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**Engaging with children living amidst political
violence: Towards an integrated approach
to protection**

Jason Hart

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ENGAGING WITH CHILDREN LIVING AMIDST POLITICAL VIOLENCE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PROTECTION

Jason Hart, University of Bath

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Series Editors: Susan Johnson and Shahid Perwez

Website: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/bpidw>

Email: s.z.johnson@bath.ac.uk

Engaging with children living amidst political violence: Towards an integrated approach to protection

Jason Hart

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Engaging with children living amidst political violence: Towards an integrated approach to protection

Jason Hart

Abstract

This paper begins with reflection upon the specific protection needs of children in settings of political violence as identified by child protection actors. It then considers the nature of institutional response offered by child-focussed humanitarian organisations. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges of public advocacy addressing the sources of harm to the young, taking into account the political agendas and sensitivities attendant to many of the world's conflict zones. From this perspective, the piece constitutes a call to consider child protection in broader political-economic context, concluding with analysis of key ways in which the field requires further development if it is to ensure not just the healing of children harmed by political violence but also more effective prevention of such harm in the first instance

Key words: children, protection, rights, political-economy, military recruitment

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1 Introduction

Images and stories of children have been central to contemporary understanding of the horrors of war. Anne Frank's diary of life in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam (Frank, 1947/2007), the photograph of Vietnamese Phan Thi Kim Phuc running naked from the site of a napalm attack, and Ishmael Beah's account of his experience as a boy soldier in Sierra Leone (Beah, 2007), are among the familiar depictions of the brutality of contemporary warfare and of the particular suffering that the young are liable to endure. In the wake of World War One images of such suffering motivated a British woman, Eglantyne Jebb, to call upon the government to lift its blockade of central Europe so that the children of the defeated enemy would not continue to die of starvation (Mulley, 2009). Ultimately, Jebb prevailed. Shortly afterwards, she established Save the Children to institutionalise such efforts on behalf of children. The genesis of Save the Children illustrates the centrality of concern about protecting children¹ from the ill effects of armed conflict² to broader aid efforts focussed on the young.

The last two decades have witnessed an increase both in the scale and professionalisation of efforts by organisations such as Save the Children to address the harm to children resulting from political violence. Handbooks, training programmes, global standards, monitoring mechanisms, a plethora of publications by recognized experts, and various resolutions of the United Nations, attest to the emergence and importance of 'child protection' as a discrete domain of humanitarian action. This field coheres around a definition of protection as actions intended to '...prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse against children' (UNICEF, 2006).

This brief essay begins with reflection upon the specific protection needs of children in settings of political violence as identified by child protection actors. I shall then consider the nature of institutional response offered by organisations such as Save the Children. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges of public advocacy addressing the sources of threat to children given the political agendas and sensitivities attendant to many of the world's conflict zones. From this perspective, my piece constitutes a call to consider child protection in broader political-economic context, concluding with analysis of key ways in which the field requires further development if it is to ensure not just the healing of children harmed by political violence but also more effective prevention of such harm in the first instance.

2 Conceptualisation of Threat

In settings of armed conflict and political violence the ways in which young people are rendered vulnerable to harm are specific and numerous. Aside from injury and death, serious violations can take the form of, *inter alia*, coerced recruitment to military groups; sexual and gender-based violence; denial of food and medical care; obstructions of access to education including through the targeted destruction of schools; and forced displacement tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Moreover, violations experienced by the young tend to be multiple and inter-related – a point

¹ In this essay I use the term 'children' in line with the definition contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which refers to "every human being below the age of eighteen years..."

² While recognizing that 'political violence' might embrace a broader array of situations than 'armed conflict', in this essay I use these two terms interchangeably

not always reflected in the literature which has often focused on single issues, such as military recruitment, in isolation (Bissell, 2012: 4).

Inevitably forms of abuse and neglect conventionally addressed by social workers in non-conflict settings are also to be found in settings of political violence. Again it is important to see how such threats to the young may be part of an inter-related web of protection concerns. For example, an increased rate of early marriage (of girls) in refugee camps and exploitative child labour are often attributed to the need of families fleeing conflict to reduce the burden on the household unit. Similarly, the pressures associated with life as a refugee or living amidst political violence has often been seen to result in heightened levels of domestic discord, even violence. This connection is not lost on young people themselves as this quote from a Palestinian girl indicates:

Now if you experience the occupation, you have someone in prison or you don't know where they are... you will feel angry, stressed, you feel you cannot protect yourself, that will affect how you respond to the environment around you. So if my dad who's a taxi driver, if the soldiers take his ID or his driving licence, when he comes back home he will be angry and doesn't want to listen to us.³

The converse may also be true: abuse and neglect within the realm of family or community can result in young people engaging in political violence that renders them vulnerable to other sources of harm. This is illustrated by the following quote from a young female member of an armed group in Colombia:

The day I got my uniform I understood that no one can harm me now. I have my weapons and I am very clever using them. I am the best in my battalion. My commander said that. And with my uniform everyone respects me, no man will dare to say dirty things in the pueblo to me. And my mother's boyfriend won't dare to touch me ever again.⁴

This quote prompts reflection upon the ways that the experience of abuse and neglect in their many forms might contribute to the emergence or perpetuation of political violence. Seeking to protect themselves from violations within the everyday settings of home and community, children may engage with military groups thereby contributing to the continuation of armed conflict. Recognition of this dynamic entails questioning of the conventional wisdom that children are always coerced – through physical threat or brainwashing – into joining up with a military group. If we accept the proposition that an individual's capacity to connect the experience of oppression to larger societal structures can emerge *before* their eighteenth birthday, then it is possible to imagine that young people may be motivated to seek transformation of their situation through involvement in political violence. Indeed, numerous ethnographic accounts of specific conflict-affected locations indicate that young people's experience of injustice within everyday life can lead them to engage in various forms of combat

³ The voice of a 14-year old girl in focus group conducted by the author in Nablus area of the West Bank in 2009, see Hart and Lo Forte (2010) for further details.

⁴ Unpublished. From author's communication with Laura Cordoba Bull, May 2006

(e.g. Read, 2001; McIntyre, 2005; Zharkevich, 2009). Such a view contradicts the assumptions made in much of the advocacy-type literature about military recruitment: that all those under the age of 18, including teenagers, cannot be said to participate voluntarily in such activity since they lack the intellectual maturity to make social and political sense of their experience.

If young people are willing to risk their lives to transform, through violent means, a situation encountered as oppressive then the conventional understanding of protection in emergency – as predicated on some version of Maslow's Pyramid of Human Needs – is called into question. In my own ethnographic work with children in settings of political violence and in that of colleagues the quest to secure human dignity for self or community has commonly emerged as an important priority for young people. Yet, in Maslow's pyramid such concerns are located towards the upper part - in the domains of esteem and self-actualisation - and are thus not considered primary. At the bottom are found physiological needs associated with survival and safety that are assumed to constitute universal priorities. The conceptual challenges of addressing the fact that for some young people the pursuit of dignity may take precedence over physical wellbeing are considerable. Assumptions of victimhood, of passivity, and of inadequate comprehension by the young about the threats that they face may all require rethinking.

3 Institutional Responses

Over recent years there have been increasing efforts by international non-governmental development organisations (INGDOs) and UN agencies to develop a multi-faceted and integrated approach to child protection. Eschewing an "issue by issue approach" that was often commonplace in child protection programming (Bissell, 2012: 1) considerable attention has been paid to the development of child protection systems that address threats (such as forced displacement and domestic violence) as inter-related (e.g. Terre des hommes, 2011; UNICEF, 2013). Moreover, it has been asserted that a systems approach is likely to prove more cost-effective and will also achieve a greater level of prevention of harm, balancing the often dominant focus on the response to harm already inflicted (Bissell, op. cit.).

The 'protective environment framework' articulated by Karin Landgren (2005), former UNICEF Chief of Child Protection, is an important example of such efforts to develop a coherent approach. As Landgren notes, agencies and donors concerned with child protection have tended to focus on one of two main areas: legal reform or service delivery (p.215). She argues instead for an approach that simultaneously embraces eight distinct areas. These relate to government commitment and capacity; legislation and enforcement; culture and customs; open discussion; children's life skills, knowledge and participation; capacity of families and communities; essential services; and monitoring, reporting and oversight (p.227).

Landgren (2005) acknowledges some of the particular challenges of protecting children in settings of armed conflict given the common experience that "the protective mechanisms of governance, policing and accountability break down and basic social services become sporadic or cease to be provided altogether" (p.225). However, her proposed framework is intended for general use across a range of settings and in relation to diverse threats to children's wellbeing. Although the protective environment framework has been utilized subsequently to address the protection needs of children living in settings of political violence (e.g. Ager et. al. 2008),

reflection about the specific challenges of pursuing a systematic approach to protection work in such settings is arguably insufficient.

Institutional responses from humanitarian organisations have been developed largely under the rubric of either *child protection in emergencies* or *child protection in humanitarian action*, terms that not always helpfully elide so-called 'man-made' crises with 'natural' disasters (e.g. Save the Children, 2007; Child Protection Working Group, 2013). Although it is questionable whether humans, particularly powerful political-economic actors, are necessarily blameless for the latter⁵, one evident consequence of labelling both as forms of emergency is to draw attention away from the particular dynamics of humanitarian action amidst armed conflict. Here again the specific challenges of working amidst political violence are not explicated adequately. The role of outside aid organisation in settings of political violence and the institutional considerations that are raised has been an issue taken up most notably by Médecins Sans Frontières (Magone, et. al., 2011; Abu-Sada, 2012). However, comparable reflection on the institutional challenges of child protection work in such settings is still rare.

At the best of times, an international or UN agency must negotiate a range of complex relationships – including to the host state, to local communities, to national elites, and to donors – in defining and pursuing its objectives. However, in a setting of political violence such relationships are liable to be fraught with additional pressures and sensitivities. Far from being the principal guarantor of children's rights to protection, as envisaged by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, host governments are often responsible for immense and systematic violations. The Assad regime in Syria, the Sudanese authorities in Darfur and the generals ruling Burma are a few of the most obvious examples of governments whose actions put the lives of many children on their sovereign territory at risk. Understandably, national leaders responsible for violations are keen to avoid the negative publicity resulting from public statements by child protection organisations that could damage their international standing. Thus, for example, while shouting loudly about the recruitment of children by rebel groups authorities may take a harsh line with any organization seeking to address such involvement by the young in their own forces. This is a situation familiar to humanitarians working in Sri Lanka, for example, during that country's recent civil war. Here the government, engaged in a long-running civil war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), routinely decried the latter's use of children in military roles while seeking to obscure its own use of the young through armed 'home guard' units and its support of allied Tamil paramilitary groups that routinely employed children (see BBC, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Challenging governments over their violations entails risk. In many settings child protection actors must weigh up the need to undertake public advocacy with the need to continue delivery of services on the ground. This was a situation that I encountered in Bhutan in 2001 when conducting research across South Asia on the impact of armed conflict on children. At that time the a non-democratic regime refused to entertain any discussion of its violent crackdown on the Nepali-speaking population in the south and its efforts to compel emigration. For the most part the heads of development and humanitarian agencies present in the capital Thimpu spoke in

⁵ For example, famine has often been seen to have both a natural and political-economic dimension. The Great Irish famine in the mid-19th century is a case in point (see Waters, 1995).

hushed voices about the violations, including the denial of Nepali-speaking children's access to formal education, for fear of being thrown out of the country. A notable exception was the head of one organisation who argued that it might be preferable to risk expulsion – and thereby bring global public attention to the situation – rather than remain silent and become complicit as a result. This divergence of opinion illustrates the specific dilemmas that child protection organisations may encounter in settings of political violence and the role of individual and institutional political will.

In addition to the pressure from host governments, humanitarians must negotiate the agendas of donors. Agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children usually rely heavily on funds from western governments for their child protection work in conflict-affected settings. By contrast, natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, often attract huge contributions from citizens. All humanitarian activity, including child protection programming, can become subject to the particular scrutiny of the donor government's ministry of foreign affairs when pursued in regions where that government has strong interests.

I have witnessed the influence upon actions, and inactions, on the ground resulting from donor agendas most explicitly in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)⁶ – a volatile region in which I have studied, worked as a teacher, and conducted research over a period of twenty years. My most recent research in this region was in 2009-10 when, together with Claudia Lo Forte, I produced a study on the role of international organisations in protecting Palestinian children from the violence associated with Israel's occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (see Hart and Lo Forte, 2010). Here, the political stakes are especially high. Leaders are faced with the demands of powerful interest groups – most notably the pro-Israel lobby (which in the US includes fundamentalist Christian groups), and the arms, security and oil industries (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007; Cronin, 2010). Little wonder, then, that organisations relying on the support of the US, Canada, Australia, the EU or individual European states should be placed under pressure not to speak too loudly or too critically about violations routinely visited by the Israeli authorities and settlers on Palestinian children (Hart & Lo Forte, 2013). In the words of a Palestinian social work scholar whom Claudia and I interviewed in 2009:

It's a political protection. I mean everyone knows this, even donors. I never met a donor who doesn't know this. But they are constrained. All of them would talk off the record. They all are constrained. They all understand the imbalance of power that is the source of all the problems... but they have their jobs, they work within their mandates. (Ibid, p.638)

In highlighting the pressures and constraints on child protection organisations, my intention is not to suggest that all efforts at programming are doomed to failure or, at the least, to serious compromise. That would be an over-statement. Rather I seek to draw attention to the specificity of such efforts in the context of political violence where the agendas to be negotiated exist not just at the local or national level but internationally as well. This is an issue rarely discussed openly by the agencies themselves. Yet, I would argue, without awareness of these dynamics we

⁶ The term 'occupied Palestinian territory' – as employed by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross – refers to land conquered in the war of 1967 and since occupied. This territory comprises East Jerusalem, Gaza, the West Bank and part of the Golan Heights.

cannot fully comprehend how child protection is pursued, or not, on the ground. This can be illustrated, for example, in the way that the duty to be accountable to beneficiaries is discharged.

Amongst practitioners and scholars of development and humanitarianism, accountability is commonly viewed as a core element of a rights-based approach (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004), particularly so-called 'downwards accountability' to the local population (Ebrahim, 2003). In settings of political violence, however, engaging with a local population to identify and act in accordance with their aspirations – in this case for the protection of the young – is fraught with difficulty and risk for the agencies themselves. Leaving aside the practicalities of achieving community-wide agreement about priorities, the space for response to those priorities will clearly be constrained by the demands of donors and host states. How, for example, should organisations respond when local people call upon them to speak out about the need to remove Jewish extremists who have settled on their land in violation of international law?⁷ When, as has happened in the South Hebron Hills, such settlers are threatening children on their way to and from school and preventing the development of basic infrastructure including the provision of piped water what should be the response of agencies mandated to protect children? (Beinin, 2007; Zertal and Eldar, 2005).⁸ Action in response to the demands of parents for protective intervention or advocacy would potentially place the agency in a vulnerable position with its funders and with the state responsible – in this case Israel.⁹

Not surprisingly, in settings of such geopolitical sensitivity as Israel / oPt, the kind of discussions between outside agencies and local communities focused on the design, monitoring and evaluating of interventions seen in many other aid contexts are few and far between. Moreover, for all the rhetoric of children's participation in programmatic activities, in such settings engagement with the young must be managed carefully if humanitarian organisations are not to be presented with a set of priorities for which they would not wish to render themselves accountable (see Hart, 2012: 483).

The kind of institutional considerations that might constrain the manner in which accountability and advocacy are pursued can also be seen to inform the nature of protection programming itself. An abundance of 'psychosocial programming' is commonplace in many settings of political violence. The term 'psychosocial' covers a wide range of activities: from playgroups to individual counselling. Although it is not always seen formally as an aspect of protection programming, in practice this work can constitute a major, if not the primary, domain of activity for humanitarian

⁷ Security Council Resolution 446 (1979) affirms that the transfer of Jewish settlers into the oPt constitutes a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention:

See <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/BA123CDED3EA84A5852560E50077C2DC>

⁸ For further information about the attacks on children by settlers in the South Hebron Hills, see the website of the Christian Peacemakers Team:

<http://www.cpt.org/cptnet/2014/04/09/tuwani-military-escort-misconduct-exposes-palestinian-children-risk-their-way-and->

⁹ Landgren (2005) cites the report of a workshop on rights-based approaches held by Save the Children Sweden in 2003 where "one of the main criticisms was that development actors in general were seen to refrain from pressurising Governments about specific rights violations, for fear of risking their legitimacy and future programme activities." See page 224, footnote 27.

organisations working to protect the young. For example, according to their website the child protection work of the US branch of Save the Children International operating in the occupied Palestinian territory consists entirely of psychosocial programming intended to provide, in that organisation's words, "a lifeline for children at risk".¹⁰ My recent fieldwork looking at the institutional response to Iraqi refugees in Jordan revealed a similar preponderance of psychosocial programming in a setting where the closure of resettlement programmes, the denial of access to the formal labour market and the withdrawal of cash support for impoverished families were exerting a wholly negative effect on the capacity of primary caregivers to protect the young (In Progress). As in the occupied Palestinian territory, the aim of psycho-social programming seemed to be to strengthen the refugees' ability to cope with intolerable circumstances in part occasioned by institutional neglect.

The scale of psycho-social programming can be partly explained as a function of the central role of mental health experts in the development of child protection work in emergencies. However, it is also institutionally expedient. Focussing on psycho-emotional needs draws attention away from political-economic forces that commonly give rise to threats to the wellbeing of young people and about which, in my experience, they often have much to say. In the Palestinian context children and youth have worked collectively to produce their own set of demands from the international community: demands that many outside humanitarian agencies would be nervous of taking on. For example, in 2002 members of the 'Young Parliament' of 9-15 year olds in Gaza working under the auspices of the Cana'an Institute created a petition that called upon the international community to fulfil its obligations for their protection. This petition was signed by 20,000 Palestinian children and delivered to Mary Robinson, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights during her visit to Gaza.¹¹ Far safer for an organisation, anxious not to alienate the host government or major donors, to engage with the young in the context of psycho-social activities – as either 'traumatised' or 'resilient' – than to open up discussion predicated on recognition of them as social actors with aspirations to live with dignity, free of routine violations.

4 Moving Forward

The call by former UNICEF Chief of Child Protection, Karin Landgren (2005) and her successor, Susan Bissell (2012) for an integrated, systematic approach to child protection is unquestionably important to heed. However, for this to become achievable in many of the locations around the globe currently afflicted by political violence consideration is needed of the larger system within which such an approach is pursued. Child protection organisations are unavoidably implicated in this larger system through their relationship to host states, major donors and fellow agencies. In situations of political violence the interests of these different actors are likely to be pronounced, relating to goals around political gain, institutional survival, and the management of public relations, that may be incompatible with a prevention-focussed approach to child protection.

¹⁰http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6153151/k.5AE1/West_Bank_and_Gaza_Strip.htm (last accessed 17.3.14).

¹¹ See also the 'Gazan Youth's Manifesto for Change', available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/02/free-gaza-youth-manifesto-palestinian> (last accessed 17.3.14)

On the face of matters, international law appears to offer tools to challenge governments involved in the systematic violation of children's rights. There is no shortage of legal instruments from International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights Law and Refugee Law that might be utilized to bring violators to account, with new legal measures such as the 'Model Child Protection Law' under development (see The Protection Project & ICMEC, 2013). However, the challenge lies in implementation. On one hand, child protection organisations need to build their own understanding of and ability to utilize legal instruments. With the notable exception of an online training programme developed by UNICEF, efforts to develop such capacity have been limited (UNICEF, 2004). On the other hand, debate is needed about the constraints and opportunities for an agency to invoke international law as a meaningful part of its work. What are the limitations of the current system and how might these be overcome through concerted action? In recent years there have been numerous statements made by leading child protection organisations about the foundational nature of international law for child protection work, but little has been suggested about actual use (e.g. Bissell, 2011). This includes the new *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action* which, as the authors explain, "are grounded in an international legal framework that regulates the obligations of the State towards its citizens and other persons in that State..." (CPWG, 2013: 14). Yet the 256-page document offers no guidance on how the framework might be put into service for the protection of children, let alone how to meet the challenges in attempting to do so. Exploring these issues inevitably entails acknowledgement of the larger political-economic forces within which organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children and others operate.

Throughout this piece I have spoken only of the UN and international agencies working on child protection in settings of political violence. In practice, however, much of the work on the ground is conducted by local organisations. Although commonly referred to as 'partnership' in reality relationships between UN agencies / INGDOs and local organizations are often riven with hierarchy. The former hold the funds, albeit on behalf of donors, and the latter are commonly obliged to operate in line with the plans and wishes coming from above in the manner of a sub-contractor rather than a genuine partner. Such hierarchy serves to prevent dialogue that might bring into regular view realities on the ground and thereby help to promote awareness of the larger system. At the risk of over-generalization, local agencies, working closer to the affected communities and staffed less by national elites, are generally more aware than the INGDOs and UN agencies of the dynamics that render the young vulnerable to violations in the context of political violence. Brought meaningfully into the design and evaluation of programming the experience of local organisations could help to ensure the greater relevance and efficacy of protection work and go some way to address the imperative to pursue 'downwards accountability'. However, the obstacles to such dialogue are numerous. The institutional global architecture of child protection, which places the UN in a central co-ordination role; donor agendas; and the quasi-colonial terms of engagement that commonly shape so-called 'partnership' between UN agencies / INGDOs and local organisations, are some of the main challenges here. It is my contention that the better protection of children living amidst political violence depends on overcoming these obstacles as well.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to identify some of the key child protection concerns arising in the context of political violence. In doing so, I cautioned against assuming necessary universality around the prioritization of these concerns. The implicit message is that engagement in open-ended dialogue with affected populations, including the young themselves, is vital to ensure that threats and protection needs are properly understood. This would be the ideal.

My subsequent discussion of organizational response indicated some of the systemic obstacles to the realization of a more engaged, dialogic way of working in settings of political violence. While the rights-based approach nominally pursued by most aid organisations working on child protection includes the principle of accountability to local populations, in reality larger institutional considerations make this a risky endeavour. In consequence, as seems evident in various settings of political violence around the world, agencies pursue child protection in ways that reflect principle only in so far as it is expedient to do so. According to the text of the UNCRC “in all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.¹² Why this may often not be the case in child protection work and how the obstacles preventing primary attention to the best interests’ principle can be overcome are topics that merit urgent debate amongst practitioners and policy-makers.

¹² Article 2, UNCRC.

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