

# Kabul kids

by Jason Hart

Few places evoke images of destruction and suffering created by war more strongly than Kabul. Kabul's children have featured in news reports and aid agency appeals to illustrate the devastation and displacement wrought by more than two decades of armed conflict. It might be assumed that many young people are traumatised by their experiences and now require the care of mental health professionals in order to begin rebuilding their lives. A study just published by Save the Children USA and UNICEF challenges this assumption and encourages us to reflect on established approaches to working with war-affected children.

*The Children of Kabul: discussions with Afghan families* is the product of six months' intensive research with more than 600 residents of Kabul, nearly 450 of whom were aged 7-18. The scale and duration of this research project set it apart from the majority of assessment exercises undertaken by humanitarian organisations working with war-affected children. It is methodologically innovative. Researchers did not focus on conflict-related events and their consequences for children's mental health but adopted a broader approach: an exploration of children's social relationships and well-being in light of a range of problems and challenges including, but not limited to, those created directly by conflict and displacement. Children were involved in research design, commenting on their lives and analysing their circumstances. The children emerge from the report as survivors actively engaged in the daily struggles of life, rather than victims who require 'expert' analysis and help.

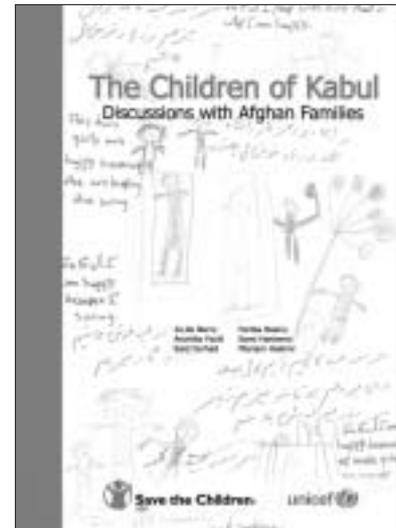
A central research finding is the overriding concern with the material and social consequences of war and displacement. Inevitably this includes poverty which, in turn, affects children's responsibilities, nutrition, ability to play, family relationships and access to health care. Destruction of basic infrastructure has greatly hindered many aspects of children's daily lives including the undertaking of tasks such as collecting water and firewood. The numerous destroyed

buildings – and the ghosts believed to haunt them – are a significant cause of fear. Alongside the challenges created directly by war and displacement, concerns about everyday matters similar to those experienced by young people around the world are also clearly expressed. These include teacher discipline, the sickness or death of relatives, romantic problems and gender discrimination.

Perhaps the most startling and salutary finding, however, is the extent of children's concern about conditions that have come about as a result of the supposed peace. The clearest example of this is traffic. With the fall of the Taliban came a massive increase in the number of vehicles on the streets of Kabul, a sudden and fearsome development for children and a direct threat to their physical safety.

The authors conclude that "...a child is much more likely to be preoccupied with the difficulties of crossing a mine field to fetch water today, than remembering an experience of fighting which happened several years ago." The implications of this study for the work of humanitarian agencies are significant. Given the range of concerns expressed, a multi-faceted response seems essential: one that focuses principally on helping children overcome diverse problems in their current lives. Save the Children USA and UNICEF are presently engaged in developing such a response, which includes a project to improve road safety, provide play and leisure opportunities and support healing practices in keeping with local religious belief and popular sentiment.

In other parts of the world affected by conflict, a fairly standardised, trauma-focused response continues to be promoted by many agencies. The Children of Kabul project illustrates the importance of devoting serious efforts to the study of local context and to working with children towards an holistic response that addresses directly their particular experiences, concerns and aspirations.



Jason Hart is an RSC Research Officer. Email: [jason.hart@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jason.hart@qeh.ox.ac.uk)

The full text of *The Children of Kabul* is online at: [www.savethechildren.org/pdf\\_publications/ChildrenofKabul.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org/pdf_publications/ChildrenofKabul.pdf)

## RSC Announcements

### Voices out of Conflict: young people affected by forced migration and political crisis

Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park, UK : 26-28 March 2004  
[see page 58 for details]

### RSC Southeast Asia Regional School in Forced Migration

8-18 December 2003 : Bangkok, Thailand

### RSC International Summer School in Forced Migration 2004

5-23 July 2004 : Oxford, UK

Forced Migration Online  
[www.forcedmigration.org](http://www.forcedmigration.org)

For more details visit [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk) or contact the RSC at address opposite.