hugely critical of the church, rather than engaging with it.

**Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA) believes that the issue must be approached from a faith perspective, as well as from a human rights one. The church, often the first port of call for families who believe their child is a witch, must be engaged. There is an urgent need for a concerted, preventative approach which identifies and addresses root causes.**

SCWA is a coalition of predominantly Christian, UK-based organisations involved in supporting frontline efforts to tackle this abuse in Africa. SCWA and its partners are addressing the issue in three African nations profoundly affected by this phenomenon.

Church leaders in affected communities need to be engaged and influenced to help bring about change in any harmful belief or practice they may adhere to. They need to be given an essential grounding in sound theology, children's rights as enshrined in law, and in child development.

**A recent survey of 1,000 pastors in Kinshasa, DRC, found that 70 per cent of respondents knew at least one child aged five or under who had been abused as a result of witchcraft accusations. An equal number acknowledged that sermons in their churches preach that child witches do harm by their supernatural powers.**

These church leaders also need to be equipped with practical strategies and resources so they can become key influencers of values and attitudes, both in their congregations and communities.

SCWA's work with African churches is underpinned by systematic research into the root causes of witchcraft accusations. It believes this is essential if responses are to be relevant,

targeted and effective. The complexity of the phenomenon means that its drivers vary from country to country, even from town to town.

SCWA has now developed a unique, dual-pronged approach – engaging and training pastors with specific reference to root causes identified through local research.

A Round Table Action Forum in Kinshasa in 2014, involving prominent theologians and pastors, has provided a useful model of working on which to base subsequent forums. A similar event is now planned for Togo. These forums have led to strategic networks and practical interventions such as training for pastors.

**Already pastors are bearing witness to changes in their own attitudes and behaviour: some are now taking into their own homes children accused of witchcraft in order to care for them. Others who were once heavily involved in abusive deliverance rites are now working tirelessly to put a stop to these accusations.**

Throughout this process, SCWA has worked closely with prominent theologians who have strong links with and a deep understanding of the cultural context. The work SCWA supports on the frontline is led by local church-based organisations with long reach and deep respect in their communities.

### **SCWA has learnt the importance of:**

- Working with the church, using patient and gentle persuasion rather than confrontation, and having a willingness to listen and learn.
- Creating space for open dialogue, whether through international forums or in churches.
- Strategic networks, including links with grassroots organisations that can influence local values and attitudes.
- A multi-faceted and holistic approach which includes tackling the underlying issues that trigger child witch accusations, including poverty.
- Providing resources, training and practical strategies to help bring about a change in understanding and practice, and to equip those working on the frontline.

By sharing its experiences and learning through this report, SCWA hopes to engage many others in helping to bring an end to this abuse. To this end, it is forging links with diaspora churches in the UK, in order to develop relationships with churches in Africa and expand its reach.

### **SCWA is calling for:**

- Concerted and collaborative efforts by local and international communities to tackle this issue in practical ways, drawing on the learning shared in this report. Round table forums such as those piloted by SCWA need to be replicated in forums at the UN and at governmental level.

- Advocacy organisations (working at a local level) to engage positively with the church on the issue of child witch accusations.
- Funders to invest in research into roots, realities and responses. Plus more funding to develop trainers and training resources, tailored to local contexts and translated into local languages. Training needs to target more sectors of society, including police, teachers, parents and community leaders.
- Recognition and support for the many small organisations in affected communities, struggling to meet the needs of children accused of witchcraft.
- Increased advocacy at a national and regional level to promote robust judicial and legal systems in affected countries, to crack down on this abuse and end impunity for abusers.
- More strategic efforts by church authorities to ensure that all churches everywhere have child protection policies in place.
- Theological colleges to include teaching on the issue of child witch accusations and related topics in their curricula.

The issue of child witch accusations is huge and complex: the challenges it poses can appear insurmountable. But SCWA believes that, with concerted and collaborative action, change in harmful beliefs and practices will follow and the flood of accusations will recede. Its own experience has proved this is possible. It warmly invites others to join in its efforts to end this abuse that wrecks the lives of countless children.



# THE ISSUE OF CHILD WITCH ACCUSATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

From the chaotic alleys of Kinshasa to the backstreets of inner-city London, countless children are engaged in a silent struggle for their identity and even their lives. They stand accused of being 'witches' and are subjected to unimaginable abuse as a result.

Some of their accusers and abusers are acting out of sincerely held beliefs: others are driven by self-interest and greed. The triggers for these accusations vary but the outcome is the same: children, even babies, are being ensnared by lies and exploited, abused, tortured and even killed. Entire communities too are entangled in suspicion and fear.

Yet, it remains an issue with which few governments and agencies have engaged with any great commitment or effectiveness.

Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA) is a coalition of UK-based organisations and individuals who share a deep concern about this abuse and a determination to help bring it to an end.

Some of its members have a long track record of working with vulnerable children in developing countries and have first-hand experience of supporting children at the sharp end of these accusations.

**SCWA was set up to model and promote more concerted, collaborative efforts to tackle the issue. In this report, it shares its learning to date and encourages others to get involved, in the belief that, despite the huge scale and complexity of the problem, change is possible.**

SCWA's distinctive contribution to the response to child witch accusations is its work with churches. It recognises that churches are part of the problem – but can also be part of the solution.

Some churches are complicit in perpetuating the harmful beliefs and practices associated with witchcraft accusations. But others are now fully engaged in trying to address the roots of this phenomenon and prevent it by influencing and educating their communities, and other churches.

The experience of SCWA members has shown that efforts that do not engage the church are doomed to failure in the long term. Church leaders in particular need to be engaged and trained so they can become key influencers who can engage meaningfully with their communities to change attitudes and practices.

SCWA's members are not all faith-based organisations. Yet, it believes that the key to ending child witch accusations lies in addressing cultural beliefs and approaching the issue from a perspective of faith.

SCWA is not prepared to allow this widespread abuse to continue unchecked, and is calling for concerted and coordinated action to stop its spread. In addition to its frontline work, it is

forging links with diaspora churches in the UK, in order to develop relationships with churches in Africa and so expand its reach.

To this end, this report aims to:

- Raise awareness of the scale of the problem.
- Share what SCWA has learnt so far in responding to the issue.
- Provide a roadmap for other agencies wanting to respond.
- Engage more support and catalyse greater collaborative efforts to tackle the issue.
- Prove that, despite the huge scale of the problem, change is possible.

## SCALE AND SCOPE

Child witchcraft accusations are particularly prevalent in regions such as West and Central Africa but it is far from being a uniquely African problem. Cases of child witch accusations have been reported from 32 countries across four continents: Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Unicef estimates that there are 20,000 children living on the streets of Kinshasa alone as a direct result of such accusations.<sup>2</sup> In a recent SCWA-funded survey of 1,000 Kinshasa pastors,<sup>3</sup> 70 per cent of respondents knew at least one child aged five or under who had been abused in this way.

Though adults have been accused of witchcraft for centuries, accusations against children are a relatively new or emerging phenomenon in many countries, such as Tanzania, for example, where this was unknown until recently.

While the focus of this report is the involvement of the Christian church in this issue, child witch accusations have also been associated with Hinduism<sup>4</sup> and Islam.<sup>5</sup>

“ In too many settings, being classified as a witch is tantamount to receiving a death sentence. ”

**Philip Alston, UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur, 2009**

## BLURRING OF BELIEF SYSTEMS

The practice is particularly prevalent in communities which believe that an unseen world of harmful spirits interconnects seamlessly with the seen, physical world. In many of the new Reveille (revivalist) churches in Kinshasa, for example, belief in and fear of witches is a dominant worldview.



In some contexts, church leaders have little or no theological training, and no accountability. Key Bible passages are misappropriated (sometimes due to mistranslation) to fit a particular cultural context, thereby 'justifying' and 'legitimising' the abuse.

As a result, syncretism is common: African concepts of witchcraft are blended with a Christian view of demons and exorcism, to create what some theologians refer to as 'witch demonology'.<sup>6</sup> In Ghana, the word now used to refer to 'Satan' means 'witch'. Many Christians in Togo carry amulets to protect against evil spirits, contrary to biblical teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, churches are often the first port of call for adults who suspect a child of witchcraft. Some church leaders and self-proclaimed 'prophets' have developed high-profile and lucrative 'deliverance' ministries, sometimes charging families the equivalent of a year's salary.<sup>8</sup> The deliverance rites they conduct to rid the child of 'evil' are often elaborate and hugely abusive. Some of Nigeria's revivalist churches have been widely denounced for their involvement in these practices.

In many instances, families are sincere in their firmly held beliefs that their children are witches and that they are releasing them from dark forces through deliverance.

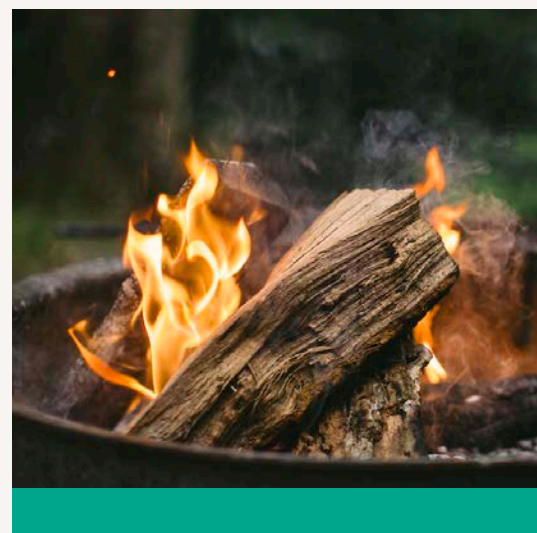
Others, however, exploit prevailing beliefs and seize on what they see as an opportunity to rid themselves of children they are no longer willing or able to support. According to SCWA's partner in Kinshasa, a high proportion of the accusers that it works with are step-parents.

In this context, any misfortune that befalls a family – such as sickness or loss of a job – is attributed to dark, unseen forces: pinning the blame on a 'child witch' is a way to rationalise pain and suffering. In their desperation to deal with their problem, people generally target vulnerable, marginalised or otherwise distinctive community members (such as the elderly, people living with disability or albinism) – and, increasingly, children. In short, children become scapegoats for the ills of their society.

Any 'abnormal behaviour' can be taken as proof that a child is a witch, including that which is a normal part of child

## Aristote's story

It was Aristote's aunt and uncle who accused him of being a witch. They had fallen into financial difficulties – and blamed him. They had taken him in because Aristote's mother was too poor to look after him. A 'prophetess' at a church in Kinshasa confirmed Aristote was a 'witch'. He was 11 years old at the time. Church leaders subjected Aristote to a systematic programme of torture and abuse, to 'drive the witch out of him'. He was held, naked, over a fire so that flames burned his stomach, thighs and groin severely. He was taken to the river to be purified, then locked up in a room with three other children who had undergone the same torture. They received no medical care and scant food, forced to 'fast' for days. By the time Aristote's mother heard what had happened and rescued him, he was extremely malnourished and unable to walk properly because the muscles were so badly damaged. He has needed years of ongoing care and support to heal him physically and psychologically.



development: from bed-wetting to appearing particularly precocious, from night terrors to dreams about flying.

## IMPACT ON THE CHILD

Countless thousands of children are being abused and exploited as a result of harmful beliefs and practices associated with child witch accusations. In a community steeped in fear and superstition, the mere fact of an accusation brings social stigma, which is abusive in itself.

As a witch's power is often seen as something physical, often in their belly, children are subjected to severe physical abuse to 'drive it out', including beatings, burning, poisoning, being buried alive, or hot oil enemas. Often, children are forced to confess to being a witch, through abuse such as incarceration or being denied food for days at a time.

Even after a child is 'cleansed', the stigma associated with an accusation of witchcraft remains. Many children are rejected by their families and thrown out onto the streets. The damage to their dignity and identity is crushing; without trauma-counselling and long-term support, it can be permanent.

“ Children accused of witchcraft are lost: anonymous, isolated, marginalised, alienated – they belong nowhere. ”

**Pastor Abel Ngolo**  
leader of EPED, D.R.Congo

## HOW ACCUSATIONS SPREAD

Poverty, social disintegration, family breakdown, conflict, poor governance and an absence of the rule of law have a cumulative effect and create an environment of fear in which witchcraft accusations can thrive.

Traditional views of childhood and child rearing as the responsibility of the whole community are being undermined by conflict, displacement and urbanisation. More ambiguous, threatening representations of childhood, such as child soldiers and gangs of street-living children, have further hardened attitudes towards children.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, perceptions of children have been further distorted by 'Nollywood', the Nigerian film industry. Its low-budget films, hugely popular across Africa and among the diaspora, frequently show children as flesh-eating witches. As the divide between reality and fiction is blurred for some, child witch accusations are given greater legitimacy.

## Fears and insecurities

Factors behind Kinshasa's "child witches" on the street:

Exploring this phenomenon, Filip de Boeck notes\* that taking the complex topic of witchcraft and putting a child in the mix, "...easily turns into an explosive cocktail." However, accusing children is "...a thoroughly modern and primarily urban phenomenon which has little in common with longstanding notions of witchcraft as they continue to exist in more rural areas."

Political and economic insecurity may enhance the problem, yet "...the occurrence of the same phenomenon in Congolese diaspora contexts in Europe, for example, ... seems to indicate that poverty alone is not a sufficient explanation." Rather, new forms of social insecurity – the fracturing of kinship care networks formerly provided by extended family – are identified as a key concern. "Labour migration, war, AIDS, and other factors have contributed to the fact that families are increasingly disrupted entities." Add to these a distinctive form of urban polygamy, and a narrowing redefinition of family as 'nuclear'. This diminishes the sense of gift-obligation towards extended kin, weakening wider family ties, in particular with step-children.

Anxiety and "spiritual insecurity" arise from these shifting social networks under the strain of the urban environment and economy, provoking "...a profound interpretative crisis. ...as if there are constantly other, more hidden and invisible, forces at work which complicate and impact upon the daily life of most citizens." Compounded by weak governance, – ineffective law enforcement and policing – new churches step in to provide explanatory narratives. In the role of a traditional diviner, they legitimise accusations and suspicions against children.

On one hand, the child's former place in the family disintegrates; on the other, a new empowerment of youth is evident. Connected with shifting economic roles (diamond rush dollars) and recent military experiences (child soldiering), children in the urban sphere are seen, and to some extent feared, as powerful social and political actors.

\* sourced from Filip de Boeck's essay, "At Risk, as Risk", in Jean LaFontaine (ed), *The Devil's Children*, Ashgate 2009



# SCWA'S RESPONSE

## BACKGROUND

SCWA was born out of the belief that any effective engagement at grassroots level with the issue of child witch accusations had to tackle its root causes and engage local churches.

The coalition's individual member agencies are:

- The Bethany Children's Trust (BCT)
- Safe Child Africa
- SGM Lifewords
- Urban Saints
- Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS)

Some members have long worked closely with local, faith-based organisations and churches in their broader child development and child protection work. They had each been confronted with the issue in their respective fields of work before they came together in coalition.

**Safe Child Africa**, founded in 2005 as Stepping Stones Nigeria, first encountered the issue through its work with children in Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria. Most of the street-living children it met (and later supported) had been accused of witchcraft. The issue soon became a strong focus for its advocacy work. In May 2010, it presented a shadow report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, detailing the ways child witch accusations violated child rights. As a result, the Committee made observations and recommendations to the Nigerian government: the charity followed up by lobbying the government to take action and raising awareness of the issue.

**The Bethany Children's Trust** became aware of the issue in 2008 when it began to partner with Congolese organisation EPED,<sup>10</sup> led by a group of church leaders working with street-living children in Kinshasa. The majority of these children were living rough as a result of being accused of witchcraft. BCT helped EPED establish child protection programmes for community members and church leaders, and poverty alleviation strategies to help address the issue. Aristote's story inspired BCT's two-year 10:10 campaign, which focused on first raising awareness of the issue and then in 2010 on petitioning the Congolese government to enforce its own Child Protection Law, which prohibits child witch accusations. The petition was presented to the government at a Public Forum in Kinshasa in 2011, hosted by EPED and attended by government ministers, Unicef, NGOs, churches and community-based organisations. Later that year, BCT Director Susie Howe attended a European Parliament forum on the issue of child witch accusations, where BCT was the only faith-based organisation represented.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, an **Urban Saints** trainer delivering children's worker training to pastors and youth leaders in Goma in the DRC was taken aback by two questions about 'child witches': 'What was Urban Saints' advice about how to deal with child witches, sent into Sunday schools to destroy them?' 'What do we do to protect ourselves from child witches?' Urban Saints had begun researching the issue and established that syncretism of traditional and religious beliefs was fuelling this abuse. Also in the DRC, **SGM Lifewords** was becoming aware of the issue through its Pavement Project, through which it was providing counselling and care to street-living children in Kinshasa.

**Churches Child Protection Advisory Service** was already beginning to work with churches in the UK on the issue of witchcraft accusations as part of its broader child protection work. It was a lone voice in calling for greater engagement with the church to tackle the problem.

In 2012, the five agencies came together to discuss the need for greater engagement with the church and the unique contribution that Christian agencies have to play in this respect. It was recognised that, despite the sterling work of some secular agencies, there was an inability to connect with churches in a way that brought transformation, to understand their 'culture' or even to speak the same 'language'. SCWA was therefore established at that meeting to help meet this need. The coalition was formalised in 2013.

**SCWA's vision: to play our part in ending harm to children resulting from witchcraft accusations, so that all children can be nurtured, valued and kept safe within their churches and communities, living a life free from fear, full of hope and opportunity.**

## APPROACH

Through the work of its individual member agencies, SCWA is all too aware that, despite the often tireless efforts of small organisations trying to deal with the fallout and care for affected children, the scale of need is overwhelming. Most are fighting fire, focusing on the care and rescue of children, with insufficient capacity to work on prevention.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, at national and international level, efforts tend to focus on advocacy, urging governments to uphold children's rights as enshrined in law. Meaningful and effective dialogue and engagement with the church is lacking. Responses often condemn churches, causing them to retreat and put up barriers.

SCWA's approach is based on the premise that an effective response requires collaboration with affected communities, trying to influence core beliefs, rather than simply decrying them. It recognises that there is a need to attempt to understand the roots of different social norms before seeking to influence them and bring about change.

Fundamentally, SCWA is an enabler, facilitator and connector: it prioritises networking, encourages collaboration, and equips, trains and resources others.

**SCWA was set up to complement existing reactive responses to child witch accusations. Its focus is firmly on prevention, through a two-pronged approach which combines:**

- **Systematic research into root causes, so responses are relevant, targeted and effective**

Though the issue of child witch accusations is now widely documented,<sup>13</sup> most research is largely descriptive of its impact. But, in order to prevent this abuse and for responses to be relevant, targeted and effective, there is a great need to understand the 'drivers' behind it. Responses must be underpinned by an understanding of what SCWA terms the 3Rs: roots, realities and responses. The complexity of the issue and huge geographical variations mean that it is vital to listen to local communities in which this abuse is prevalent, and to learn from them.

- **Engaging, influencing and equipping the church to tackle these root causes, both within congregations and the wider community**

SCWA recognised from the outset the key role the church could play in addressing the root causes of child witch accusations and in bringing about change in harmful attitudes, beliefs and practices. In most affected communities, the church is at the very heart of the community and has deep roots in local history and culture. Church leaders have authority and people's trust and respect, and can be key influencers of community values and attitudes. And, crucially, the church's reach extends far beyond that of the most determined of NGOs and into communities off the state radar.

Many churches are already deeply concerned about child witchcraft accusations and are actively engaged with addressing it. Others are aware of the issue but unsure how to tackle it; still others are complicit in it.

One of SCWA's key focuses is giving church leaders an essential grounding in sound theology, the law and child development. It is vital they have a robust understanding themselves of the biblical, legal and developmental reasons why child witch accusations must stop – so they can guide their congregations and communities through the same learning process.

SCWA's intention is to create a movement of church leaders who are prepared to hold up a gold standard, modelling child care and child protection in their churches and communities and becoming champions for change. In time, these church leaders will influence others to the point where those who have previously promoted harmful practices will be forced to abandon them, as momentum for change gathers pace.

## GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Although witchcraft allegations are a global phenomenon, SCWA's work is currently focused primarily on the issue as it occurs in some African nations. This is the context where coalition members have particular experience and relationship with organisations and churches on the ground. A fundamental part of SCWA's approach has been to learn from local experts: an understanding of the context for the accusations is essential to developing an effective response. Local ownership of the response is also vital if beliefs and practices which harm children are to be changed for good, and that ownership is built through relationships of mutual trust and respect.

With this principle in mind, SCWA is linking with diaspora churches in the UK in order to forge relationships with churches in Africa and expand its reach. Abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft certainly exists in the UK: indeed, CCPAS, a member of the SCWA coalition, is a leading authority in the UK on this issue, as are other organisations such as AFRUCA. SCWA's focus is currently sub-Saharan West African nations.

## ACTION

SCWA's unique, preventative approach continues to be developed and honed in countries where SCWA has existing relationships within affected communities. Much of the initial work has been focused on the DRC. A pilot developed there has since helped to inform a key forum in Kenya; steps are now being taken to extend the work into Togo and Nigeria as opportunities and relationships allow.

The basic model of working is providing a forum where key Christian and church leaders can explore the root causes of child witch accusations and consider their responses. Networking, discussion and training are translated into practical next steps and strategies.

The following case study of the forum SCWA helped organise and facilitate in Kinshasa in 2014 is given in detail as it embodies its approach and is a benchmark for much of SCWA's subsequent work. It is intended that this model of working will be honed so it can be adapted or adopted – by SCWA and by others.

### **Kinshasa Action Forum, DRC: August 2014**

SCWA's first pilot working with churches was in the DRC, building on existing relationships between its members and local church-based organisations. One of these in particular, EPED (a partner of BCT), was already far advanced in its understanding of the issue and addressing it through its child protection work with Kinshasa churches. Together, EPED and SCWA prepared an Action Forum in Kinshasa, along with other leaders of churches and organisations recruited to its Planning Committee. It was significant that the Forum was led by local church leaders who have a deep understanding of local culture.

The Forum brought together key church leaders, prominent theologians and other interested parties to examine the root causes of child witch accusations and develop concrete responses. It was inspired by the work of theologians Dr Robert Priest<sup>14</sup> and Dr Timothy Stabell<sup>15</sup> who had held an academic forum on the same subject in Kenya in 2013. They were invited to speak in Kinshasa, along with two other theologians: Dr Opoku Onyinah<sup>16</sup> from Ghana, one of Africa's leading authorities on witchcraft accusations, and Dr Andy Anguandia-Alo<sup>17</sup> from DRC.

Preliminary research into the roots, realities and responses associated with accusations of witchcraft against children was carried out with focus groups in several different communities in Batéké Plateau and Bas-Congo province. Their feedback confirmed the prevalence and devastating impact of the accusations. It identified five key areas as root causes:

1. the socio-economic context, particularly poverty, family breakdown, lack of access to justice;
2. a tendency to avoid taking personal responsibility and to scapegoat others;
3. fear of the supernatural;
4. misunderstandings about normal childhood development; and
5. the role of some independent (including Revivalist) churches; syncretism and poor theology.

These research findings informed the choice of topics discussed and taught at the Forum. Theological papers were prepared on: spiritual powers; human responsibility for their actions; children's growth and development; the role of the church.<sup>18</sup>

More than 40 pastors attended the three-day Forum at the Carter Center for Human Rights in Kinshasa, for presentations, theological training and small group discussions. Mistranslation of key Bible verses relating to children and witchcraft were highlighted and discussed. Proceedings were punctuated with poignant readings of accused children's testimonies.

During the forum, delegates completed a questionnaire about child witch accusations. Virtually all had some direct

## Lost in translation

In its original languages, the Bible contains no reference to 'witches' as the term is frequently understood in the African context (that is, people who use inherent evil powers in secret to harm others deliberately). It does refer to diviners, magicians and magi (for example: Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus 7:8–12, and the magi who visited baby Jesus in Matthew 2:1). In some cases, these terms have been mistranslated into African languages using the word for 'witch' or 'witchcraft' in the sense it is understood in the local context. So, Exodus 22:18 in Hebrew refers to diviners who seek to usurp the role of God and become omniscient; the King James Version (written in a cultural context of witch hunts) rendered the verse: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." In French, the word used is 'magicienne', which is feminine. This corruption is repeated in Swahili translations with the use of a term 'mchawi' which means 'female witch' – with devastating consequences for elderly women in some parts of Africa. These errors have been corrected in some more recent translations, in Ghana for example.





experiences of such accusations, from babies to teenagers, and had all encountered a range of deliverance rites and practices. It was also clear they held a range of beliefs relating to witchcraft itself. The results<sup>19</sup> were analysed and presented back to them during the forum, to help reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes, as if in a mirror.

The Forum had several concrete outcomes:

- Working groups were set up, focusing on four different points of leverage: theological research; training of pastors; advocacy and awareness-raising; practical interventions.
- A report of proceedings and outcomes was sent to the Congolese government and national media carried positive and extensive coverage of the Forum.
- The Congolese organisations involved in planning the Forum formalised into a coalition named CAAES (Consortium Arrêter d'Accuser les Enfants de Sorcellerie).
- The survey piloted among the 40 delegates has since been reworked as a tool for more detailed statistical research among 1,000 pastors in Kinshasa, partly funded by SCWA. **Some 80 per cent of respondents affirmed that they know that Congolese law prohibits child witchcraft accusations. Yet, the overwhelming majority, some 70 per cent, acknowledged that sermons in their churches preach that child witches do harm by their supernatural powers.** The full report is due to be published in late 2016.
- EPED is now training 100 pastors systematically in issues surrounding child witch accusations. It is also working closely with social services in Kinshasa to provide training and support to prospective foster families who will care for affected children.

“ At one point, nervous laughter percolated around the room as people recognised the well-known Lingala saying labelling step-children as monsters. ”

**Paul Stockley, Urban Saints**

## Kenya

Drawing on the experiences of the Kinshasa Action Forum, SCWA was involved in a similar follow-up event in Nairobi in 2016, attended by scores of prominent church leaders and theologians from several African nations.<sup>20</sup>

A two-day Working Group considered the current reality of witchcraft accusations, drawing on experience in many African nations, including Tanzania, Ghana, DRC and Nigeria; it also planned some practical responses. One of the sessions focused on the mistranslation and misappropriation of Bible texts relating to children and witchcraft, which are then misapplied to justify witchcraft beliefs.

“ Training the church to correct erroneous doctrine is key. You can't just tell someone, “Don't do that.” You have to show them a mirror, then train them and help them find a solution. ”

**Susie Howe, BCT Director**

This was followed by two separate one-day conferences: one focusing narrowly on child witch accusations and the other on 'African contextual realities'; in this second conference, witchcraft accusations were one of five streams, giving it equal prominence to mainstream topics such as health and education.

One of the key outcomes was a desire to set up an international network or community called "Light: Christians Addressing Witchcraft and Witch Accusations" (CAWAWA) – with a predominantly African identity. Delegates also committed to further research, awareness-raising training in Togo and to creating a 'toolkit' to resource frontline workers, including pastors, responding to witchcraft accusations.

## Togo

Plans for an Action Forum in Togo in November 2016 are now in train. Theologians involved in the Kinshasa Forum have played a key role in engaging Togolese churches, especially Dr Onyinah, Chairman of the Church of Pentecost (CoP), whose denomination has about 600 churches in Togo. Dr Onyinah and BCT have networked with an NGO called MECI (Mission Enfant pour Christ International),<sup>21</sup> to establish a connection with the Conseil Chretien (Christian Council) in the hope of encouraging a coordinated Togolese church response.

Focus groups are currently being held in locations all over Togo to establish the 3Rs – the roots, realities, responses – for witchcraft allegations there, so that these can be addressed directly.

## PROGRESS TO DATE

In the four years since it was founded, SCWA has achieved much that gives cause for hope.

**Space for dialogue:** Forums and conferences with which SCWA has been involved have created neutral spaces for dialogue and discussion, where people feel comfortable to discuss openly what has previously been a taboo subject. They are gently encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes and actions, and invited to reconsider them. Growing attendance at these events suggests an increasing openness to the issue.

**Strategic networks:** SCWA-facilitated events and its behind-the-scenes discussions have helped form and strengthen strategic networks and alliances which have given individuals and organisations confidence to confront the issue collaboratively.

**Concrete action:** People are no longer content to discuss the issue as an academic issue: talk translates into concrete, practical action.

**Advocacy:** SCWA is taking steps to challenge a climate of impunity in affected communities and ensure that child rights are upheld. For example, Safe Child Africa provided legal aid to enable the successful prosecution of a man accused of abusive physical chastisement of a child in a landmark trial in Cross River State, Nigeria. Individual SCWA members have lobbied government and officials in the UK on the issue of child witch accusations, including the Foreign Office, MPs and members of the House of Lords.

**Frontline care and support:** Individual SCWA members continue to work with their partners overseas to support children whose lives have been torn apart by these accusations. Lives have been transformed as a result.

**Resources and training** are being developed to educate and equip people confronting the issue on the frontline. For example:

- With significant input from SCWA, Congolese coalition CAAES has developed a training resource for church leaders, addressing some of the key ‘drivers’ behind the accusations. The modular, Bible-based training covers the following themes: God’s heart for children; personal responsibility; child development; spiritual powers; the role of church leaders in safeguarding children; the place of the child within the community; child rights within the legal framework.
- Urban Saints has delivered training with church youth workers in Kinshasa, facilitated by EPED. It has now developed a 90-minute module specifically on the subject of child witch accusations to be used, as part of its wider training, in contexts where accusations are rife. Urban Saints is exploring opportunities to run the full CAAES training course, possibly as a follow-up to its own training module on the issue.
- SGM Lifewords’ Pavement Project is helping street-living children accused of witchcraft recover from their trauma and be reconciled with and reintegrated into their families. Its Bible-based materials and approach are proving very effective, even with children traumatised through witchcraft accusations.
- Safe Child Africa and its partners have started to work with pastors, as well as with traditional rulers, to engage them with the issue of child witch accusations, with positive results. It has also conducted workshops in communities across Cross River State, focusing on child rights and referral pathways in cases of abuse.

“ With SCWA’s input and prompting, CAAES has been able to fully grasp the problem of witchcraft accusations against children in Kinshasa, to identify the root causes and the realities involved and to share this knowledge with others. Through this collaboration, we are now acknowledged as experts, consulted by others and given a platform to raise awareness and challenge harmful beliefs and practices. We now have the ability and tools to bring about change through training.

**Pastor Abel Ngolo**, leader of EPED, and member of CAAES, Kinshasa, D.R.Congo

**Attitudes are changing:** Many pastors in the DRC have borne witness to dramatic changes in their own attitudes, beliefs and practices as a result of their relationship with EPED. Several have become role models for their community by taking children into their families as foster carers. Instead of perpetuating abuse, church leaders are rescuing children and restoring them to a life of acceptance within a family and within a community. They are

demonstrating these children are vulnerable and innocent victims who need to be protected and cared for, not feared or shunned.

## NEXT STEPS

SCWA will continue to focus closely on networking and developing capacity in civil society in affected communities. To this end, it intends to:

- Develop an online toolkit containing existing training and information resources (or links to them) that are widely available but not otherwise collated. It will be aimed at those interested in or affected by child witch accusations, including: church leaders and professionals in the field of child welfare; the enquiring public; media; and academics and researchers.
- Measure the impact of its work in a more intentional way. Starting work in Togo, a relatively small country, will enable SCWA to draw up a baseline and evaluate its impact through research.
- Undertake more international 3Rs research on child witch accusations, in collaboration with theologians such as those who are part of CAWAWA.
- Create and fine-tune a model of working that can be rolled out in other nations. SCWA will continue to offer support and resources to people and organisations engaging with this issue at the grassroots.
- Encourage other groups to join the SCWA coalition, especially those working in other countries affected by the issue which are currently unrepresented in its membership.

## Pastor Gideon's story

“ I became a pastor of a Reveille church after virtually no training. We used to hold deliverance services every day, and our speciality was delivering children of witchcraft. To be honest, it was a way of making money. We just responded to what the people wanted and made them pay for it. We had to work hard to get the children to confess that they were witches – forcing them to fast and beating them. I abused countless children. Then I was invited to a meeting about witchcraft accusations against children that EPED was holding. The Bible teaching and the discussions that followed showed me the criminality of my actions. I was overwhelmed with a desire to repent, and found myself kneeling before all the others, just weeping and weeping. I saw clearly how many children's lives I had ruined. Since then, I have been learning from EPED and working with them to refute witchcraft accusations against children. When I think what I have done in the past, I can barely forgive myself. But now I will dedicate my life to protecting children. ”

**Pastor Gideon,**  
Kinshasa



# LEARNING

In the four years since it was established, SCWA has learned many lessons. Some of these have been painful and costly.

In sharing its learning here, SCWA hopes that it will spur on others to engage with the issue of child witch accusations and prove useful to others considering action on this issue. Our experience can be adapted for use in different country contexts.

## We have learnt:

**Gentle persuasion works better than confrontation.** Shock and anger are natural responses to the appalling abuse that children accused of being witches are suffering. The instinctive reaction is to confront those whose behaviour is so deeply damaging. But confrontation does not generally lead to collaboration. Gentle persuasion, with an eye on a longer-term preventative response, is more effective.

**Developing relationships in country is key.** Building relationships with community-based organisations and local church leaders in country is vital, especially those which are well placed to influence others. Outside agencies simply do not have access to communities in the interior of DRC, for example: community-based organisations such as EPED do. The theologians SCWA works with all have strong links with the nations they are focusing on, by birth or through their work. SCWA was able to work with local churches in DRC, for example, because of existing relationships Urban Saints, SGM Lifewords and EPED had with them.

**Peer-to-peer learning is most effective.** Peer-to-peer learning offered by local people and nationals is much more appropriate than perceived 'wisdom' dispensed by outsiders. So representatives of SCWA have tended to assume a backseat role at forums, facilitating,

## Problematic approaches

Safe Child Africa's experience in Nigeria:

Safe Child Africa initially took a confrontational approach to church leaders, whom it accused of encouraging child witchcraft accusations through deliverance ministry. Its work was featured in two Channel 4 Dispatches documentaries, in 2008 and 2009, which roundly condemned the actions of church leaders and contributed significantly to raising awareness of the issue. Legal suits were brought against the charity and the film-makers, and the Nigerian government made plain its displeasure. There were violent attacks on the charity's local partners and staff were advised not to travel to Nigeria.

Dr Emilie Secker, Prevention and Protection Programme Manager of Safe Child Africa, says: "We continue to support directly children accused of witchcraft and campaign for their rights. Child protection systems in Nigeria are very poor and we cannot just abandon the children of today for the sake of the children of tomorrow. But these responses have to be combined with a longer-term, more strategic focus. We were quite young as an organisation then; we're older now. It's been a learning curve."

catalysing and networking. Presentation of key issues is best left to national speakers familiar with the local context.

**Patience is a virtue.** It takes time to gain trust and to build relationships. Development matrices set great store by impact indicators and measurable results, but attitude and behaviour change is a long, slow process.

**Don't presume to have all the answers.** It is important to show humility and a willingness to listen and learn. Westerners cannot afford to take a colonial attitude or occupy the moral high ground on this issue: from the Pendle Witch trials of 1612 to the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000,<sup>22</sup> the UK is not exempt from this type of abuse.<sup>23</sup>

**Be intentional.** Any meeting to discuss potential responses to the issue of child witch accusations should result in a list of practical outcomes, not blanket statements of intent. Discussion should be translated into practical applications. For church leaders, these outcomes can be simple and achievable steps such as: raising the issue in a sermon; having a listening group at church where struggling families and couples are identified and supported (before their problems overwhelm them and they become potential accusers).

**Choose your allies with caution.** SCWA advises caution about being too closely associated with media which may have a knee-jerk reaction to the subject and condemn the church. This can close down channels of communication with the church: open dialogue with the church is key and so must be protected.

**Do your research.** Responses need to reflect closely the local context and take account of the fact that the drivers for child witch accusations vary from country to country, even town to town. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. For example, the Togolese worldview is strongly influenced by voodoo. Responses need to be underpinned by context-specific 3Rs research.

“ It's hard to engage with people who are harming children. But, if you don't treat them with respect and try to understand their point-of-view, you cannot make inroads with them. You have to listen and learn and start to dialogue, even if it goes against the grain to do so. So, if someone says, “There are witches in my church,” you'd ask them, “How do you know they are witches?” rather than leaping up and saying, “Children are not witches.”

Susie Howe, BCT Director

**Find common ground.** Training on child witch accusations should initially be couched in terms relating to much broader child protection issues: establishing common ground such as the belief that children should be cherished not harmed is key. Sensitisation to the subject should be gradual.

**Come at the issue from all angles.** A multi-faceted approach is vital. Efforts to confront child witch accusations must be multi-dimensional and holistic: no one intervention is sufficient. EPED's work in DRC combines many different approaches including: broadcasts on the issue in local marketplaces; income-generation activities and pastoral support with vulnerable families; peer-to-peer learning among pastors.

**People working at the sharp end need practical approaches and strategies.** Pastors at the sharp end of child witch accusations need practical strategies to deal with families asking them to perform deliverance rites on their child. If they refuse to perform rites, families will just go to another church. If they act out a fake ritual to pacify the parents, such as pouring water over a child's head to 'cleanse' them, they are reinforcing the idea that the child is a witch. The training resource developed with CAAES includes helpful strategies.

Pastors should never agree with the assertion that the child is a witch, but rather (without any drama) pray with the child, bless them and speak scripture over them. Spending time with the family, watching the child at play, talking with both parents and child separately, will help bring to light any underlying issues (for example, bedwetting or trauma). Affected families need continuing pastoral care – for both parents and child – to address these issues. Marriage counselling is part of EPED's ministry.

This approach is effective where people genuinely believe their child is a witch, rather than with people who have a malevolent intent to get rid of the child. In some cases, where the child is at risk of abuse, pastors may need to involve other agencies to remove the child from immediate danger.

**Change will come.** The experience of SCWA and its partners on the frontline of the struggle to tackle child witch accusation is that, despite the huge scale of the problem, change is possible. Attitudes and behaviour are starting to shift in areas where concerted, collaborative efforts are being made to end this abuse.

### Fay and Martin's story\*

Fay and Martin were asleep in their beds their uncle and aunt poured petrol over them and set them alight 'like pieces of dry timber'. They believed the children had caused their mother's terminal illness: she watched in horror as her children were attacked, helpless to intervene. Fay and Martin ran outside, screaming, and climbed into a water butt. They spent the night submerged in cold water, while their uncle threatened to 'finish them off', until the police arrived next morning, alerted by the children's grandfather. The children then spent many months in hospital, in unspeakable pain and deep trauma. Fay's injuries were particularly severe: her calf tissue on one leg was burned away and her thighs and groin were badly damaged. Their mother and baby sister subsequently died from HIV-related disease. The aunt fled, but the uncle was subsequently imprisoned thanks to EPED's advocacy. EPED and its partners continue to provide the children with care and support, including counselling, physiotherapy and medical care. Fay and Martin have now made a remarkable recovery, despite their ordeal. A pastor and his wife whom the children love and trust are now in the process of legally adopting them.

\* names changed to protect identities

# CHALLENGES

There remain a number of hurdles and roadblocks which SCWA is confronting in its ongoing work.

## Systemic challenges

In many affected countries, cultural acceptance of the existence of witchcraft permeates society at every level. It is not limited to isolated, rural communities: sometimes it extends even to the police and judiciary. Likewise, violent discipline of children is often considered culturally acceptable: Bible verses such as ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ are misappropriated and taken literally.

Most African nations are signatories to the UN Rights of the Child and other international statutes protecting child rights. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) 1999 contains a clause<sup>24</sup> discouraging harmful cultural practices such as child witch accusations to put right a perceived omission in the UN Charter. Yet, knowledge of child rights is very poor within communities, even among police and the judiciary. In some nations, police corruption is an obstacle.

## Reluctance to engage

Engaging people with the issue of child witch accusations is difficult because the subject is so dark. People naturally shy away from confronting issues they associate with evil. Community-based organisations, NGOs in country and church leaders are sometimes reluctant to speak out and take action to protect children, for fear of reprisals, political or otherwise.

Westerners fear being perceived as neo-colonial in interfering with communities’ traditional beliefs and rituals. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the African Charter 1999 specifically discourages abuse such as child witch accusations.

Likewise, many pastors, in the UK and overseas, are cautious about engaging with organisations such as SCWA. Some have been unfairly vilified by the media in connection with high-profile abuse cases such as that of Victoria Climbié in the UK where the church has been found wanting. Their reluctance is understandable. Furthermore, attitudes to the spirit world differ between African and Western churches – and African church leaders are often wary about how Westerners perceive them.

## Inroads and openings

SCWA continues to find it difficult to build inroads into the church in nations where it has been unable to identify key champions to help it build a network of influencers. This is particularly problematic in nations where there is a strict hierarchical structure in the church, such that any engagement with the issue has to be led from the top.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

SCWA is a small coalition with a big vision: to put an end to the abuse associated with child witch accusations. It firmly believes that as organisations and agencies start to collaborate, pooling their contacts, efforts and resources, harmful beliefs and practices will come to an end.

It warmly invites any interested individuals and organisations to join in this work and empower more and more communities to develop understanding and practices that will enable children to live happy, fulfilled lives.

## **SCWA are calling for:**

- Concerted and collaborative efforts by local and international communities to tackle this issue in practical ways, drawing on the learning shared in this report. Round table forums such as those piloted by SCWA need to be replicated in forums at the UN and at governmental level.
- Advocacy organisations (working at a local level) to engage positively with the church on the issue of child witch accusations.
- Funders to invest in 3Rs research and more funding to develop trainers and training resources, tailored to local contexts and translated into local languages. Training needs to target more sectors of society, including police, teachers, parents and community leaders.
- Recognition and support for the many small organisations in affected communities, struggling to meet the needs of children accused of witchcraft.
- Increased advocacy at a national and regional level to promote robust judicial and legal systems in affected countries, to crack down on this abuse and end impunity for abusers.
- More strategic efforts by church authorities to ensure that all churches everywhere have child protection policies in place.
- Theological colleges to include teaching on the issue of child witch accusations and related topics in their curricula.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See SCWA's FAQs at <http://stop-cwa.org/faq/>
- <sup>2</sup> Unicef (2010) Children accused of witchcraft: an anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa, Dakar. Author: Aleksandra Cimpric
- <sup>3</sup> Research due to be published in late 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> DfES (2006) Child abuse linked to accusations of 'possession' and 'witchcraft'. Author: Eleanor Stobart
- <sup>5</sup> Unicef (2010) Children accused of witchcraft: an anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa, Dakar. Author: Aleksandra Cimpric
- <sup>6</sup> Dr Opoku Onyinah used this phrase in his address at the Working Group and Conference on Witchcraft Accusations in Nairobi, Kenya, March 2016. See also: <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2012/09/guest-post-on-witchdemonology-by-ghanaian-theologian-opoku-onyinah/>
- <sup>7</sup> According to Liz Numadi, Mission Enfant pour Christ International (MECI), Togo
- <sup>8</sup> Channel 4 Dispatches documentary, 2008, 'Saving Africa's Witch Children'
- <sup>9</sup> for example: UNHCR (2009) Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence. Research paper by: Jill Schnoebelen, p15: <http://www.unhcr.org/4981ca712.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> EPED stands for Equipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse (Pastoral Team for Children in Distress).
- <sup>11</sup> A one-day forum on 15 June 2011 entitled 'Children accused of witchcraft in Sub-Saharan Africa', attended by NGOs from DRC working with the issue, journalists, academics, media, MEPs and members of the European Commission
- <sup>12</sup> They include the Basic Rights Counsel Initiative and the Society for Youth Development and Rescue Initiative in Nigeria, supported by Safe Child Africa, and EPED in the DRC, supported by BCT.
- <sup>13</sup> Unicef, UNHCR, Save the Children, Human Rights Watch and the UK government have all recognised and documented this abuse.
- <sup>14</sup> Dr Robert Priest is an anthropologist and theologian, a Professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, USA, and President of the Evangelical Missiological Society.
- <sup>15</sup> Dr Stabell is Adjunct Professor at Shalom University, Bunia, DRC, and at Briercrest College and Seminary, Canada. He's also a former missionary and pastor in DRC.
- <sup>16</sup> Dr Onyinah is Chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Accra, Ghana.
- <sup>17</sup> Dr Alo is Associate Professor and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Shalom University, Bunia, DRC, and an expert in Bible translation.

- <sup>18</sup> A précis of each of these papers can be found on the SCWA website: <http://stop-cwa.org/resources/>
- <sup>19</sup> Dr Robert Priest's research findings are available on the SCWA website: <http://stop-cwa.org/resources/>
- <sup>20</sup> Dr Robert Priest was instrumental in organising these events in collaboration with ASET (Africa Society of Evangelical Theology); EPED and SCWA were invited, to ensure a sustained focus on children and practical action as an outcome.
- <sup>21</sup> <http://www.meciuk.org/about-us/>
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34475424>
- <sup>23</sup> Cases of child abuse linked to exorcism and witchcraft reported to the Metropolitan Police in London doubled between 2013 and 2014.
- <sup>24</sup> Article 1:3 of the ACRWC reads: Any custom, tradition, cultural or religious practice that is inconsistent with the rights, duties and obligations contained in the present Charter shall to the extent of such inconsistency be discouraged.



# RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

SCWA's online toolkit contains a wide range of training and information resources for those wanting to engage with or those affected by child witch accusations.

Visit: [stop-cwa.org/resources/](http://stop-cwa.org/resources/)

- SCWA vision paper: "A Call to Action" – accessible at [stop-cwa.org](http://stop-cwa.org)
- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child  
– [http://www.unicef.org/esaro/African\\_Charter\\_articles\\_in\\_full.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/esaro/African_Charter_articles_in_full.pdf)
- Papers from the Roundtable Action Forum in Kinshasa, DRC, August 2014  
– Roundtable Action Forum in Kinshasa in the DRC – summary report
- Summaries of the theological papers presented during the forum  
– "God at work through history", Dr Timothy Stabell  
– "Spiritual powers", Dr Opoku Onyinah  
– "Human agency", Dr Andy Anguandia-Alo  
– "Children in the Bible" Dr Andy Anguandia-Alo  
– "Socio-economic context", Dr Timothy Stabell
- Results of a survey carried out during the forum  
– "Questioning the role of the church", Dr Robert Priest
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