

# The role of art in psychosocial care and protection for displaced children

by Bo Viktor Nylund,  
Jean Claude Legrand and Peter Holtsberg

The psychosocial care and protection of children affected by armed conflict and displacement are extremely important components of humanitarian action.

This is recognized by Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which deals with the child's right to psychological recovery and social reintegration of the child victim of armed conflict. In recent years emphasis has increasingly been on providing activities for children to create a safe and 'normal' environment, rather than focusing on psychological analysis and treatment.<sup>1</sup>

UNICEF's policy has also developed similarly: that is, towards the need to build an environment conducive to the child's recovery and reintegration. This includes providing education for children but also organising other forms of activities, including facilities for play and artistic activities. Child development is a complex dynamic process that involves growth and change at many levels. Avenues have to be found by which normal development flow can be re-established for children who have experienced trauma. One such avenue that UNICEF has found extremely successful has been the use of art, including drama, music, puppetry and drawing.

Displaced children – in particular internally displaced children – are among those who suffer most. While there is a regime to cover refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) still have to rely on *ad hoc* arrangements and coordination among agencies and NGOs for a response to their rights and needs. Since there are no international legal instruments on the rights of IDPs and no

single agency in charge of assistance and protection programmes, IDPs tend to fall through the cracks. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement<sup>2</sup> provide certain guidelines but have little focus on children.

This article examines UNICEF's recent experiences in using art in psychosocial care and protection programmes for displaced children, and identifies some key lessons learned. In the context of this article, 'protection' encompasses "all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law"<sup>3</sup>. We are thus not necessarily speaking of physical protection but understand protection as a broader concept. It is also important to note that UNICEF is not doing this alone but is working with local and international NGOs and government authorities, be it Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, Radda Barnen in Sudan or the Ministry of Labour in Afghanistan.

## Structure for implementation

In implementing psychosocial programmes UNICEF tries to utilise existing structures, such as schools, centres for youth, child-care and social services, or health centres. One such example comes from Algeria:

*...there are many children in the most affected areas who are suffering trauma and who are in need of psychological care and protection. UNICEF implements*

*a programme together with government ministries and NGOs with the goal of addressing the psychosocial condition of the children suffering from trauma. The implementation of this project ... is facilitated by the fact that the social safety net is in good condition, and the social services well-developed and functioning. Activities include group play, sports and cultural activities such as art, drawing, theatre and establishment of recreational parks.*

The school structure is critical, since it fulfils two functions: it addresses the need for normalcy and a sense of stability for children, and it provides a forum for reaching children through the use of art. Schools play a key role, and teachers and educators are trained to be able to deal with these issues, identify children at risk and help the children:

*Given the importance of formal education in Sri Lanka, enrolling displaced and returnee children in classes is a high priority for IDP families. UNICEF Sri Lanka has recognised that many of these re-enrolled students are still deeply affected by the conflict, and that teachers are in a unique position to observe students facing adjustment difficulties. UNICEF has initiated training programmes for primary school teachers to help recognise signs of psycho-social needs in IDP children, and to guide appropriate interventions or referrals.<sup>4</sup>*

UNICEF's Albania initiative to create 'child friendly spaces' in 1999 was important in a situation where there is no existing infrastructure. One objective was to provide integrated basic services for children and mothers, in line with their age and needs, such as baby care, pre-school, primary school, recreational activities, counselling, psychosocial support, basic health and nutrition



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Children paint their new reality, Tuzla, Former Yugoslavia.

education in the same physical location. Child participation in the selection and implementation of activities proved to be one of the key factors of success of this initiative.

### Restoring normalcy

After exposure to overwhelming, life-threatening events, children all over the world manifest emotional distress through some form of behavioural change, developmental delay or disturbance. In such situations, the essential premises for healthy development are threatened.

Psychosocial programming consists of structured activities designed to advance children's psychological and social development and to strengthen protective factors that limit the effects of adverse influences. Re-establishing a stable family life and a sense of normalcy is crucial. Familiar routines create sense, purpose and meaning, and allow children to start functioning again as fully as possible. Providing children with nurturing opportunities for expression is also essential. Children need appropriate vehicles to tell their stories and to be heard and acknowledged. This is where artistic

activities offer a number of advantages:

- ▶ They allow children to deal with their past. Art allows the child to remove him/herself from the spotlight of the situation. Through activities promoting their direct expression or even being spectators of performances played in front of them, children are offered a means to mediate their own emotions and feelings. This also allows them to realize that what is happening to them is also happening to others.
- ▶ They allow children to deal with their present. Developed in a culturally appropriate environment, art activities create opportunities for organized non-violent activities aimed at facilitating communication and interaction among peers. These activities keep children away from other more harmful activities, including drug abuse, recruitment as child soldiers, and sexual exploitation.
- ▶ They allow children to deal with their future. The performances open up closed doors within the child, unleashing emotions which they have been forced to hold back. Over time, psy-

chosocial activities instil in the children a sense of hope for themselves by allowing and encouraging them to tell their story and, by so doing, putting the event into perspective. Thus, it allows the child to continue life and start looking positively at the future.

### Forms of art used to address psychosocial care and protection

Art is effective for several reasons:

- ▶ It provides a way for sensitive issues to be addressed in a way which is affirmative and easily accessible by children.
- ▶ Through the use of art it is possible to reach children on their level, since art can be whatever the spectator/performer wants it to be.
- ▶ It allows children to express themselves and to articulate their feelings - feelings that would otherwise be internalised for reasons such as fear and confusion concerning their situation. It is a way to end isolation of traumatised and displaced children.<sup>5</sup>

The role of culture is central for psychosocial programming. Culturally-grounded interventions will take into consideration and respect those beliefs and practices which constitute the framework of local socialisation practices. Local communities have developed over centuries a wealth of indigenous psychosocial resources in response to the daily challenges posed by crises. These cultural resources may include traditional patterns of child rearing, rites of mourning, rituals for healing, norms of caring for children and ceremonies of cleansing; artistic expressions such as dance, songs, music and body painting are essential vehicles for the healing means developed by this culture.

Every culture has its own form of art with which to articulate and express feelings. This facilitates the use of art as a way of reaching children, since the mechanisms are already in place. However, art must be used very delicately and with extreme caution. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are important. If something is presented to children, they need to be able to relate to the characters and gestures. It is also important that what is being taught to the children is reinforced by the adults and the institutions around them.

### Drawing and painting

Through painting, children can express emotions which are too difficult to express verbally, and other people can see what they are feeling. As with performances, these forms of art also show the children that there is more to life than what is happening to them right now.

In Croatia, the pre-school and primary school systems were used to help children who had experienced the war in the Balkans and who had been displaced by it. The Let's Help Them Grow Project involved organising and educating teachers and providing them with the necessary facilities and materials, and the Step by Step to Recovery Project involved using art therapy to help parents and children articulate and express their emotions. UNICEF has improved the education system, crucial in helping children traumatised by war and displacement, through a three-level process:

1. direct help for the children themselves
2. indirectly helping the children through administering support to



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their teachers and parents (in particular, to enable a better understanding of the impact of violence on children, to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of communicating with children)

3. through public information and campaigns to convey messages on positive schooling and upbringing

### Dance and music

The non-verbal communication involved in playing music, dancing and performing pantomimes represents a way of communication which children used before they were able to speak, and therefore is a very creative tool, both for the child to express him/herself and for adults to communicate with children. Moreover, it is easy to create and perform art in terms of economic cost. Gestures and sounds can be used, and simple outfits and costumes can be created using everyday items and material.

### Drama

Performing, wearing costumes and playing with puppets present children with

the freedom to act out their emotions under the guise of being someone or something else. Drama can also be used as a form of entertainment in which children are mainly participants yet involved in a theme that is important to them:

*In the refugee camps which were set up across the border from Kosovo in the neighbouring countries of Albania and Macedonia, theatre groups from other countries were invited by UNICEF in order to bring something different into the refugee camps, apart from the tense waiting and the struggle to retain one's dignity which characterised their daily lives. The theatre groups worked together with the psychologists in the camps in order to make the children want to express themselves. The effect was very positive. Although the camps were still there, and the political situation remained the same, the children of the camps were given a chance to be ordinary, to be spectators for once, as opposed to being followed and observed by the world through the media.<sup>5</sup>*

## Challenges in using art in psychosocial programmes

Many critics of psychosocial programmes feel that spending money and resources on abstract things such as the psychosocial wellbeing of children, although important, is a luxury which cannot be justified. Moreover, many contend that the only way in which the children can recover is by improvement of their economic surroundings. The cost of psychosocial rehabilitation for children, however, is extremely small when compared to that of other expenditures, and the benefits can be enormous for the child.

It is difficult to show tangible results of psychosocial programmes and therefore difficult to evaluate them. Furthermore, as many psychosocial programmes are part of a preventive strategy, the results of the intervention will not be noticed. It is also necessary to recognize that the use of art in psychosocial programmes will not always be successful and that it will not be the best method for all children. However, this argument should be weighed against the child's right and need to play and interact with other children.

Some critics also refer to the use of art as a Western concept and say that there may be other culturally more appropriate or relevant interventions for psychosocial support. It is important to remember that psychosocial programmes using art are not an end in themselves, and that taking into account the local culture and the views of the target population will be a useful part of a checklist to ensure an appropriate and useful intervention.

## Two-tiered strategy

For UNICEF the reasoning is simple. In a human rights-based approach to programming, due regard must be given to the full spectrum of children's rights. UNICEF aims to:

1. provide appropriate social services across all the sectors to reach and support children at risk and
2. put in place targeted initiatives to reach disadvantaged children who are missed by or left out of mainstream programmes.

Targeted interventions include the 'El Retorno de la Alegria' programme in Colombia. In this situation, mobile teams

go up the River Atrato to carry out psychosocial programmes with children who otherwise would not be reached. Simply supporting infrastructure would not address the special protection needs of children in urgent need of psychosocial care and protection. Experience also shows that systems change slowly, and the earlier one is able to intervene, the better.

## Building capacity through and involving adolescents in psychosocial programmes

Learning from many years' involvement in the design of psychosocial care and protection, UNICEF has increasingly put emphasis on compliance with humanitarian principles, including the principle of involving local communities and building capacity for purposes of sustainability. An example of this has been the involvement of the IDP community in the design and delivery of programmes in Colombia:

*...leaders for therapeutic games and recreational activities, [including puppetry, singing and dancing] - an important component of El Retorno - were recruited from among the [adolescent] internally displaced, and 'production groups' were formed among IDPs to produce shoulder bags, toys and other programme material. Training materials for El Retorno de la Alegria included a 'Volunteer's Manual' that empowered IDP adolescents by providing basic instruction in early childhood development, and that continually emphasised the essential role of family and community structures to the child's well-being. Community volunteers, moreover, were asked to share their experience and training with other displaced or returnee communities, enhancing their status and self-esteem. Of particular note, numbers of displaced teenagers were recruited as leaders of play groups, providing these adolescents with an important anchor to the community at a time of considerable stress in their own lives.<sup>8</sup>*

## Key lessons learned

- ▶ Psychosocial programmes should be implemented through existing structures wherever those structures exist. Where there are no structures, or where structures are weak, it may be necessary to establish certain areas for women and children where psycho-

social care and protection are looked at in a holistic manner.

- ▶ Psychosocial care and protection allow children to deal with their past, present and future. They are necessary for restoring normalcy and focusing on more than just the material needs of children.
- ▶ Art (in many different forms) has proved a successful form of psychosocial care and protection and this is becoming an increasingly important aspect of humanitarian action.
- ▶ Children have a right to psychosocial care and protection, and these programmes are necessary for the recovery of society as a whole. It is not enough simply to support infrastructure. Targetted programmes are needed in order to ensure that psychological recovery and social reintegration can take place.
- ▶ Psychosocial programmes must include an element of involving the beneficiaries and building capacity. In this way not only will the programmes *per se* be beneficial to children but their actual implementation will also bring benefits to the community.

**The authors all work at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by UNICEF or the UN.**

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1 See report from Inter-regional Programming Workshop on Psychosocial Care and Protection; contact UNICEF, Child Protection Section, 3 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA.

2 UN Document E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2 of 11 Feb 1998.

3 The purpose of protection was defined at the Third Workshop on Protection for Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations, hosted by ICRC, Geneva, 18-20 Jan 1999.

4 'Mission to Sri Lanka with a View to Develop Field Practice in Internal Displacement', UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes 1998; also available on website at [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).

5 See Macksoud M *Helping Children Cope with the Stresses of War - A Manual for Parents and Teachers*, UNICEF 1993.

6 Caddell A 'The Healing Power of the Arts', UNICEF Information Bulletin 1999, Macedonia.

7 Cantwell N 'Starting from Zero - The Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights in Post-Genocide Rwanda (July 1994 - December 1996)', UN.

8 'Mission to Colombia with a View to Develop Field Practice in Internal Displacement'; available at [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).