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# Child protection: rhetoric and reality

by Jo Boyden

Since the pioneering work of Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children, young people have been at the forefront of humanitarian interventions. Jebb established fundamental principles: as an especially vulnerable social category children must be the first to receive relief, their welfare overrides all political considerations and they should be assisted without regard for nationality, belief or other distinction.

It is likely that Jebb was thinking about children as civilian victims of international conflicts. But today's reality is that large numbers of young people – both boys and girls – in middle childhood and teens are combatants in intra-state conflicts. Some are abducted and forced to bear arms, while others enlist voluntarily, whether through lack of viable alternatives, the search for excitement, a desire for revenge or political commitment.

Children may be inducted into military units through rites of passage that involve extreme brutality, including the torture, maiming or killing of relatives. Such practices are intended to ensure that children are outcast by their communities and families. Anecdotal evidence from several conflicts suggests that the young are more loyal to their leaders and more brutal than adult combatants. Their loyalty may be because of trickery, because children do not have the social power to resist commands or because they have been raised not to question authority. Their brutality may be due to a lack of sufficient experience or insight to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions, although some think that it has more to do with young people's particular susceptibility to psychological damage following repeated involvement in violence.

Children who enter combat flout commonly agreed societal rules about the roles, status and conduct appropriate to the young. Adults may be happy to benefit from the work and domestic responsibilities assumed by children but tend to be made very uneasy by the power they obtain through military involvement. Military commanders are often very well attuned to adult sensibilities in this respect and may promote their younger fighters into front-line roles in order to more effectively intimidate their foes.

In keeping with Jebb's vision, international legal standards now require that child combatants be treated differently from adults, in that they are not to be held accountable for their actions and have a right to special consideration and protection. Such rulings notwithstanding, children's involvement in intra-state violence presents a major policy challenge, particularly in designing demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration initiatives.

Given that civilians are often the prime targets in intra-state conflicts, there is resentment, anger and fear to contend with. Victims often oppose education, vocational training and other measures for former combatants lest they appear to reward those who perpetrate violence.

The doubts, fears and aspirations of former child combatants themselves also need to be addressed. Girls liberated from the oppression of traditional gender roles and hierarchies by membership of a military unit are frequently reluctant to resume civilian ways. Those who have had children out of wedlock are commonly concerned about the likely adverse reaction of families and communities to offspring fathered

by fighters and the stigma of being a single parent. Children associated with fighting forces who have missed crucial years of schooling may desire an education but balk at the idea of being in an institution regarding them as dependent children rather than autonomous adults. They readily become frustrated by vocational training schemes that cannot overcome the lack of employment opportunities for demobilised young people. A career in mechanics or carpentry is unlikely to generate the kind of income that can be obtained in the military through theft, extortion, arms dealing and other such activities.

## *children's involvement in intra-state violence presents a major policy challenge*

The challenges to making effective provision for young people in post-conflict settings are legion. Even in countries like South Africa, where children were seen to have played a major positive role in the fight against apartheid, the young are often marginalised and blamed for rising inter-personal violence and crime. It is a sad reality that civil wars in which the young are very prominent confront humanitarian agencies with attitudes that defy the international ideals of child protection conceived nearly a century ago.

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