

THE TIMES Christmas Appeal



Why we are supporting these causes, by the Editor of the Times

The bleak economic climate means that charities are struggling as never before to raise funds and meet the demand for their services.

Last year Times readers helped to raise more than £700,000 for good causes whose work changes the lives of millions of people at home and abroad. But your generous support is even more pressing now.

This year we have chosen to support three charities that operate in areas that have featured prominently in the news in 2011.

British troops departed from Iraq in May, and are preparing to leave Afghanistan in two years' time. Civil and guerrilla wars in Africa have also featured prominently in our pages. Readers rightly want to know what the UK is doing to help to rebuild these war-torn nations.

One small British charity, War Child, has been at the forefront of this work. As Martin Fletcher reports opposite, War Child does not seek to stop wars, or reform hopeless governments. It gives help directly to children whose lives have been wrecked by conflict, those who have been left homeless, with no education or prospects of any kind. It works in perilous places where major non-governmental organisations often refuse to go, to find the most vulnerable children and help to improve their lives.

Our second charity, Greenhouse, also works on the front line, but here in the UK with teenagers in some of the most deprived areas of the capital. This summer London experienced days of rioting and looting, much of it at the hands of young people. Greenhouse works in the areas worst affected by the riots and is guided by a simple principle that if teenagers have no goal in life, they have nothing to aim for. It uses

sport, including basketball, table tennis and football, to turn young lives around. The charity does not believe that sport cures social ills. Packing kids into a sports hall to whack around a shuttlecock does nothing for social outcomes. Sport transforms lives only if it is harnessed in the right way, by inspirational men and women who are as much life coaches as sports coaches. Greenhouse has parachuted these coaches into some of the toughest schools. The youngsters play sport and learn about life. Its results show that Greenhouse children focus more on their school work, their self-discipline and their ambitions as a result.

Our third charity, the Alzheimer's Society, will already be familiar to many of you. Dementia is probably now the greatest fear of all older people and one in three of us will have it in one form or another. The Alzheimer's Society believes that you can live well with dementia and offers local and national services to help families to cope with the condition. It has also won battles on behalf of the public to secure greater access to new medication.

Over the next few weeks Times writers and photographers will bring to life the outstanding work that these charities perform every day of every year. Please do show your support for their work by donating what you can. You can follow our appeal each day in the paper and give money to your chosen charity at www.thetimes.co.uk/timesappeal or by using the coupon.

James Harding

To donate to The Times Christmas Appeal

Visit thetimes.co.uk/timesappeal

Call 0870 043 3764

Or complete the form below

Please send to The Times Christmas Charity Appeal, Charities Trust, Suite 20-22, Century Building, Tower Street, Liverpool L3 4BJ. I wish to donate £ to the Christmas Charity Appeal. The money raised by the Times Christmas Charity Appeal will be used by the charities for their general charitable purposes. All donations will be split equally between the appeal's three causes unless specified in the circle(s) below

Alzheimer's Society Greenhouse War Child

Please include a cheque or postal order made payable to: The Times Christmas Charity Appeal or complete the Mastercard/Visa/Amex details

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Telephone number for confirmation purposes Please note Charities Trust will appear on your bank/credit card statement

Calls to The Times donation line are charged at the national rate of no more than 8p per minute from a BT landline. Charges from other networks will vary. Donations will be administered by Charities Trust (no 327489) on behalf of Alzheimer's Society (no 296645), Greenhouse (no 1092744) and War Child (no 1071659). Charities Trust will use your information for claiming Gift Aid. We will not send your details to third parties, other than your nominated charity/

A beacon of hope in a miasma of human misery

A tiny British charity is helping children who are forced to sell their bodies just to survive, Martin Fletcher writes

No streetlights illuminate Ndjili market in Tshangu, a huge slum in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, possibly the most wretched country on Earth. There are just flickering oil lamps on the rickety stalls that offer cigarettes, peanuts and bananas to crowds picking their way home across an expanse of mud. All around is the thick, muggy darkness of an African night — a darkness that hides a horror worthy of Conrad or Dickens.

In the shadows behind the stalls prostitutes lurk. Most are young teenagers forced to sell their barely pubescent bodies for a dollar or two, a little more if the men do not use condoms. They and their customers rut on the ground, or in a nearby toilet.

A "night ambulance" run by the British charity War Child parks and opens its doors to the girls who, through no fault of their own, live and sometimes die on the bleak streets of this filthy city. Some approach the vehicle, which is manned by a nurse and a social worker and is the only source of help that these girls have. One, aged 15, has a sexually transmitted disease. A pregnant 16-year-old feels sick. Another girl, aged 17, has malaria.

Mardie comes for free condoms, which she tucks into her bra. She is 15, little more than a child. She has strands of false orange hair braided into her own, wears the rings of female condoms as bracelets, and has a scar on her neck where another girl slashed her with a razor blade. She is HIV-positive.

With tired eyes Mardie tells how she has lived on the streets since relatives accused her of witchcraft when her grandmother died three years ago. She has been raped and robbed, and had an abortion. She has several clients a night, drinking illicit spirits to dull her senses. Afterwards she sleeps beneath a market table, or with her yaya — an older woman for whom she works.

"What's frightening is she talks about her life as if it's normal," Alessia Polidoro, War Child's programme manager in Kinshasa, says. "She knows nothing else."

War Child is a tiny charity, with only 14 staff at its British headquarters, a former false teeth factory in Kentish Town, North London. It does not seek to change the world, or to reform hopeless governments. It gives help directly to outcast children in conflict zones, those without homes, education or support of any kind, and offers them the chance of a better life.

Founded in 1993 in response to the brutal effects on children of the Balkans war, it uses local people to work in four war-torn countries — Iraq, Afghanistan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, countries often considered too risky by the big NGOs. It prides itself on its lack of bureaucracy, boasting that it spends 77p of every pound directly on the children. "We're a very lean organisation. Pretty much all the money we receive goes directly to the beneficiaries," says Nigel Wilson, its chief executive.

Although War Child is small it is growing fast. The Department for International Development was so impressed that it recently gave it a grant to expand its work. Comic Relief, a



Nadesh, 14, slashed in a gang attack, is typical of the girls helped by War Child's



demanding grant-maker, has made a donation for its work in Uganda.

But nowhere is the aftermath of war felt more strongly than the Democratic Republic of Congo, barely recovering from the deadliest conflict since the Second World War. In seven years of fighting more than five million died, half of them children. It is bottom of the 187 countries on the UN human development index. In Kinshasa alone perhaps 20,000 children live on the streets — some orphans, some driven out by impoverished or abusive parents, others desperately seeking a way to feed themselves. For girls that invariably means prostitution.

War Child's ambulance searches for

them six nights a week, offering first aid and condoms and encouraging them to visit the drop-in centre that War Child opened in November last year for street girls under 18. The two-storey building is hidden behind high walls topped by razor wire in an alley. Behind its black steel gates is another world — a sanctuary where two or three dozen girls seek refuge each day. A gaggle of them greet us with diffident smiles. Most are barefoot, dishevelled, in little more than rags. Many are emaciated, scarred, exhausted or traumatised. The youngest are 6 or 7. All have harrowing tales to tell.

Nadesh is 14 and barely 5ft tall. She has never been to school. She has been

ambulance, below left. Landu, 32, below, became a vendor with a £130 grant

a prostitute since her mother abandoned her two years ago. Her left arm is bandaged where a gang slashed her for refusing to hand over her money.

Madho, 16 and pregnant, was forced on to the streets after her parents split up and their new partners rejected her. Five times she has had to move to new sites to sell herself. In each she has been beaten and gang-raped by boys in a sort of initiation ceremony. Natalie, 16, was cast out after her uncle's barren wife accused her of sorcery. Two weeks ago she gave birth after being repeatedly raped by a man in his sixties.

A War Child survey of 315 Tshangu street girls found that 79 per cent were under 18 and 6 per cent under 12; 70 per cent had only primary education or none; 57 per cent had been raped, many by soldiers or policemen, and 42 per cent had become pregnant, of whom two thirds had had illegal abortions.

"The street is a jungle," says Patricia Ngay, who runs the centre. "There's a lot of violence." Initially the girls are wary of the centre with its rules but "by the time they come here they're desperate", she says. "They've suffered so much. It's their last hope." Ms Polidoro adds: "Some are very aggressive. They're angry with the world and what's happened to them."

Gradually they soften. The centre gives the girls

hot food, somewhere to wash themselves and their clothes, mattresses to sleep on. It employs three nurses, six social workers and teachers of reading, writing and other basic skills. Lessons are mandatory. But it does more. It seeks to reunite the girls with parents or relatives, which can take months of detective work and mediation. It pays for them to go to school or receive vocational training, or to attend hospitals when necessary. It encourages and helps them to seek justice in a society where men rape with impunity.

More broadly, War Child works with other NGOs in Kinshasa to tell of the street girls' plight through radio, television, community activities and meetings with ministers.

In its first nine months, 163 girls came to the centre, which costs £90,000 a year. So far 25 have been reunited with families. Fifteen have been sent to hospitals to give birth, or for treatment. Six are receiving training or preparing for school. Three died, two from tetanus and one from Aids. The centre aims to take 100 girls permanently off the streets within three years. That is not many given the scale of the problem, but far better than grand schemes that seek to benefit all but end up helping none.

"Before going to sleep each night I pray for War Child. It's

given me a second chance," said Landu, 32, a single woman whose ten-year-old daughter ran away when they were so poor they had to sleep in a church. After a month on the streets the girl was hit by a car and arrived at the centre with a broken thigh. While she recovered in hospital the social workers traced her mother, and War Child gave Landu \$200 (£130) to set herself up as a vendor of fufu — maize flour. She now rents a one-room corrugated hut for the two of them.

It takes time for the centre to wean

Deutsche Bank will match donations to War Child through The Times Appeal to a cap of at least £10,000. Its employees chose War Child to support this year and have raised more than £800,000 so far. TESCO Tesco will match donations to the Alzheimer's Society to a cap of £30,000. The supermarket chain and its staff made it its charity of the year and hope to raise £6 million in total.

the girls away from the only way of life they know. As darkness falls, they sit in the courtyard, laughing, singing, braiding each other's hair. Mardie is there, and even she joins in.

Briefly, they are children and happy again. Then, one by one, most slip out of the steel gates and into the night, down the squalid alleys, past men in roadside bars, along streets plastered with the election posters of politicians who care nothing at all about young girls forced to sell themselves for the cost of a Christmas cracker.

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