Children in adversity

by Jo de Berry and Jo Boyden

In September 2000, the Refugees Studies Centre and the Centre for Child-Focused Anthropological Research of Brunel University hosted an International Consultation on 'Children in Adversity' in Oxford.[1] The 110 participants were brought together to share their knowledge, research information and practitioner experience to promote a better understanding of children, their development, their capacities and vulnerabilities, and the risks they face in highly detrimental settings. The participants divided into five working groups: refugee and displaced children, children in armed conflict, working children, children and family incapacitation, and children in deleterious institutional settings.

The aim of the consultation was to increase understanding of the resilience and coping strategies of children exposed to highly stressful situations, as well as the risks they face. It was proposed that recognition and support of children's competencies and resourcefulness can encourage a move away from a focus on child pathology and towards the recognition of children as social actors with valid insights and skills. This in itself can lead to better child protection.[2]

Factors influencing children's resilience and coping

Much of the discussion focused on identifying factors that contribute to or undermine children's resilience and coping in situations of hardship. Five themes in particular arose in the armed conflict and forced migration working groups:

1. The relevance of social definitions of childhood

Approaches to and experiences of childhood vary widely across cultures and contexts. Childhood tends to end far earlier for girls than for boys, for example, with the transition to adulthood in women often being associated with puberty and marriage. In situations of adversity, notions of childhood, youth and adulthood can be highly fluid, and the boundaries between generational categories contested. How childhood is understood in any given setting can have a major impact on resilience and coping.

For example, the Children in Armed Conflict working group heard how many young Ethiopian boys have been conscripted as soldiers. Practitioners involved in programmes for their demobilization and reintegration noticed a distinct difference in the ability of the boys to come to terms with what they had done as active combatants. Those who had undergone initiation ceremonies prior to conscription showed better resilience to the conditions of war than boys of the same age who had not been initiated. These initiation ceremonies stress a transition to manhood, a status that would accommodate the activities of warfare, while boys who had not been initiated found it difficult to reconcile what they had done with their status as a 'child'. When humanitarian interventions introduce specific age distinctions which are not necessarily functional in the host society (for example, classing all those under 18 as children), such interventions can even change how the host society defines and responds to children.

Yet, alongside the relevance of social constructions of what it is to be a child, it was also recognized that both the risks of adversity and the attributes of resilience and coping do alter significantly with age. Young children are often seen as the most vulnerable, due to their dependence on others and their inability to comprehend many of the situations they confront. In one refugee settlement in Indonesia, for example, the high fences surrounding the school were perceived by younger children as the perimeter of a prison camp. The children thus saw school as a place of fear and restriction rather than of opportunity and freedom. Undoubtedly, infants face very specific risks. In Mozambique, for instance, the war in the Gorongosa region disrupted the elaborate social relations and cultural practices surrounding breast feeding and weaning. Women did not keep up traditional practices, which would have ensured a two-year spacing between children. Children were weaned more abruptly and infant mortality soared. Cases such

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as these indicate that much more information is needed about age-related vulnerabilities and competencies.

2. The importance of a child's cultural learning

Research and practitioner experience highlight the importance of children's cultural inheritance and learning in confronting adversity. Children are heavily influenced by their cultural, material and social environment. Particular societies have their own ideas about the capacities and vulnerabilities of children, the ways in which they learn and develop, and those things that are good and bad for them. These ideas affect approaches to child socialization, learning, discipline and protection and, hence, to a significant degree circumscribe children's adaptation, resilience and coping during time of stress. Some societies actively train children in endurance to enhance resilience.

In Uganda, for example, suffering and hardship are construed very much as part of everyday experience. After a time of war, young people were able to use their cultural resources – joke telling, humour, companionship, r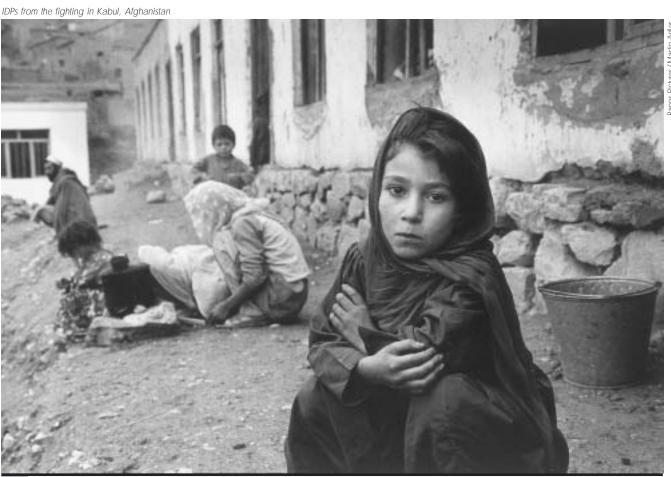eligious faith – to cope with the many losses they had endured. In another example, pastoral nomads were found to encourage personal autonomy in herding boys, and to have very positive ideas about migration and an essentially spiritual view of family; these values and attitudes fostered resilience in boys separated from their families during conflict and forced to migrate overseas.

A child's cultural context not only provides the necessary resources for coping with hardship but also defines whether or not they are overwhelmed psychologically by their experiences. These are resources that differ between cultures and within cultures. In some contexts - in Palestinian refugee camps for instance - families exercise far greater control and restriction over girls than boys. This is justified in terms of girls' greater need for social protection; however, the constraints placed on girls may limit their ability to learn essential skills for dealing with adversity.

3. The adaptability of children

The Refugee and Displaced Children working group discussed an array of risks commonly faced by displaced children. These include poor physical health, disruption to and loss of family, separation, statelessness, lack of security, environmental degradation, social marginalization, lack of education and absence of power, choice and control over their lives. Personal safety emerged as a major concern, with displaced girls and women in some cases experiencing a marked increase in sexual abuse and children of both sexes being exposed to high levels of violence within and outside the home.

In certain circumstances, cultural identity can become a major risk factor. Young Serbs in Europe, for example, were acutely aware of the stigma of their nationality, seeking immediate abandonment of their past persona and integration with the host culture. Displaced children are often doubly disadvantaged in this respect in that they no longer belong to their community of origin and are rejected by the host community. In trying to integrate, children become acutely aware of the boundaries imposed upon them – the lack of familiar space, the many places they are prohibited from entering and opportunities denied them. These strictures can have emotional and psychological repercussions, with children losing self-esteem and restricting the horizons of what they hope to achieve.

IDPs from the fighting in Kabul, Afghanistan

Panos Pictures/Martin Adler

While the Working Group dwelt at some length on the challenges confronting refugee and displaced children, they also observed how children are often more adaptable than adults.

HAYS (Horn of Africa Youth Scheme), a group of young people who had come as unaccompanied refugees from Ethiopia to Britain, described the bewildering experience of arriving as young children in a foreign country, the frustrations they felt when people made assumptions about their background and the alienation of being labelled as a refugee rather than accepted as an individual person. Yet through regular meetings, organized by the young people themselves, the members of HAYS have offered each other space to share their reflections and to respect each other's needs for friendship and support.

Indeed, children often manipulate their dual identity by adopting those elements of the host culture that are useful for survival and acceptance in a new environment, while clinging to aspects of their original heritage that provide emotional security. Children learn the host language, cultural values and practices more quickly than adults and this can lead them to assume adult roles in the wider community, acting as intermediaries for parents (such as negotiating with authorities or doing the shopping). Such developments can be a cause of inter-generational conflict, however, especially when within the home children are expected to maintain a submissive role. This is especially the case with girls in patriarchical societies. In the longer term, therefore, the adaptiveness and agility of children is a potential threat to inter-generational relations and family stability.

4. Coping and resilience as sources of risk

In some situations of adversity, children have far more survival and coping options than adults. For example, children are often considered to present less of a security risk during conflict and displacement, enabling them to forage and scavenge in militarized areas from which adult civilians are barred. Often, however, conflict and displacement markedly increase children's economic and social responsibilities while at the same time severely limiting their choices and, under these circumstances, children's resourcefulness and coping strategies can entail severe risk. In Afghanistan, practitioners working on anti-mine education projects were dismayed when a boy who had recently attended classes on the dangers of landmines had to have his leg amputated after venturing into a minefield and stepping on a mine. He told them later that, although he was well aware of the danger, collecting scrap metal from the minefields for sale was the only way he could make a living.

"Now that we've finished the survey, can we tell you about our problems?"

Young Palestinians in refugee camps in Jordan experience many problems associated with long-term displacement in cramped conditions; their coping efforts focus on breaking away from an oppressive family environment either through early marriage or fleeing to take part in armed struggle. Engagement in combat can be a coping mechanism for boys in Sierra Leone also. In a climate of accusation and fear, all boys - including civilians - risk being identified as combatants and attacked by opposition groups. Joining the military provides physical protection, access to food and clothing, weapons and companionship. Clearly, while such strategies may resolve immediate problems, they also pose grave new threats, such as sexual abuse.

What children do in the name of survival and coping during adversity can have serious repercussions for their relationships and social integration later in life. Once the fighting ceases, for example, former child soldiers may be held to account by their communities and families for their actions during combat. The roles and responsibilities that children assume in wartime often seem inappropriate in times of peace, and the post-war context can involve societal judgements concerning children's activities that are far stricter than those made during war.

However, 'normal' child development indicators and measures have little validity during times of war. Practitioners who have worked with former child soldiers stress the importance, in terms of the children's well-being, of acknowledging and building on, rather than condemning or disregarding, the skills and strengths (such as leadership, teamwork, resourcefulness and courage) that these young people may have learnt in combat. Resilience is best supported through positive reinforcement rather than rehabilitation.

5. Role of children in their own protection

In Mozambique, practitioners conducted a survey to assess levels of post-traumatic stress disorder in a war-affected population with the intention of implementing a counselling programme. After completing the survey, some local children asked, "Now that we've finished the survey, can we tell you about our problems?" The investigators had clearly failed to address what the children saw as their main concerns which, it transpired, were to do with the loss of schooling and farmlands.[3] In another project, aimed at reuniting children with their parents in Tanzania, children did not understand the questions in a family-tracing questionnaire, disliked being asked directly about sensitive issues such as the loss of their parents and did not know what the information was to be used for. Yet they felt compelled to answer, simply to please the authorities.

Many people at the conference attested to the difference that can be made in terms of the quality and impact of child protection interventions when children play a meaningful role in programme design and implementation. At the very least, ignoring children's perspectives can undermine their ability to manage and adjust to adversity.

Additionally, children often have insights into their problems of which adults are unaware. Talking to children in war-affected communities in Sri Lanka, for example, revealed a major problem of alcohol abuse that had not been apparent from conversations with adults. Similarly, displaced children in several settings were found to be particularly preoccupied about their inability to fulfil social and economic obligations normally associated with childhood, such as the care of fields or animals, and the threat that this posed to their passage to adulthood. Children also often have sound ideas about possible solutions to their problems. In the

Sivantheevu region of Sri Lanka, field officers made a concerted effort to learn about children's worldview and perspectives, developing an understanding of children's needs as articulated by the children themselves. The children identified play, the reconstruction of their village and the re-establishment of trust as priorities and were subsequently involved in designing initiatives to strengthen these aspects of community life.

Findings from other child-focused interventions reaffirmed the tangible benefits of children's participation, including greater self-esteem and lesser risk of psychological distress. Indeed, there was a suggestion that, to promote resilience in children, practitioners should rid themselves of the 'problem solving' imperative that drives so much of their work. They should learn to step aside and recognize the capacity of children and their communities to address their own problems and take action on their own behalf using indigenous mechanisms and strategies rather than imported models.

Implications for child protection policy and practice

One of the tensions faced at the consultation was the question of how to move on from observations concerning what influences children's resilience and coping to the design of better policy and practice for children in hardship. There remain many unanswered questions. If we are to focus on children's own abilities and strengths, how do we then formulate the role of adult intervention? If we focus on children's collective responses, do we risk losing sight of individual children who are particularly vulnerable and isolated? If children's responses are so influenced by their historical and cultural setting, can we use global standards such as those set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child? If children's resilience and coping strategies - which may be beneficial in the short term - have negative repercussions in the long term, then should we not concentrate on the prevention rather than amelioration of situations of adversity?

One important step made at the consultation was the recognition that the ability to

answer such questions demanded better knowledge and understanding of children's experiences of adversity. Yet it emerged that what practitioner experience already exists (of the relative success and failures of interventions with children) is not widely disseminated. More serious still, there has been very little research globally into the impacts of different protection measures and approaches on children's well-being and seldom are projects for children critically evaluated using culturally appropriate and child-focused criteria. Frequently, academic research into risk and resilience in children in adversity does not reach beyond the confines of a particular discipline and is not disseminated in an accessible and issue-orientated manner. Knowledge that is disseminated is often biased and incomplete; it was striking, for example, how little systematic attention was given in the armed conflict and forced migration working groups to the implications of gender and age in terms of exposure to adversity and patterns of vulnerability, resilience and coping.

For these reasons the Children in Adversity consultation can only be seen as a first step in a process of debate, research and action on child protection issues. The follow-up to the consultation will work to further this process at many levels.

It will, **firstly,** ensure that the essence of the event – recognition of children's strengths and creative coping ability - is advanced in influential international fora.[4]

Secondly, a report on the consultation will be disseminated before the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in September 2001; regional workshops on the topic, intended to bring together researchers and practitioners, are also proposed for 2001.

Thirdly, there will be advocacy of the need for further substantiation of knowledge about children's resilience and coping in adversity and for better understanding of the lives and circumstances of affected children, with a focus on age and gender differentiation. There will also be advocacy in regard to the need for systematic evaluation of the impact of protection interventions on the well-being of children.

And **finally,** a workshop planned for July 2001 will explore methods that can be developed in the acquisition of more effective information about children affected by adversity and the impacts of protection measures.

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2 The conceptual frameworks that have long shaped understandings of children's experiences of adversity tend to be dominated by assumptions of medical and pathological relevance. The content of these concepts and their limitations are discussed in the conference background paper 'Children's Risk, Resilience and Coping in Extreme Situations' Boyden & Mann 2000: Refugees Studies Centre.

3 The inadequacy of the paradigm of 'trauma' to do full justice to children's experiences of adversity has been discussed at length elsewhere. See, for example, C Petty & P Bracken *Rethinking the trauma of War,* 1998, London: Save the Children.

4 The Consultation's website allows for the dissemination of insight, resources and critique on these issues: see www.childreninadversity.org

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International Conference on War-Affected Children, Winnipeg, September 2000.