



## **STATEMENT ON CHILD MENDICITY (BEGGING) IN GUINEA-BISSAU**

It was [reported from Guinea Bissau](#) on 20 March 2023 that a new law will prohibit Islamic leaders using children for begging. The President of Guinea-Bissau, Umaro Sissoco Embaló ordered that from Monday, 27 March 2023, child mendicity will be prohibited and that fathers or Koranic teachers of any child caught begging in the streets of the country would be arrested. The President considers shameful to send children in the streets of Bissau and neighbouring countries to raise support for their Koranic teachers. The regular practice perpetrated by some Islamic leaders have created an alarming phenomenon nationally and in the region.

As members of the global [Campaign to Decriminalise Poverty and Status](#) advocating for the repeal of laws that target people based on poverty, status or for their activism, we are, however, concerned for those children who beg on the streets not sent by their religious teachers, but forced by their economic and social situation. For those children, mendicity may be the only means of subsistence because the state may not have adequate social, economic and other relief measures in place to combat their poverty. By prohibiting all children from begging, the President is putting these children at risk of further harm.

Children should be in school and in the care of their families and not the streets. Parents should take all measures to safeguard the development of children in a secure and safe environment. But when this is not possible, the question remains whether the state created an adequate safety net to protect these children and their families from hunger and starvation?

Criminalisation should be a measure of last resort in dealing with socio-economic challenges and the effective criminalisation of acts such as begging and performing other life sustaining activities in public perpetuates the stigmatisation of poverty by mandating a criminal justice response to what are essentially socio-economic issues. Such laws criminalise poverty, homelessness and unemployment, and adversely impact the poorest and most marginalised persons in our communities.

It is unclear whether these acts will be punished with imprisonment, however, the order does mention that arrest is possible. If this is the case, imprisonment will result in other costs that could rather be used to improve the conditions of children and their families. State Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights should take measures to ensure that laws and their enforcement comply with the Principles on the Decriminalisation of Petty Offences in Africa and other regional and international human rights standards.

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