

# Book reviews

***Children's Rights and International Development: Lessons and Challenges from the Field.* Edited by Myriam Denov, Richard Maclure & Kathryn Campbell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2011)**

This book describes a selection of field based, research projects that emphasise the urgent need and challenges of recognising and realising children's rights in several developing countries in Africa, the Americas and Asia. It looks at the practice of children's rights, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and focuses on the following guiding principles: 1) children's interests come first; 2) protection of children from any form of discrimination; 3) children's basic right to life, survival and development; and 4) children's right to participate and be heard.

The four sections of the book (303 p) are: 'Children and institutional care'; 'Child labour, violence and exploitation'; 'Child rights education and participation'; and 'Community based approaches to child rights and protection'. Each of these themes provide an interesting insight into the way CRC principles are practised. While the various research projects described all share this focus on the application of CRC principles, the book also defines project focus by location (Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, Vietnam, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Angola, Malawi, Uganda and South Africa), target groups (orphans, child labourers, juvenile delinquents, and child soldiers), research models,

and implementation and presentation of the project or study.

One important common thread, throughout all of the projects discussed in the book, is that despite children's vulnerability and the all too frequent victimisation within a context of massive rights abuses, children and youth also show a lot of agency and resilience. This is illustrated throughout all 12 chapters. Each chapter describes a project in which research was used, both as a goal and as a means; looking at and facilitating young people's capacity to exercise agency. With the publication of this collection, the editors and writers wanted to stress the significance of perspective, participation and capacity of young people in regard to programmes, policy, and advocacy, in terms of their own wellbeing.

The study on '*Juvenile justice in Sao Paulo, Brazil: Violence and denied opportunities*' (Ch. 2), focused on the lives of incarcerated youth, from their own perspective, through the innovative component of video. This method proved to be both interesting and refreshing, particularly in comparison to traditional research methods (interviews, focus groups) and that were also the most commonly used in the projects included in the book.

While the focus on participation and engagement of youth is an important constant, different researchers offer varying interpretations. Whereas many '*gave voice*' to the children, the most interesting contributions tended to go deeper, and aimed to facilitate change through promoting the rights of specific groups of children. This is well

illustrated in the chapters on child labourers working in the Bolivian mining sector (Ch. 4), and youth violence and aggression in Colombian (Ch. 6). In Chapter 4, for example, how children can be mobilised to enhance the awareness of adults and government officials about their plight through education of their rights, as well as also encouraged to articulate their needs publicly and to take part in decision-making and actions, was explored. These actions motivated changes in the social conditions of the mining sector, and both studies (Bolivia and Colombia) resulted in political moves to address children's needs (p103).

While the editors felt that combining 'Northern' research projects with 'Southern' practitioners in most of the studies included was an important aspect, I did not find it that revolutionary. While the involvement of both researchers and practitioners is challenging, the North-South mix is not. It would have been more interesting to apply a partner relation between Southern researchers and Southern practitioners. Maybe this can be explored in the future.

In the last Chapter, *Circles of Care in South Africa*, the 'triple A' (Assessment, Analyses, Action) participatory, research model was used in an interesting and innovative, community based initiative where local advocates engaged in the process of youth rights. In general, the role of adults in supporting children's participation proved to be important, both to facilitate and sustain, as well as to continue the process (p 170). This conclusion is supported by many of the other studies, especially in the form of resources for education and training, and especially regarding girls (p 161). It is also worth mentioning that the latter are a well-represented group in this publication. A variety of contributions address the experiences of marginalised young girls, which is often considered

a gap in the literature. The fieldwork conducted with female workers shows that girls are not silent victims and are as an important voice as boys in terms of experience and understanding of war and political violence. Alternatively, the study with adolescent males in Bolivia offers discussions from the young men's point of view, which is also relevant.

The studies in this book show an interesting collection of data on child experiences and involvement in research. However, the different writers stress the need for more research in this regard. Two of the most important recommendations are: research on children's education and on children as social actors/agents (through action research). Additionally, it provides inspiration for new research areas, such as: child trafficking, homeless and street children, refugees and other displaced children and youth. Apart from the research element, this publication also shows a clear link and relevance for practitioners in the field, through its emphasis on participation and social change, illustrated by different methods and (change) models.

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***Re-Member: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reconciliation of War-affected Children*, edited by Ilse Derluyn, Cindy Mels, Stephan Parmentier & Wouter Vandenhole (2012), Antwerp (Belgium): In Intersentia (xxxviii + 568 pp.)**

The book, *Re-Member: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reconciliation of War-Affected Children*, is a weighty tome of 568 pages. In its 22 chapters, the authors address how

rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation help to reconnect children, affected by war, to their home communities. Although the bulk of the book does seem to have a focus on studies and experience with children and war in Africa, the research and reflections presented come from around the globe. The chapters are grouped into three sections: 1) disciplinary perspectives; 2) current practices and approaches; and 3) exploring resources through empirical research. The size of the book, as well as the varying contexts and methodologies contained, present quite a challenge to review. As a result, therefore, this review will focus on the more conceptual issues.

In the first place, the book contributes strongly to building a nexus between rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation. This is, in my view, is a step forward in the available literature on children and war. The move towards reconciliation is particularly commendable as many studies, starting with Machel's (1996) well known study on the impact of armed conflict on children, to more recent studies in the 2000s (such as McIntyre, 2005; Honwana, 2006; and my own dissertation, Angucia, 2010), have tended to focus on the reasons why children join armed groups, how they go to war, the condition of children returning from war and their reintegration. Although some of this literature, especially Honwana (2006) and Angucia (2010) among others, discuss traditional approaches for dealing with children returning from war, they have done so in the light of reintegration, and not reconciliation. This is an important difference. There appears to have been some hesitation to push children, impacted by war, onto the reconciliation platform, as part of the reconnection process. What remains unclear, however, is whether this hesitation, to move to reconciliation and therefore transitional

justice is due to international and disciplinary tension that sees this group of children as '*victims needing protection*' (humanitarian law) on the one hand, or '*victimisers that have committed serious crimes, and therefore have criminal responsibility*' (human rights law) on the other. The chapter by Javier Ciurlizza both confirms and illustrates this point:

*'We do not know how to incorporate children into a truth-telling process in which we can give them a voice. . . We have been quite useless in trying to provide specific reparations for children. . . We have very few ideas about the participation of children in prosecution efforts, or how to treat children as witnesses. Legal systems are clumsy at dealing with perpetrators under 18. . . because our legal systems tend to criminalise the "anti-social" conduct of minors. . . we have not been capable of incorporating a transitional justice perspective into the public and social policies. . .'* (pp. 110).

Overall, this book, particularly in the foreword, makes it clear that there is an absolute need to use both humanitarian and human rights law approaches to transitional justice for children. This is where the move into reconciliation, as a factor of transitional justice, becomes relevant and paramount for children impacted by war. Quite a few of the chapters highlight the plight of children recruited into military service, namely: Ann Lorschiedter and Femke Bannink-Mbazzi, on support of education and to livelihoods of war-affected children and youth in northern Uganda (chapter 10); Daniel R. Mekonnen on the use of child soldiers in Eritrea (chapter 11); the two chapters by Sofie Vindevogel, and her colleagues, on children's life in captivity and their psychosocial care in reception centres in

northern Uganda; and other chapters on children impacted by war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These chapters highlight forced, or dubious methods of, children's recruitment, their captivity (and the conditions thereof) and programmes and/or approaches for, and challenges to, reintegration. Exposing the plight of these children is essential given that these experiences come from different parts of the world. It illustrates the global nature, and magnitude, of questions around children and war. However, beyond these points, this type of literature is now rather 'static', in that the problems and impacts of war on children was already under discussion in the field, as early as the 1990s. Therefore, it appears to be time to move on, and question our assumptions and practices of rehabilitation and reintegration, particularly against the background of the experiences of children in war.

Thankfully, signs of this need to advance and progress with the research, knowledge and practice come in the chapters by Kirrily Pells and Vanessa Pupavac (chapter 6, part II and chapter 19, part III, respectively). These chapters question our existing practices, concepts and terminologies. Pells's chapter, in particular, exposes the inadequacy of the trauma paradigm within the context of children living in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. She demonstrates that traumatic memory is less problematic than the struggles of daily life, such as children struggling to put food on the table. In her chapter, Pupavac is very critical of the existing international psychosocial approaches, and loss of policy confidence or general pessimism, in children's moral resilience. She places all of this within an environment where, she asserts, there is a 'psychological crisis of meaning', where communities do not have an ideological grounding for aspiration. These are the

chapters, as far as I am concerned, that will move the debate on war-affected children and their reintegration to the next level search for 'new' knowledge and practice. The spirit of these two chapters is to evaluate the existing assumptions and practices, in order to improve any contributions to children affected by war. In light of the aforementioned two types of knowledge that the book puts forward (static knowledge and progressive knowledge), it appears to stand midway, with one leg in the past (knowledge status quo) and the other in the future (what might be done through critique of current practices and paradigms to move the debate forward).

Finally, in the title of the book, children of war are referred to as 'war-affected'. On first sight, this appeared to be a positive change of terminology; the use of the more appropriate concept of war-affected children vs. the well known, and in my view misused, concept of child soldiers. Unfortunately, my sense of relief on the use of 'war-affected' was short lived, as from the bold heading 'child soldiers' used in the preface, throughout so many chapters in the book, the writers continued to overuse the concept. My disapproval of the concept of *child soldiers* comes from my experiences with formerly abducted children, and the return communities involved in their reintegration in northern Uganda, who do not consider themselves soldiers. For various reasons, explained somewhere else in detail (Angucia, under review) they reject the categorisation, preferring to be regarded as *war-affected*. My take is that an erroneous categorisation of children, in this case as *child soldiers*, might negatively influence and/or undermine the effectiveness of targeted intervention programmes to reintegrate these children.

That said, this book is still timely for practitioners and policy makers who often face

the dilemma of being caught between humanitarian and human rights law (the advice is to try to reconcile and, thereby reconnect, children impacted by war back to their communities, regardless of disciplinary differences). Students interested in issues surrounding children and war will also find this book a great resource.

## References

- Angucia, M. (2010). *Broken Citizenship: Formerly Abducted Children and their Social Reintegration in Northern Uganda*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.
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***Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters, Joshua Miller (2012). New York: Columbia University Press (384 pp)***

This 384 page book provides a comprehensive overview of psychosocial capacity

building after disasters; laying out essential principles of practice when working in the field of disaster response and recovery, among a variety of cultures. Miller defines psychosocial capacity building (PCB) as *'intervention, provided by professional and non-professional people, both local and from the outside, that constitutes a multi systemic, culturally grounded, empowerment- and resiliency-oriented approach designed to help individuals, families, social groups, and communities recover from a disaster. Psychosocial capacity building seeks to be sustainable over time and builds on the foundation of local capacities and resources'* (p.191). It can be said that the scope and duration of PCB is longer than only the immediate and short-term aftermath of a disaster, and wider than only individual or small group interventions. Additionally, it places importance on respecting local culture and the unique structures and processes of the people themselves. From my own experience, having been trained in western psychology, and working in the Tohoku area of Japan (which was devastated by the tsunami on March 11, 2011), I agree these are crucial elements.

The author has accumulated knowledge as a result of extensive work as a social work practitioner with survivors of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Asian tsunami, the Haitian earthquake, the Wenchuan earthquake and the armed conflict in northern Uganda. As such, he seeks to integrate western mental health approaches and psychological capacity building within a social ecology framework. Miller warns of the danger of imposing western disaster mental health concepts and models, which tend to focus more on the individual, family and group, in an uncritical and universal fashion when working among different cultures.

The 12 chapters of the book cover: the social ecology of disasters; the field of disaster mental health and the role of helping

professionals; conceptualising disasters; the phenomenology of disasters (i.e. the impact on individuals, families, and communities); sources of resiliency; vulnerable populations; discourses of disaster response and recovery; PCB; the use of groups and activities; responding to disasters caused by intergroup conflict; the process of collective memorials; and disaster distress and self-care.

Using a social ecology framework, the impact of disasters on individuals, families and communities are analysed, examining, in particular, vulnerable populations in disaster situations and the connection between social justice and building resiliency. Global case studies are introduced, covering how social, economic, political, historical and cultural structures affect the way individuals and communities make meaning from a disaster situation, and their response to it. Case studies also include how responders can effectively work to allow people and communities to self-heal through the development of their own psychosocial capacity, and the trajectory of recovery. Reading the book, it becomes clear that in the field of disaster mental health and psychosocial support, perhaps due to the urgency of the situation and because of the training that many practitioners have received focusing on the individual and small groups, practitioners are susceptible to minimising the importance of acknowledging the context of the disaster. As the author suggests, disasters are *formed and shaped by history, culture, social structures and processes and political economies*. Without this perspective, efforts by practitioners might not only just be ineffective, but at times, do harm.

The book covers important concepts and frameworks of psychosocial support, such as connecting the past, present and future in the process of making meaning of a disaster within a culturally and traditionally

acceptable way, recovering social connectedness and cohesion, linking individual and family healing with community recovery, fostering resiliency and emphasising efficacy. At the same time, the book does not stop at abstract concepts and ideas, but gives concrete examples in terms of methods and models that can be used, as well as the way that such methods could do harm if not used carefully within certain circumstances. However, the book could be easier for the reader if there was less redundancy in the parts of the book that cover definitions, concepts and frameworks. It would have been easier for the reader to grasp if concrete examples, suggestions and methods were laid out more clearly and separately.

The book does allow the reader to think through multiple topics and raises awareness in areas that may be overlooked, such as vulnerable populations within certain cultures. Also, how a practitioner should position themselves in areas where intergroup conflict exist. It will certainly serve as a guide in the field of psychosocial work, which requires sensitivity, flexibility, and knowledge in a variety of topics that are covered in this book. The references are also valuable for any reader who would like to learn more. Contents on bereavement and grief, collective memorials, and self-care for practitioners introducing a self-audit, are based on the author's experience, and give practical suggestions. At the end of each chapter, the author introduces mindfulness exercises that can be used by practitioners, which I found to be particularly useful.

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