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**Protection Through Participation:  
Young People Affected by Forced Migration  
and Political Crisis**

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## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Mary Diaz, who died on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004 after a long battle with cancer. She was 43 years old.

As executive director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children since 1994, Mary was a tireless, dedicated advocate for the protection and empowerment of women, children and adolescents affected by armed conflict and forced migration. During her time at the Women's Commission, her devotion, passion and leadership touched the lives of millions of refugee women and children who she visited all over the world, including in Haiti, Angola, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tanzania, and the Balkans. Under her direction, the Women's Commission grew from an organization with a staff of four and a budget of \$450,000 to one with over 20 staff and a budget of more than \$4 million. In 2003, Mary was awarded the UNHCR Gender Equity Award for her work in advancing the equal rights of refugee women. She led the Women's Commission in its important contributions to UNHCR's policies on refugee women and children, most recently related to gender-based violence.

Mary was well-loved and respected by all those she worked with in the United Nations, government offices, international and local nongovernmental organizations. Arthur E. Dewey, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration describes her as "a shining example of what it means to be a true humanitarian." As the Human Rights Watch staff wrote, "Mary was one of a kind. She was not only an outstanding champion for the rights of women and children in the most difficult circumstances, but a warm and loving person who brought great humanity and humility to her work. She touched many of us deeply – as colleague, friend and mentor." Mary's death is a tragic loss to the international community, and she will be missed dearly by many throughout the world. May her death bring us renewed inspiration to carry forward the vision and commitment which marked her short life.

## Acknowledgements

There are many people who deserve my sincere thanks for their generous support and guidance throughout the research and writing of this paper. The Queen Elizabeth Fellowship which made this paper possible commemorates the life of the late Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. It was according to her vision that the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St. Catherine's based at Cumberland Lodge was founded in 1947 in order to support the efforts of young people in building a peaceful post-war society.

Cumberland Lodge has provided support for this paper in innumerable other ways. I am particularly grateful to Alastair Niven, who, in addition to providing valuable advice and encouragement along the way, welcomed me graciously into his home as if I were family. Thanks also go to Sandra Wilson, Jutta Huesmann, Janis Reeves and Ginny Felton, who must no doubt know of the fond memories I'll harbour of our days in the office. My sincere thanks also go to the rest of the Cumberland Lodge staff, who took me into their fold without complaint, and made a 17<sup>th</sup> century royal hunting lodge feel like home, if only for a short while.

Institutional support for this paper also came from the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, NY, and the International Rescue Committee, UK. I am very grateful to numerous members of each for valuable discussions and for allowing me to wade through their many years' worth of collected materials. In particular, members of the conference Steering Committee – Paul Ryder (RSC), James Allen (IRC), Alyoscia D'Onofrio (IRC), Matthew Emry (WCRWC), Cornelius Williams (STC), Stephanie Fawbert (STC) and Laura Brownlees (STC) – provided a wealth of information, resources and advice. Though they are too numerous to name individually here, I am also grateful to all those who contributed priceless bits and pieces of research from all corners of the globe.

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## Executive Summary

This paper was originally intended to provide background reading for the Cumberland Lodge Conference, “*Voices Out of Conflict: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis.*” It considers the situations of youth and adolescents affected by war and displacement throughout the world, and provides a summary of some of the key issues to be explored with regards to their protection. It draws upon insights and experience from researchers, practitioners and war-affected young people themselves in an attempt to better understand the challenges they face during war, and the resulting implications for policy and practice.

### Introduction

The first section of this paper provides a brief overview of the impacts of war on children, youth and adolescents, and examines the international protection regime that has been established in recent decades to protect young people from physical harm and the wider violation of their human rights.

The sheer demographic dominance of young people in most of the world’s conflict-affected areas ensures that many, if not most victims of warfare are children, adolescents or youth. Recently, national governments, humanitarian organizations, and legal bodies alike have begun to explore what kinds of practical action may be taken to protect young people of all ages.

Children’s rights in particular have attracted much international attention, and the international community has rallied widely around of issue of child protection. In general, prevailing opinion holds that young children are the most vulnerable social category in war, and they are thus treated as the

first priority for intervention and relief in both conflict and post-conflict situations.

Despite widespread humanitarian action taken on behalf of young children, however, the rights and needs of adolescents and youth have yet to be similarly supported and acknowledged. Attention to these groups is *ad hoc* at best, and extremely limited empirical data exists on their situations, experiences, and needs. What little adolescent/ youth-specific programming exists is limited in scope, and funding for targeted research and assistance is sorely needed.

But youth and adolescents are often worse off than young children in situations of armed conflict in a number of ways. While they may not suffer death and disease to the same degree as young children, they are *more* susceptible to a wide range of immediate and long-term threats to personal safety. Failure to attend to the particular challenges facing youth and adolescents risks contributing to the perpetuation of cycles of poverty and violence in precisely those to whom we look for the future.

### Growing Up in Danger

The second section explores why and how youth and adolescents are made particularly prone to hazard during warfare. First, it takes a closer look at the specific dangers that youth and adolescents face. Second, it examines the underlying *reasons* for their susceptibility, and the primary *sources* of many threats to their safety and well-being. Often, the risks that young people face are very different from what we believe. As a result, there is an urgent need to understand the varying causes, sources, natures, and extents of risks in order to develop more relevant and effective protection mechanisms on their behalf.

### *Young people's protection concerns*

Youth and adolescents are more likely than young children to join or be recruited into military service, and engage in armed combat. They are also especially prone to engagement in hazardous or exploitative labour. Adolescent girls are specifically targeted for sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, and are thus at particularly high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Youth and adolescents are less likely to receive education and health care during emergencies than young children. In particular, they often have less access to reproductive health information and care than adults.

### *Causes of danger*

Youth and adolescents are not inherently vulnerable. Rather, they are at a critical stage in both their physical and social development which subjects them to detrimental forces at work in their surrounding environments. That they are both older and physically more mature than young children is of great value to those seeking to exploit them. On the other hand, that they are not yet considered full social adults means they are denied many of the rights and protections associated with adulthood. Their increased susceptibility to hazards has everything to do with the unique social roles and positions that define youth and adolescence, with important implications for their protection in practice.

### *Sources of danger*

The international protection regime tends to see protection in terms of national or regional security, and is generally designed to guard young people against external dangers such as armed attack. In fact, the greatest threats to young people's well-being often come from within their own communities – from relatives,

neighbours, friends and even the immediate family. Sometimes, even actions taken by parents on behalf of their children in the name of protection result in negative consequences for young people. Recognition of this suggests that we must learn from young people about their most urgent sources of danger. Only then will we be able to design appropriate protection interventions and prevent against mistaken ones that may harm young people instead of help them.

### **Protection in Practice**

The third and final section moves from a discussion of the dangers and risks young people face to a consideration of how to develop more effective protection in practice. An examination of the nature of young people's responses to adversity finds that a strong basis for protection already exists among many young people themselves. This stands in stark contrast to the paradigm of vulnerability and dependence that has come to dominate research and practice with young people in emergency situations. Second, this section explores possible ways forward for the protection community, highlighting the need to move policy and practice beyond issue-based research and vertical systems of service delivery towards a more holistic, comprehensive and participatory framework for young people's protection.

### *Young people's resilience*

Northern models of childhood, child development and human suffering have by now achieved global status, and thus dictate international approaches and responses to young people in crisis throughout the world. In general, they take vulnerability rather than resilience as a base, and view war-affected young people as passive, helpless victims rather than

competent, resilient survivors. Growing evidence suggests, however, that such a view may be unrepresentative of the vast majority of youth and adolescents living through war. Even amidst tremendous hardship and danger, young people may be remarkably capable of managing hazard, coping with misfortune, and influencing their own fate and that of those around them. They become heads of households and take on leadership positions in their families and communities. Some become self-sufficient, and others generate income for their families and care for younger siblings. In many situations, young people negotiate their own protection on a daily basis, and demonstrate highly developed capacities for surviving. Often, survival itself is a testament to the ingenuity, courage and competence with which young people confront severe threats to their safety and well-being. Such evidence suggests that young people are active agents with valuable knowledge and insights into their own problems, and with skills and capacities appropriate for solving them.

#### *Protection through participation*

Evidence of young people's resilience and competence has radical implications for the way the international community conceptualizes and responds to young people affected by forced migration and armed conflict. It challenges the legitimacy and effectiveness of emergency interventions that act *on behalf* of young people rather than *with* them, and argues that many protection failures have been the result of policy and practice only loosely constructed around young people's own perspectives, priorities and realities. A lack of engagement with youth has led to agency interventions that are unrevealing of their own priorities at

best, and detrimental to their protection and well-being at worst. Therefore, we would do well to engage young people as active participants in the establishment of protection mechanisms with constructive roles in and responsibility for their own safety.

This requires working with young people rather than for them, treating their views as a source of strength and allowing them to educate us about problems and solutions of which we may be unaware. It suggests that agency interventions should build upon young people's knowledge, skills and experience in order to improve the quality and impact of protection efforts. It also implies the need to devise appropriate ways for young people to be involved in fora and mechanisms related to the design, management and implementation of protection solutions.

Overall, research suggests that it may be detrimental to young people's well-being to discount their perspectives and contributions, as in doing so we risk undermining their strengths and the positive roles they play in their own protection, and thus rendering them *more* susceptible to danger. The fundamental challenge for the humanitarian community, then, may be to devise more participatory, holistic approaches to protection aided by policies that allow for less centralized planning and greater responsiveness to local conditions. Central to this approach are the following questions: What can young people do to contribute to their own well-being? How can we encourage their participation in determining protection measures? The fear is, of course, that unless we involve young people in constructive measures for building a safer society, their energies and initiative will instead be exploited by those who would do them harm.

# **Protection Through Participation: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis**

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This is a revised version of a paper originally presented as a background paper to the conference  
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<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/Voices%20Out%20of%20Conflict%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>

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## List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration
FREMILO	Frente de Libertação Nacional
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICRC	International Community of the Red Cross
IGO	Inter-Governmental Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NRA	National Resistance Army
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RENAMO	Resistencia Nacional de Moçambique
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UPDF	Ugandan People's Defence Forces
UXO	Unexploded Ordinance
WCRWC	Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
WHO	World Health Organization

## 1. Introduction

According to the UN, roughly 20 million people have been killed in over 150 armed conflicts in developing countries since World War II, the majority being women, children and adolescents.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the sheer demographic dominance of young people in most of the world's conflict affected areas ensures that many, if not most victims of warfare are children or adolescents.<sup>1</sup> As UNICEF records, two million young people have been killed in situations of conflict throughout the past decade, 12 million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled, more than 1 million have been orphaned, and 6 million have been made homeless. The US Committee for Refugees places the number of forced migrants at the end of 2000 above 35.5 million people, at least half of whom are children and adolescents. According to WHO, those under 18 years of age are 24 times more likely to perish during conflict from disease and injuries which would in peacetime be treated routinely and without fatality. Approximately 800 young people are killed or seriously injured by landmines and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) every month. Furthermore, The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that there are 300,000 young people under the age of 18 actively engaged with military forces in 30 countries across the globe.

Despite the overwhelming imprecision of statistical data, it is nonetheless clear that conflict has the greatest impact on the poorest communities in the poorest countries of the world, and that the young are among the most severely affected in these communities. The impacts of armed conflict and displacement on young people may be direct and obvious, such as death, disease, family separation and displacement. Many of the most detrimental impacts, however, are far less readily apparent, and include economic impoverishment, engagement in hazardous labour, early marriage, and loss of opportunities for education and healthy development.<sup>2</sup> In addition to physical destruction, war does violence to young people's social worlds, tearing at the fabric of communities, weakening interpersonal ties, destroying trust, and threatening the survival of individual families.

### 1.1. WARFARE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

These shocking statistics reflect ominous global trends in modern warfare. Recent decades have witnessed a steady growth of armed conflicts throughout the world, ranging from outright warfare between large military forces to sporadic civil unrest and protracted instability. The result of a complex collusion of destabilizing forces –

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, a variety of terms are used to denote different generational categories. The Convention on the Rights of the Child remains the principal international standard for determining "who children are." Article 1 states that a child is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to that the child, majority is attained earlier." Therefore, when discussing legal norms and human rights treaties, 'child' refers to all those under 18. For the broader purposes of this paper, however, specific distinctions are made between 'children,' 'adolescents' and 'youth.' In general, 'child' refers to individuals who have not yet reached puberty. 'Adolescents' are understood to be those in transition from puberty to physiological maturity, and 'youth' refers to all those above that age, generally older teens and those in their early to mid-twenties. 'Young people' and 'the young' are used interchangeably to refer to all these categories.

post-colonial transitions, the stress of an unequal global economy, collapse of governments, internal fighting, the personalization of power, erosion of civil services, manipulation of ethnic and religious divisions – economic, social and political crisis of all forms has led to increased eruptions of violent conflict throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of warfare in recent decades is unlike anything the world has experienced previously, and the changing patterns and characteristics of conflict have dramatically increased risk for young people today. Since the end of the Cold War in particular, the scale of casualty and displacement as a result of conflict has grown, as have percentages of civilians killed in warfare. Prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, civilian fatalities constituted 5% of total deaths as a result of conflict, compared to current conflicts in which 90% of fatalities are non-combatants.<sup>4</sup> In modern conflicts, the elimination of civilians is often a primary military objective. Dramatically increased civilian casualties are a direct result of the changing nature of warfare, as full-scale war between nations has given way to long-term, low-intensity conflict between enemy groups within national boundaries. As a result, conflict sites have shifted from uninhabited border areas to the centre of civilian life in villages, towns and cities. Internal warfare thus poses special risks to young people, since fighting is likely to take place in homes, fields and streets, inviting massive destruction on their surrounding environments.<sup>5</sup> Increased civilian mortality is also linked to the growing use of smart bombs and missiles intended for targets within heavily populated areas.

Many contemporary conflicts do not consist of continuous fighting, but are instead characterized by sporadic violence which moves from one area to the next, involving isolated incidents of guerrilla activity and small-scale combat amidst intermittent periods of relative peace and armed attack. Severe inequality in the distribution of resources, oppressive and unjust governance, arrested development, thriving black economies fuelled by the arms and drugs trade, sectarian strife and other destabilizing forces are all common characteristics of war today.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, modern conflicts often involve myriad forms of horrifying violence – political, criminal, interpersonal, domestic – and have seen human rights violations on an unprecedented scale, including ethnic cleansing, genocide and systematic rape.<sup>7</sup>

The frequency and longevity of conflict are aided in part by developments in modern weaponry which have put small, inexpensive lightweight arms within reach of ordinary citizens, including young people. Indeed, the international arms trade has made deadly weapons widely available to even the poorest communities, and has contributed to the proliferation of materials for the construction of unsophisticated, often homemade, weapons and explosives.<sup>8</sup>

While the young have always been victims of war, they are increasingly becoming both targets and perpetrators of violence, due to blurring distinctions between civilians and combatants, and exacerbated trends in child soldiering.<sup>9</sup> And yet, though young people all over the world have been profoundly affected by emerging trends in armed conflict, the full impacts of violence and displacement are still to be understood. So far, we have only begun to imagine the scale of adverse physical, psychological, economic, social and emotional consequences for young people.

## **1.2. THE INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION REGIME**

In recent decades, an international protection regime has been established to respond to the myriad dangers that young people face in situations of conflict and displacement. To this end, humanitarian organizations and legal bodies alike have begun to examine what kind of practical action may be taken to protect young people from physical harm and the wider violation of their human rights. Efforts to protect young people in times of war have traditionally been framed in terms of international humanitarian and human rights law and UN Conventions, the earliest of which dates back to the League of Nations' 1924 adoption of the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child.<sup>10</sup>

Today, standards for the protection of young people during conflict are largely based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, the CRC recognizes children and adolescents as rights-holders, and acknowledges their distinct legal personalities. It is the most widely ratified of all human rights treaties in history, and has been signed by all states except the United States of America and Somalia. The CRC has laid the groundwork for intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, donors, academic institutions and others to engage in dialogue and action on behalf of young people affected by armed conflict.<sup>11</sup>

The CRC identifies a comprehensive list of children's rights that apply in both peacetime and war, including the right to have their basic needs met. Protection is highlighted as one such need, and is to be guaranteed through the implementation of international human rights and humanitarian law.<sup>12</sup> The CRC thus provides a comprehensive framework for rights-based programming for refugee, internally displaced and returnee children and adolescents, as well as young casualties and combatants.<sup>13</sup>

Several other bodies of humanitarian law are relevant to the protection of the young including the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention Relating to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and two additional protocols added in 1977. Based on the UN Charter and reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a wide range of human rights laws and treaties also deal with the protection of young people in armed conflict: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). They also receive attention under various national and multilateral resolutions and regional instruments, such as the OAU and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950).<sup>14</sup>

Given the significant body of law that exists to protect the young in situations of armed conflict, the abuses which they endure worldwide represent an astounding global disregard for international law and human rights. In recognition of their needs, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Mr. Olara Otunnu, was appointed in 1996 to keep young people high on the international community's agenda. Since then, research and experience have been shared on two significant occasions, at the Winnipeg Conference on War-Affected Children and at the UN

Special Session on Children. Additionally, a comprehensive study undertaken by Graça Machel at the request of the UN Secretary General has contributed remarkably to international understanding regarding the situations of young people in armed conflict.<sup>15</sup>

A wide range of international organizations, humanitarian agencies and human rights groups have also sought to address the needs of young people affected by conflict and displacement. International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) and local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) often play a central role in providing services to civilian populations, including the young. NGOs have often been primary advocates for targeted protection measures for young people, and they manage a wide range of humanitarian assistance programmes. UN organisations such as UNICEF, UNHCR, UNFPA and UNDP are particularly involved in protection efforts. UNHCR has recently established the position of Senior Coordinator for Refugee Children and produced a definitive protection document, “Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care.” WHO has recently dedicated an entire unit to the cause: the Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development. Large international organizations such as the International Community of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Rescue Committee, Save The Children and Christian Children’s Fund are also major proponents of protection. Additionally, several national governments have been involved in supporting particularly noteworthy initiatives, including the governments of Canada, Norway, Sweden, UK and USA.<sup>16</sup>

### **1.3. CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH IN WAR**

Children’s rights in particular have attracted much international attention in recent years, and the international community has reached extraordinary political consensus around the subject of child protection. The near universal ratification of the CRC and UN publication of Graça Machel's report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (1996) have drawn attention to the plight of millions of children whose rights are often cruelly violated during war, with severe consequences for their survival and healthy development. Furthermore, through bilateral and multilateral assistance, governments and international humanitarian aid and development organizations have begun attending to the needs of those children particularly susceptible to death and disease. In general, prevailing opinion assumes that young children are the most vulnerable social category in war, and thus humanitarian organizations treat them as the first priority for intervention and relief in conflict and post-conflict situations.<sup>17</sup>

While emergency interventions for children under 5 years of age are standard, the rights and needs of youth and adolescents have yet to be similarly acknowledged and supported. Attention to these groups is ad hoc at best, and in most cases, they tend to be neglected as a specific social group, and subsumed within the broader category of children. Extremely limited empirical data exists on youth and adolescents in terms of their numbers and profiles, and few formal assessments and evaluations have attended to their particular concerns. Thus, their specific situations, experiences and needs are often overlooked in both research and practice, concealing the suffering of millions of young people in situations of profound crisis. As a result, youth and adolescents are generally absent from the agendas of donors and humanitarian agencies; little targeted coordination or dialogue surrounding their specific problems

has taken place; and responding definitively to their concerns has not become a central priority within the international community as a whole. Therefore, despite commitments at the level of international law, protection efforts for youth and adolescents are sporadic and reveal only limited success. Programmes and policies that address their needs are insufficient, and funding for efforts targeting this age group is urgently required.<sup>18</sup>

Despite prevailing perceptions throughout the international community, youth and adolescents often are worse off than young children in situations of armed conflict in a number of ways. While they may not suffer morbidity and mortality to the same degree as young children, they are *more* likely to experience rights violations and confront severe challenges to their personal safety.<sup>19</sup> Adolescents in particular are at a critical stage in their physical and social development, which leaves them especially susceptible to detrimental forces in their surrounding environments. Youth and adolescents are more likely than younger children to be recruited into military service and engage in armed combat, are particularly vulnerable to economic exploitation, and are less likely to receive education and health care during emergencies than young children. Adolescent girls are specifically targeted for sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, and are thus at higher risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS than their younger counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to having distinct experiences of conflict and special protection concerns, however, youth and adolescents also display distinct capacities for survival and coping in situations of extreme adversity. They become heads of households and take on leadership positions in their families and communities. Some become self-sufficient, while others generate income to support their families. They care for younger siblings, mentor and tutor other children, and provide companionship for one another.<sup>21</sup> Many demonstrate remarkable skill and strength in the face of extreme adversity, confronting hardship with imagination and courage when young children and adults lose hope.

Given the recent findings of research with youth and adolescents, their invisibility in emergency interventions and the lack of specific mechanisms to ensure their protection are particularly troubling. This paper does not intend to provide an exhaustive account of the myriad challenges that young people face in times of war. It does, however, offer a brief synthesis of some of the key issues in the field and aims to provoke thoughts for discussion. It suggests that the costs of neglecting youth and adolescents in particular are tremendous in terms of the severe rights violations committed against them during conflict, and in terms of long-term consequences in the aftermath of war. In particular, it suggests that failure to focus on young people means that their “strengths and potential as constructive contributors to their societies go largely unrecognised and unsupported by the international community, while those who seek to do them harm... [such as military leaders,] recognize and utilize their capabilities” instead.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Growing Up in Danger

### 2.1. LITERATURES OF WAR

There now exists a growing body of literature that explores the effects of armed conflict and forced migration on the young. Primarily composed of research from academia and humanitarian organizations, this literature informs the approaches and responses to protection employed by the international community. Despite increased interest in young people's experience of war, however, there still exists a shocking dearth of empirical evidence, systematic research and theory surrounding their protection needs and capacities for survival. Consequently, both policy and practice affecting the young relies heavily upon research and theory produced in industrialised countries, relating primarily to European and American youth or to refugees in western countries of asylum.<sup>23</sup> This research bias is in part due to the significant practical obstacles to conducting research with young people in conflict situations. Access to war-affected populations is often limited due to obstruction by authorities or security considerations, and thus research methods commonly used by anthropologists, for example, such as long-term participant observation, are made difficult if not impossible.<sup>24</sup>

The vast majority of research with young people in conflict situations has been conducted by psychologists and psychiatrists, and thus international policies and agency interventions related to war-affected youth are overwhelmingly influenced by western biomedical theory.<sup>25</sup> To this end, emergency policy and practice with young people of all ages have been largely informed by two main areas of research: the nature of children and child development on the one hand; and the effects of armed conflict on their psychological development and mental health on the other.

First, 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific wisdom holds that age and developmental stage are the most critical indicators of children's resilience and competence. Thus, due to their immaturity, dependence and lack of adult competencies, children are perceived to be inherently vulnerable and needy.<sup>26</sup> The notion that they have special physical, emotional, psychological and social needs has informed and dominated international policy in recent decades, as evidenced by the development of an international convention dedicated exclusively to children.<sup>27</sup>

Such ideas have been reinforced by notions about a “proper” childhood in which individuals are brought up by a nurturing family in safe environments, isolated from the malice and dangers of the adult world, kept far from misfortune, and out of reach of adversity.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, appropriate spaces for young people are seen to be the home and the school, but not the workplace or the battlefield, as the young are to be free of the burdens of economic or social responsibility. As such, childhood is portrayed as a joyful time characterized by leisure and learning, upon which subsequent happiness depends.<sup>29</sup> Since the industrial revolution in Europe, such ideas about the innocence, vulnerability and incompetence of the young have been institutionalised through 20<sup>th</sup> psychology, pedagogy, and other child-related disciplines.<sup>30</sup>

Second, policy and practice relating to young people affected by war have been critically shaped by medical research regarding their psychosocial development and mental health. Since the work of Anne Freud and Dorothy Burlingham in the aftermath of the Second World War, inquiry into the devastating impacts of war on the young has been central to this research, and it has now become accepted wisdom that violence, loss and displacement bring about negative developmental and mental health consequences for the young.<sup>31</sup> This research now constitutes a burgeoning field, and has been highly influenced by studies and therapeutic work conducted in Europe in the aftermath of WWII, and in the US with Vietnam War veterans. Such studies often highlight the detrimental impacts of conflict on young people's physical, intellectual and moral development, and the prevalence of distressing psychological symptoms and disorders in those exposed to extremely adverse conditions. Emphasis is commonly placed on trauma, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as the primary responses to highly stressful events and situations, and on individual therapy as the most effective remedy.<sup>32</sup>

The power of the trauma discourse in today's world is undeniable. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the language of trauma has come to pervade everyday vocabulary,<sup>33</sup> being used in relation not only to major global catastrophes, but also to relatively minor occurrences, such as car accidents. Insofar as this "psych-complex" has become a powerful system of scientific authority, its claims regarding what is normal and desirable for psychological development<sup>34</sup> have had profound implications for the perception of young people affected by armed conflict. Frequently promoted is a notion of war-affected young people as traumatized victims who are rendered helpless and vulnerable by a series of traumatic episodes which are outside the realm of 'normal human experience.'

#### *New research with youth and adolescents*

Though international treaties have extended such ideas to all those under 18 years of age according to accepted global definitions of childhood, attention is focused primarily on early childhood. Thus, protection efforts in conflict situations are suited predominantly for young children, and systematic investigation into adolescent development, their experiences of war, and the nature of their responses to stressful events is sorely lacking.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the international community has far to go regarding the protection of youth and adolescents. Previous protection failures have sometimes been the result of poor management, or tremendous operational obstacles in emergencies. More often, however, they are the result of misconceived, or ill-informed ideas about the problems facing young people, and of the appropriate solutions. They represent considerable gaps in understanding and are the result of unexamined assumptions about the reality of young people's lives, their development, vulnerabilities, protection needs, and capabilities for survival.

In recognition of the inadequacies of policy and practice concerning young people exposed to conflict and displacement, a new literature has begun to emerge which is revolutionary in its efforts to conduct research with youth and adolescents. Spearheaded primarily by social scientists and practitioners, it is dedicated to exploring what young people themselves are saying about their experiences of conflict and displacement, and to understanding the resulting implications for the international protection regime. This literature has provided important new insights that contest traditional understandings about how best to protect and assist war-



affected youth. It argues that the situations of displaced and war-affected youth need more thorough analysis, since what constitutes danger and protection differs according to cultural and historical context. It suggests that contemporary understandings of protection rely too much on western assumptions about what young people can and should do, and about what their relationship should be to adults and to adversity. While acknowledging the global power of western theories, it questions their universal applicability across cultures and societies, and argues that reflection upon the assumptions underlying agency interventions engenders serious doubts about their relevance and validity.

Recent research makes a compelling argument for the need to understand the realities of young people's lives from their own perspective so that interventions may be more relevant to their concerns and needs. Furthermore, it criticizes the current operational emphasis on young people's vulnerabilities, suggesting that such an approach may make young people *more* susceptible to hazard by rendering them passive victims, as opposed to active survivors, of adversity. Such an operational focus, it is argued, obscures some very real protection issues, neglects young peoples' capacities and resilience, undermines their existing resources for self-protection, and creates dependency on outside interventions. Finding conventional perspectives and operational strategies ultimately disempowering, new research sends out a resounding call for a modified view of the young and for new approaches to adolescent/youth-centred emergency interventions.

## **2.2. WHO ARE YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS?**

Understanding the risks youth and adolescents face during war is essential for designing and implementing protection interventions, and yet identifying them is not necessarily a straightforward task.<sup>36</sup> In fact, a critical examination of differing conceptions of generational categories such as childhood, youth and adolescence reveals profound tensions between the international protection regime and many local communities, with important implications for protection in practice.

In general, the international community functions according to age-based definitions of children and adults that correspond to western understandings of childhood and child development. This approach is in contrast to widely accepted tenets of the social sciences which hold that categories such as childhood and adolescence are socially, rather than biologically determined. As such, they are understood to be widely varying, context-specific, and constantly being negotiated within the bounds of a particular time and place.<sup>37</sup> Echoing the claims of Vygotskian psychology, social scientists emphasize the essential role of culture in child development, and understand generational categories as reflecting cultural beliefs about particular life phases, rather than as fixed, universal states defined by an upper age limit and circumscribed by predetermined developmental stages. Accordingly, youth and adolescence are seen as diverse and malleable constructs, reacting as much to social, cultural, economic and political context as to biological sequences.<sup>38</sup>

Definitions of, approaches to and experiences of young people differ widely across cultures according to different contexts. As Mawson notes, defining who is a child, an adolescent or an adult is a process of negotiation between individuals, family members, peer groups and the wider community in the context of life events and rites

of passage.<sup>39</sup> Different societies have different methods for determining what constitutes adulthood and how to attain it, many of which have little to do with reaching a certain chronological age, but relate instead to physical, social or religious rites.<sup>40</sup> Factors such as gender, physical maturity, marital status, sexual activity, peer group seniority, position in the family, class and employment commonly define the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood.

In many cultures, for example, childhood ends earlier for girls than for boys, as reaching puberty marks girls' transition to adulthood. Though this often occurs well before the age of 18, girls are nonetheless expected to marry, bear children and take on adult responsibilities.<sup>41</sup> In some places, those who attend school, are considered children, while young people of the same age who do not attend school but work instead, are considered adults. In many African societies, children become adults after initiation rituals and induction into secret societies.<sup>42</sup>

Concepts of youth and adolescence are even more variable and contested throughout the world. While the English term *adolescent* refers to an individual in transition from puberty to maturity or adulthood, such an idea is based on theories of child development that are unlikely to apply cross-culturally.<sup>43</sup> As Tefferi notes, there is no traditional concept of youth or adolescence in many African societies, and only two defining phases of a human life cycle exist, with childhood proceeding directly into adulthood following initiation.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, de Berry points out that whether or not individuals experience a "youth" is determined by gender and class. In Afghanistan, for example, girls, for whom marriage constitutes the apex in their social status, progress directly from childhood into adulthood upon being wed. Afghan males, on the other hand, are often treated as "youth" even after they are married, since they are only perceived to reach adulthood when they become heads of families after the death of their fathers. "Youth" in Afghanistan is also a luxury category reserved for those who can afford time out for learning and growth. Thus, while youth are likely to be found in the middle and upper classes, poor children very quickly assume the responsibilities and burdens normally associated with adulthood.<sup>45</sup>

#### *'Youth' in conflict*

In situations of adversity, generational categories are often highly flexible, and the boundaries between them contested. Distinctions between children, adolescents and adults are readily and effectively manipulated to accommodate political or military ends in particular, with important implications for young people's protection. In some conflicts, for example, young activists may refer to themselves as children to avoid punishment, while authorities define them as youth so as to render them legally culpable.<sup>46</sup> Among the Acholi people of northern Uganda, boundaries of childhood have been expanded in order to grant impunity to large numbers of National Resistance Army (NRA) combatants, many of who are much older. Such a broad, inclusive definition has allowed for a liberal approach to justice distribution that has facilitated widespread post-conflict reconciliation.<sup>47</sup> In Mozambique, on the other hand, local constructions of childhood and adulthood actually enabled Resistencia Nacional de Moçambique (RENAMO) forces to recruit youngsters into combat. In Mozambican society, labour migration marks passage into manhood and thus involvement in economic processes rendered young people legitimate perpetrators of violence beginning as early as age 12. Since many rural recruits had lived away from

their families for extended periods of time, they had ceased to be children in the eyes of the community, and were thus ripe for recruitment into fighting forces.<sup>48</sup>

How youth is defined also has important implications for aid policy and practice in conflict and post-conflict situations. As Tefferi points out, discrepancies between the international community's understanding of generational categories and local perceptions often have negative implications for young people's self-esteem and self-efficacy.<sup>49</sup> In Ethiopia, for example, young people reach social adulthood once they have undergone initiation ceremonies, and are subsequently expected to contribute to and defend their communities, through activities including soldiering. Humanitarian interventions and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, however, tend to characterize adolescent boys as dependent children, imposing upon them conflicting roles and expectations from those of their communities. Though they understand the necessity of submitting to what they consider to be demeaning treatment in order to qualify for aid, Ethiopian youth view relief practice as a step backwards from their initiation. According to Tefferi, contradicting demands to be both vulnerable children and contributing adults has had detrimental effects on the identities of many adolescent boys who inhabit this precarious middle ground between societal expectations and their dependence upon foreign aid for survival.<sup>50</sup>

Research clearly highlights the irrelevance of age-based definitions of childhood and adolescence for an understanding of the experiences of war-affected youth. It suggests that contextualised definitions of generational categories are much more revealing, and allow for an examination of youth in relation to their social, political and economic realities, rather than to an abstract developmental model marked solely by biological phases.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, a better appreciation for the varying meanings, functions, statuses and roles to which 'adolescence' and 'youth' refer during conflict is needed in order to fully understand how best to respond to their protection needs during and following war.

### **2.3. YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROTECTION CONCERNS**

Recent attention to the plight of youth and adolescents has unearthed compelling evidence to suggest that they may be *more* prone to hazard than children in situations of armed conflict. While young children are extremely vulnerable to disease and death due to their physical and psychological immaturity, youth and adolescents are more susceptible to a wide range of immediate and long-term threats as a direct result of their *increased* maturity. Therefore, while fatality rates may not reach the same heights for older groups as they do for young children, adolescents and youth are more likely to face severe risks to personal safety and well-being as a consequence of their relative strengths or abilities.<sup>52</sup>

Youth and adolescents are particularly susceptible to detrimental forces at work in their surrounding environments precisely because they are at a critical stage in both their physical and social development. Thus, they are not inherently vulnerable, but face particular risks due to their structural position as *adolescents* or *youth*. The dangers they confront are a direct result of their age and physical maturity on the one hand, and the social position, status and roles to which their life phase refers on the other. Since they have reached puberty, for example, they are physically developed

and valuable to military groups in a way young children may not be. Furthermore, they're often out of school and working independently, and are thus ripe for abduction. Because they are not yet considered full social adults, however, they are denied the protections and rights associated with adulthood, such as marriage. As a result of this precarious state, adolescents and youth are prone to special risks that children and adults may be protected from. Thus, their susceptibility to hazard is not a natural or innate value, but the product of a complex interplay between biological and social forces.

### **2.3.1. Military Engagement and Other Forms of Exploitative Labour**

Youth and adolescents are more likely than younger children to be engaged in military service.<sup>53</sup> Across the globe, in countries such as Afghanistan, Columbia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Guatemala, Lebanon, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda, older boys and girls have been recruited by both government armies and rebel forces to provide a number of services, of which soldiering during direct combat composes only a fraction.

In addition to fighting, young people also serve armies in supporting roles – as cooks, porters, messengers, spies – and in ancillary functions such as intelligence gathering or road and bridge repair. Since young people are seen as more expendable, they are frequently asked to perform the most dangerous tasks, such as patrolling checkpoints; laying, detecting and clearing landmines; defending arsenals and cleaning weapons. Though girls too are recruited for soldiering, they are more commonly used as office clerks, or are “married off” to officers and expected to provide sexual and domestic services. There is great risk and hardship associated with even these supporting roles, and young people who fail or try to escape are often dealt with harshly.<sup>54</sup>

Due to their age and relative physical maturity, youth and adolescent recruitment is often an explicit strategy of war. Compared to young children, adolescent boys are particularly attractive to military leaders who recognize their physical strength and ability as assets to military endeavours. Similarly, post-pubescent girls are the most desirable for sexual enslavement to soldiers.

In addition, given the socio-economic responsibilities that adolescents and youth take on in many poor countries, these age groups are often easier to reach than children. As mentioned, after completing primary school, families often rely upon older children to seek gainful employment and contribute to the family income. As a result, many are not in school,<sup>55</sup> are highly mobile, and move around independently from parents. Recruitment generally occurs in the streets or in workplaces, and thus street youth, those separated from their families, and those working in the informal sector are in greatest danger of abduction. Adolescent heads of households are also particularly susceptible to forced recruitment.<sup>56</sup>

Not all young combatants are forcibly recruited, however, and many present themselves for service under their own initiative. Whether or not enlistment is ever ‘voluntary’ is a subject of great debate, though it is increasingly recognized that young people are driven by a variety of social, cultural, economic and political pressures to join armed groups. As research reveals, enlistment in fighting forces is often a reasonable adaptive strategy or practical protection mechanism in situations of extreme danger or deprivation.<sup>57</sup> Often, military life is the most attractive option for

survival, as armies provide food, shelter, clothing, security, protection and companionship which are unavailable to young people elsewhere.<sup>58</sup> Alternatively, in situations of extreme poverty or insecurity, young people may be sent into the armed forces by their families in an effort to secure added income or protection for the family as a whole.<sup>59</sup> Young combatants regularly profit from looting, raids, bribes and pay-offs, and gain dramatically increased power to protect themselves, their families and their land.<sup>60</sup> In addition, young people may also enlist or stay in fighting forces on account of political or ideological convictions.<sup>61</sup>

In general, there has been markedly little examination of the diversity of motivations and experiences of young fighters. Though child soldiering has become an issue of intensive international focus, most literature regards young combatants as the unfortunate victims of ill-intentioned adults, and assumes that they are uncomprehending, unwilling or coerced into joining armed forces.<sup>62</sup> According to such perspectives, young people are removed from the conditions and ideologies that generate violence. They are denied personal agency, and emphasis is instead given to the vulnerability and powerlessness evident in their abduction, forced conscription, brainwashing and deceit.<sup>63</sup> Recent research, however, suggests that we may be in denial about the broad range of motivations young people have for fighting, and that the reality may be more complicated – while some are forcibly abducted or pressured into fighting, others may join willingly, determining loyalties and engaging with violence on their own terms.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Social roles, social positions*

As indicated, young people are not only ripe for recruitment and enlistment due to their age and physical maturity, but as a result of the precarious social positions and roles in which they find themselves during conflict. As Tefferi notes, in situations of conflict and displacement, young people often flounder in a liminal state between childhood and adulthood due to the impossibility of fulfilling societal expectations associated with upward generational mobility. Of great concern to many young people is being trapped in a stagnating youth, and the inability to become adults due to lack of education, employment, or economic and social resources for initiation ceremonies, marriage and other traditional rites of passage.<sup>65</sup> In Angola, for instance, initiation rites performed around the time of puberty are of utmost importance to the young as they symbolize a change in social status and are a necessary step in becoming a man or woman.<sup>66</sup> As a result of social dislocation and impoverishment, however, such ceremonies are often impossible, and thus conflict and displacement create intense frustration for young people due to their limited mobility in the social system and lack of social power.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, adulthood follows the completion of education, commencement of gainful employment, or attainment of self-sufficiency, and is thus understood to be a compliment or achievement rather than an age.<sup>68</sup> As a result of recent conflict, “youth” has become a wide, elastic term, encompassing a broad age range due to the impossibility of attaining adulthood through normal means. Today in Sierra Leone, individuals up to 35 or 40 years of age may still be referred to as ‘youth’ due to their lack of education and skills. Large numbers of older women, for example, were left in the aftermath of war without husbands, families or jobs, and are thus still considered youth.<sup>69</sup>

Displaced boys are particularly affected by social upheaval, as they often have few opportunities for self-sufficiency and little physical or emotional space to develop their knowledge, skills and capacities. Furthermore, their inability to produce a livelihood or provide a bride price in poor economic settings often have negative consequences for self-esteem and self-efficacy.<sup>70</sup> Unable to become adults through traditional mechanisms such as employment, marriage and bearing children, participation in conflict is often seen as an alternative means of accessing power and control, income, respect, social status, even girlfriends.<sup>71</sup> Insofar as soldiering provides a substitute source of authority, it represents an attractive method of social mobility<sup>72</sup> for youth and adolescents who have lost the roles and sources of social meaning which normally shape their particular life phase.

#### *Other forms of hazardous and exploitative labour*

Similar forces also render youth and adolescents especially likely to become involved in other forms of hazardous or exploitative labour. Insofar as conflict and displacement result in destitution and material loss, and principal wage-earners are absent, killed or injured, families often turn to their eldest children for economic support and engage them in dangerous labour that would be unnecessary in peacetime. Additionally, a prevailing climate of lawlessness and impunity provide a profitable environment for those who seek to take advantage of able young people. Traditional protective forces are greatly reduced, families are destabilized, impoverished and scattered amidst the chaos of war, and government authorities' capacity to stop exploitation is restricted.<sup>73</sup>

The sources of exploitation are many. According to young Afghan refugees in Pakistan, for example, they are frequently forced to seek employment in hazardous industries such as carpet weaving, garbage picking, begging, brick making and drug pedalling.<sup>74</sup> In Afghanistan itself, adolescent boys earn income by foraging for scrap metal in mine fields. Perfectly aware of the risks they run, many have little choice since this is the only lucrative occupation available to them. Adolescents are more likely than young children to be involved in hazardous labour due to their relative physical strength and because they are out of school and expected to contribute to their family's income. Those who head households are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as are separated youth who leave their homes in search of better protection elsewhere.<sup>75</sup>

### **2.3.2. Sexual Violence, Exploitation and Reproductive Health**

Increased levels of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence often accompany situations of conflict and large-scale displacement, and adolescent girls in particular are common targets for rape, trafficking, and slave concubinage. Though gender-based violence has long been downplayed as an unfortunate but inevitable feature of war, there is growing evidence that it is much more than an arbitrary side effect of a breakdown in law and order. Rape and other forms of sexual violence have become crucial weapons of war and instruments of terror, and women and girls are often sexually violated as a deliberate military policy. Sexual violence takes on varying forms such as rape, torture, genital mutilation, forced marriage and forced maternity, and is common in the context of ethnic cleansing and genocide, as was seen in Rwanda and the Balkans. Far from an incidental consequence of war, rape and sexual violence are often purposely used to degrade and demoralize individuals and damage the collective psyche of entire communities.<sup>76</sup>

Impoverishment also forces many adolescent girls into prostitution, obliging them to offer sexual services in exchange for goods or services such as food, shelter, safe conduct through war zones, immigration papers, and other privileges for themselves or their families. Girls are often forced to present themselves as sexual slaves to military leaders in order to secure protection from attack or extortion for their families. The arrival of peacekeeping troops is also known to contribute to a rise in prostitution. Adolescent girls are also particularly vulnerable to traffickers who seek to sell them to brothels or foreign markets abroad.<sup>77</sup>

In northern Uganda, for example, adolescent girls were particularly prone to systematic abduction and slave concubinage by NRA soldiers during the civil war. According to de Berry, this was a direct result of their relative youth, beauty and physical state. In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, post-pubescent girls have become the desired sexual partners of military commanders on account of their likely virginity and unlikely infection with the disease.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, girls reported that soldiers wanted beautiful girls, which was generally equated with youth and light skin colour. Since adolescent girls often bear prime responsibilities for domestic duties such as gathering water and firewood – tasks which take them away from populated areas – they are at particular risk for abuse and abduction.

Similarly, prostitution is a viable survival strategy particularly for adolescent girls due both to their prime sexual age and the commoditization of sex. On account of their physical maturity, post-pubescent girls are often forced to take advantage of the fact that soldiers are willing to pay for sex, thus foregoing sexual protection for economic security and subsistence.<sup>79</sup> Eldest daughters in Burma, for example, were commonly sold into prostitution in Thailand for profit when the material pressures of war meant that regular access to resources were destroyed. In this case, adolescent girls' susceptibility was also compounded by their position in the birth order and sibling composition.<sup>80</sup>

#### *Social status, social value*

Being unmarried also plays a key role in rendering adolescent girls prone to exploitation and abuse. In many societies, unmarried girls are of both cultural and economic value to families and communities, and are thus especially appropriate vehicles through which to attack an enemy. Due to the cultural importance of virginity in Albanian Muslim society, for example, raped Kosovar girls are generally considered unsuitable for marriage and reproduction. As a result, unmarried Kosovar girls were obvious targets for a Serbian enemy wishing to prohibit the growth of the Albanian population. In addition, since women were also perceived to be the bearers of Kosovo Albanian identity, the rape of adolescent girls was an explicit means of humiliating communities and defiling ethnic and religious purity.<sup>81</sup>

Social stigmatisation against sexual violence also played a crucial role in determining Kosovar girls' vulnerability in the aftermath of conflict. Strong social taboos against sexual violence meant that girls who were raped faced alienation or even abandonment by their families and communities, which in turn rendered them vulnerable to trafficking rings operated in refugee camps by the Albanian mafia. Many adolescent girls facing exposure, shame and rejection as a result of this dishonour proved likely to succumb to the false promises of traffickers who offered them freedom and happiness abroad.<sup>82</sup>

In Uganda, adolescent girls are of great economic value to their fathers, as in his virgin daughter rests a father's hopes for bridewealth cattle. Thus, by arranging for her sexual violation, a girl's marriage prospects, her father's claim to livestock, and a family's economic prospects could be simultaneously destroyed. Such was common practice in displacement camps, where girls' susceptibility to abduction and slave concubinage by NRA soldiers was also a function of the high levels of interpersonal violence which characterized life in the camps. As de Berry notes, threats to Teso girls came not just from the two opposing sides of armed conflict, but also from men in their own communities who organized girls for the soldiers. In this way, Teso men bettered their own position at the expense of young girls, whose sexual services they used to ingratiate themselves with soldiers, thus earning protection for themselves and their families.<sup>83</sup>

### *Sexual and reproductive health*

Adolescent girls are also at higher risk of reproductive health problems than younger children. This is due to their heightened exposure to sexual violence, abuse and exploitation; early marriage; generally increased levels of sexual activity; and to the fact that they have little information about sex and are often powerless to enforce safe sexual practices. They are more likely to have unwanted pregnancies or unsafe abortions, and may be unable to deliver safely due to insufficient bone growth, height and pelvic size. In fact, girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die from childbirth as women in their twenties.<sup>84</sup> Those who do give birth successfully face severe risks in the aftermath due to a shortage of trained midwives, post-natal care and sufficient public health infrastructure.

In addition to physical hazards, young girls must also contend with the social, economic and psychological effects of sexual violence and exploitation. Many "bush wives," for example, are deserted by soldiers when they become pregnant and have great difficulty raising children without adequate family and community support.<sup>85</sup> Rape survivors may be socially alienated and economically devastated when they are subsequently deemed unmarriageable.<sup>86</sup> This may in turn lead to dangerous levels of shame, alienation, and high suicide rates among rape victims.<sup>87</sup>

Adolescents and youth are also more likely to contract HIV/AIDS and other STDs than younger children, with 50% of all new infections globally occurring in these groups. As the Machel study concludes, there is a strong correlation between armed conflict and a high incidence of STDs and HIV/AIDS, and young people involved in the armed forces are 50% more likely than civilians to contract HIV/AIDS. The spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS among adolescents in conflict situations is commonly attributed to overcrowded conditions in displacement camps, a general breakdown of established social values and constraints, and an increased likelihood of unprotected sex with a larger numbers of sexual partners, in part due to the development of sexual identities and tendency toward sexual experimentation.<sup>88</sup> Often, those who acquire HIV/AIDS and other STDs suffer in silence due to fear of stigmatisation, and thus few receive treatment.

Despite these statistics, however, adolescents are the least likely to have access to reproductive health information and care. While the provision of primary health care and interventions to secure clean water, adequate nutrition and shelter are given priority during humanitarian interventions, reproductive health is often neglected, or



treated as a luxury measure. Even where reproductive health services do exist, they rarely target adolescents or youth as a distinct population for reasons ranging from cultural stigmas against sexual activity in the young to poor programme outreach.<sup>89</sup>

And yet, adolescents are also choosing to have sex. In situations of protracted instability and crisis, many young people seek solace in sexual relationships. Voluntary sexual activity compounds adolescents' increased risk of a wide range of diseases and reproductive health problems, making them perhaps the most important targets for dissemination of reproductive health information and care.<sup>90</sup> Such a proposition, however, represents a major shift in focus for the international community, and requires a radical rethinking of reproductive health programming in emergencies to acknowledge the realities of young people's lives and provide protection to those most in need.

### **2.3.3. Determinants of Danger**

In addition to understanding the physical, social, and structural mechanisms that render youth and adolescents particularly vulnerable during warfare, it is also critical to acknowledge those forces which distinguish *between* different groups and categories of young people in determining their relative susceptibilities. Previous research based on universal theories of child development has tended to study young people as an undifferentiated category. As such, it has disregarded differences of social power and identity between the young, ignoring evidence that social status critically determines survival and well-being, and obscuring crucial distinctions which profoundly influence their protection needs.<sup>91</sup>

Young people in different social, economic, gender, ethnic and religious categories experience vastly different kinds of lives, with great diversities in their safety, vulnerabilities and capacities for survival. They are not randomly or equally at risk during armed conflict, but face specific threats and risks as a result of who they are. Frequently, young people are rendered more or less vulnerable as a result of how they're valued by their families and communities, causing particular concern for those in less desirable social categories.<sup>92</sup> Disabled young people, for instance, often face disproportionate risk of abandonment during displacement or when families are trying to relieve themselves of economic burdens amidst desperate conditions. As indicated, girls face sexual violence in far greater numbers than boys, and unmarried girls are often in the most danger. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be abducted into the armed forces. Poorer youth are most likely to engage in exploitative labour. Overall, armed conflict exacerbates differences between the young in terms of exposure to risk and the extent and nature of particular risks, placing new burdens or strain on some, and removing the protection or survival prospects of others.<sup>93</sup> Thus, we must reach beyond "the commonalities of the human condition"<sup>94</sup> in order to appreciate why some are in greater danger than others, and what assistance will be relevant to whom. In effect, only by understanding protection in terms of social status and power will we be able to identify those most in need and adjust our interventions appropriately.

### **2.3.4. Sources of Danger**

In addition to understanding *why* adolescents and youth are more prone to many hazards during war than young children, it is also critical that we appreciate where the

most severe threats to protection come *from*. Significantly, adolescents and youth are at great risk not only because they are valued by an outside enemy but also because they are equally valuable to their own communities and families who may rely on, or even exploit, them for their own support, survival or gain.

Previous research with youth and adolescents during conflict and displacement has focused to a large degree on threats to protection from an outside enemy, be it direct warfare, exploitation or civil and political violations. As a result, international protection efforts are designed primarily to guard against such external dangers, and frequently entail: the deployment of international peacekeeping troops to conflict zones; negotiation with national governments to ensure protection of displaced people by government armies; or human rights training and advocacy. To this end, young people's susceptibility in conflict is treated solely as a function of threats from the outside world.

Recent research highlights a much more insidious reality, however, in which the greatest threats to young people's well-being often come from *within* their own communities – from relatives, neighbours, friends and even the immediate family. It acknowledges that while often fundamental to young people's survival and well-being, families and communities may also be a major source of constraints, threats and danger. To this end, it warns against adopting stereotypic notions of family and community that obscure the risks they pose, and emphasizes the need to be cautious of assumptions that family and community are necessarily safe spaces for young people.

### *Community*

Perhaps the most sinister effect of modern civil wars is the damage they wreak upon young people's social worlds, often communities become pitted against themselves and neighbours become enemies through acts of self-protection, self-interest and collusion with the enemy. Research in numerous conflict-affected areas reveals that young people often have extremely limited social networks exclusive of anyone beyond immediate family members. Such a reality reflects the intense fear and distrust that exists even within communities during conflict.<sup>95</sup> In particular, refugee and IDP camps may be extremely corrosive social environments for young people, in which loss of social trust and destruction of social and kin networks constitute particularly dangerous settings.

As noted, for example, the sexual exploitation of adolescent girls in northern Uganda by NRA soldiers was made possible by men within their own communities who arranged the girls' abuse in order to survive themselves. These middlemen chose girls strategically, organizing the abuse of those girls against whose male relatives they held grudges, using the girls as an instrument to humiliate and terrorize their own personal enemies.<sup>96</sup>

In eastern Sri Lanka, Tamil youth live amidst a climate of great distrust and suspicion, as families have learned to protect their own offspring by pointing out others for abduction and forced recruitment into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Similarly, in Uganda, parents of young combatants who have not returned from war have been known to identify those young people who have escaped and returned for re-abduction by rebel forces.<sup>97</sup> Other parents may inform government soldiers that

the children of their adversaries are collaborating with opposing forces, thus subjecting them to detention or torture, and relying upon young people's military value to protect their own.

In such ways, young people's lives amidst conflict are marked by interpersonal grievances and jealousies over disparity and inequity that find expression in violence against them. In many cases, intra-communal conflicts which would normally manifest themselves through witchcraft or spiritual violence are expressed instead through physical violence, as people exploit the conditions of war to avenge their enemies.<sup>98</sup> Interpersonal violence is a common feature of life in refugee camps in particular, where people cannot depend on physical and social distance for control of conflicts due to overcrowded conditions.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, for many young people, war is less about fighting forces "than the mire and violence of micro-level relationships, with which they [have] to contend."<sup>100</sup>

### *Family*

Conventional wisdom also holds that young people's needs are best served within the context of the family.<sup>101</sup> Despite a lack of empirical evidence about this, some suggestions to the contrary, and little research into young people's own methods for independent survival, the family is nonetheless instinctively presumed to provide more stability, support and protection than young people could access on their own accord. And yet, recent studies with war-affected adolescents and youth suggest that family is not necessarily the refuge for young people that we presume it to be.<sup>102</sup> While family may be a protective force in peacetime, it does not necessarily constitute a safe environment for young people during warfare, when it comes under tremendous pressure and stress.

Families are often a direct source of threat to young people in conflict situations. In general, we are mistaken to assume that the well-being and protection of the young is necessarily a family's first priority. On the contrary, parents may purposely decide to sacrifice one child for the good of the family unit – often an adolescent or youth – depriving them of their safety and well-being for the survival of others. As we have seen, it is not uncommon for families to single out older offspring as dispensable through abandonment, sale or militarization. In such situations, the young are forced from the home in order to lessen the economic burden of a family, produce income through exploitative labour, or seal political alliances crucial to economic or physical security.<sup>103</sup>

Adolescent girls, for example, may be forced into early marriages in order to reduce numbers of offspring to care for, or to gain favour with powerful men. Older boys often face the greatest perils during wartime, as they are sent to the military in order to protect the family against extortion and violence by armed forces, while younger sons are sent to orphanages or to live with extended family for safekeeping. In Pakistan, Afghan refugee youth are frequently forced into hazardous labour where they face physical, sexual and psychological abuse, and refusal to work regularly incurs beatings or starvation from parents.<sup>104</sup> Adolescents may be pushed from homes during war precisely because they are capable of fending for themselves, and thus they are rendered vulnerable to death, exploitation or impoverishment as a direct result of parental decisions, abuse and neglect.

Young people's protection concerns often refer to much more mundane events and circumstances, such as increased alcoholism and domestic abuse from parents. As Palma argues, rising levels of violence against young people in homes is a direct result of political conflict in Colombia, for when "democracy is constrained in public life, it leads to a similar replication in private life."<sup>105</sup> Though the relationship between armed conflict and domestic abuse has long been a subject of great debate, Palestinian adolescents also note the multitude of ways in which violence experienced in society is subsequently reproduced in the home.<sup>106</sup>

Families may become increasingly dangerous places for young people in the aftermath of war, when disruption of traditional generational hierarchies leads to increased conflict between parents and youth. When fixed systems of parental power and authority are upset during conflict, many adults cope with social upheaval by attempting to reinstate their authority according to previous social norms. In doing so, they may demand total respect and unquestioning compliance in an attempt to reverse their loss of status and control, becoming new or worse abusers of defiant youth.<sup>107</sup> Evidence suggests that such concerns are particularly prevalent for former combatants, who may face outright fear from parents, or have difficulties submitting to pre-war social hierarchies from which they escaped during conflict.<sup>108</sup> Such dangers are powerful testimony to the fact that purposeful destruction of social orders is frequently used as a weapon of war by military forces who recognize intergenerational and family distrust as an effective means through which to inflict suffering upon communities long after the cessation of conflict.<sup>109</sup>

#### *Violence in protection*

Even a family's "protection strategies" may be detrimental to young people's well-being, as families are generally adult-centred institutions with strategies of care and protection decided upon by parents who may be unaware of the risks their children face. For example, in times of war young people are often sent to institutions where it is assumed they will be cared and provided for. As growing research argues, however, residential care institutions themselves are commonly dangerous places where young people may be abused or exploited, denied proper food and clothing or suffer neglect.<sup>110</sup>

Early marriage is another common protection strategy, for marriage is often valued as a means for guarding against young girls' sexual violation and family dishonour. Adolescent girls frequently perceive things differently, however, recognizing that hasty decisions about marriage often lead them into unhappy and lonely lives. Parents of adolescent girls in Kosovo, for instance, often resorted to early marriage in order to protect their daughters from rape, suffering and dishonour. And yet, Kosovar girls themselves rarely regarded this as an effective protection strategy, as many were betrothed at very young ages to significantly older men, and suffered from early consummation of marriage and dangerous pregnancies. Furthermore, even early marriage often failed to protect them against assault and sexual violence.<sup>111</sup>

#### *Peers*

Much research has shown that support from peers is critical to young people's survival and resilience in situations of conflict and displacement.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, friends and peer networks have been found to have highly developed collective survival strategies which may be more vital to young people's well-being during emergencies

than parents and kin. And yet, recent evidence belies the notion that youth groups are always protective associations. Frequently, conflict places peer groups under intense strain, and even friends may pose very real threats to individual safety. According to research in Kosovar and Palestinian refugee camps, increased violence within and between peer groups has reached deadly proportions due to both protracted instability and increased possession of weapons among young people.<sup>113</sup> As young Palestinians themselves note, young people are arming themselves at alarming rates, carrying weapons in schools, homes, and streets, and turning boyhood brawls into fatal fights among friends.<sup>114</sup>

In particular, difficulties often arise between returned combatants and non-combatant youth. As a former combatant in Sierra Leone claimed, the debilitating stigmas that followed them in the aftermath of their return were frequently perpetuated by peers.<sup>115</sup> In post-conflict situations characterized by resource scarcity and immense competition for employment, for example, non-combatants may spread rumours about atrocities former combatants have committed in order to ensure their own socio-economic security and access to jobs. In this way, peers contribute directly to ex-combatants' social and economic marginalization.

Although conventional research frames family and community as the safe spaces of youth, recent ethnographic work casts doubt upon the assumption that these institutions are necessarily reliable sources of protection during violent social upheaval. It argues that young people are often especially prone to mistreatment from their families and communities, and highlights the urgent need to learn from young people themselves about risks and danger they confront, and from whom they are in need of protection. Furthermore, it warns that failure to understand the true source, nature and extent of threats to young people's well-being risks perpetrating dangerous misconceptions about family and community which may allow for a plethora of mistaken interventions.

### *Rethinking vulnerability*

Age is one among many factors contributing to the susceptibility of youth and adolescents to danger in situations of conflict and displacement. While there can be no doubt that young children are extremely vulnerable during war, these older groups appear especially prone to destructive forces which threaten their long-term survival and healthy development. They experience armed conflict in entirely distinct and unique ways, according to the particular constraints imposed upon them by their age, physical maturity, social status, cultural and economic value. Clear patterns emerge as to how and why they are rendered particularly susceptible to abuse and exploitation, and yet such trends have little to do with innate vulnerability. Instead, it is young people's structural position, the violent dismantling of social relationships, family breakdown, methods and modes terror, cultural tradition and trends of life amidst conflict which so often produces the most insidious threats to their protection. In order to develop effective methods of protection, there is an urgent need for detailed examination of the social, cultural and structural determinants of young people's vulnerability in order to better understand how and why they are endangered in the contexts in which they live.

### 3. Protection in Practice

#### 3.1. YOUNG PEOPLE AND SELF-PROTECTION

In recognition of the extreme dangers which young people face during warfare, assumptions about young children have largely been extended to adolescents and youth as well, and thus a paradigm of vulnerability and dependence has come to dominate research, policy and practice with war-affected youth of all ages. Firstly, perceptions of youth as reliant and of limited competence have forged widespread convictions about their need for adult protection and salvation in the face of adversity. Secondly, biomedical approaches to human suffering promote a picture of war-affected youth as traumatized due to violent, overwhelming events with which they have difficulty coping. Such portrayals of the young take vulnerability rather than resilience as a base, and encourage understandings of war-affected youth as passive, helpless victims rather than competent, resilient survivors.<sup>116</sup>

A growing body of literature suggests, however, that even amidst tremendous hardship, young people may be remarkably capable of managing hazards and coping with misfortune. It argues that they negotiate their own protection on a daily basis, and demonstrate highly developed capacities and techniques for surviving. This literature attempts to shift the dominant discourse to one which focuses on their resilience, coping mechanisms, and strategies for self-protection.<sup>ii</sup> In doing so, it treats young people as active agents with valuable knowledge and insights into their situations, and with particular skills and competencies for managing adversity, protecting themselves from danger, and influencing events around them.<sup>117</sup>

#### *Young people as social and economic actors*

First, this literature begins by pointing out that western notions of youth rarely apply in most places throughout the world.<sup>118</sup> Great variations exist with regards to how young people, their capacities, roles and needs are viewed in different societies, and thus notions of vulnerability and dependence may not be widely shared.<sup>119</sup> On the contrary, young people in many cultures are treated as active members of society, and endowed with important responsibilities and obligations to their communities. For them, growing up is not a time of limited economic and social responsibility, but consists of much of what we perceive to be adult activity and burden.<sup>120</sup>

Research has shown, for example, that young people are often critical to sustaining the domestic unit, and frequently bear major responsibilities for income-generation or family care. They are often an important economic and emotional resource for adults, and thus intergenerational relationships are often characterized by interdependence.<sup>121</sup> Though young people work, care for siblings and elderly relations, or even become

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<sup>ii</sup> Recognition of young people's resourcefulness and resilience is not to deny the potentially overwhelming, devastating nature of war, or that some young people are indeed vulnerable. Nor is it to suggest that youth do not experience profound pain and suffering as a result of their experiences. Some become depressed and anxious, while others experience loss on a level from which it is difficult to recover. It is critical not to romanticize or over-value young people's abilities to cope with the catastrophes that attend their lives during conflict. The potential for coping and survival may change over time. Resourceful youth may become vulnerable, and those who once displayed remarkable resilience may ultimately succumb to distress. Alternatively, young people's own protection strategies may put them at risk either in the short or long term.

entirely self-sufficient, evidence of their active participation in self and family maintenance is often neglected in research and practice. And yet, recognition of their skills, competencies and valuable contributions to family and community implies the need for a reconceptualization of youth which emphasizes it as a culturally distinct phenomenon according to which vulnerability and resilience are determined.

#### *Agents of self-protection*

Second, new research with war-affected youth and adolescents argues that even when young people do find themselves in situations of extreme danger, they do not lose the ability to contest and negotiate their circumstances. It claims that many young people are highly resourceful and readily assume responsibility for themselves and others, influencing their own fate and that of those around them. It considers the means by which the young draw upon the physical, economic, social and emotional resources they have at hand to improve their lives, and emphasizes their capacity for acting in order to ameliorate even the most atrocious circumstances. It focuses on the variety of tactics young people have to resist complete submission or ease their pain, and highlights their abilities to positively influence the outcome of adversity.<sup>122</sup> Finally, it suggests that youth and adolescents in particular are highly resilient, and able to develop strategies for survival due precisely to their abilities and unique social positions.

De Berry's research in northern Uganda, for instance, argues that although adolescent girls were extremely vulnerable to sexual violence from government soldiers, they nonetheless developed myriad strategies to resist, negotiate and control attacks on their personal well-being. Some girls effectively turned the agents of their vulnerability into those of their protection by ingratiating themselves with camp middlemen so as not to be pointed out to soldiers for abduction. In this way, they were able to manipulate the very system that was the source of danger into one that provided them refuge. Others found protection amidst exploitation by arranging to live permanently with one soldier so as to avoid being exchanged between many. In this way, girls were able to ensure financial stability and reliable protection and provision, both improving their living conditions and even retaining a small degree of sexual autonomy.<sup>123</sup>

Similarly, young Kosovar girls developed multiple protective strategies for defending themselves from sexual violence during both flight from home and within displacement camps. As many girls claimed, they regularly disguised themselves in old women's clothing, covering their faces with dirt and assuming the slow gait of elderly ladies so as not to be identified as adolescent girls and raped by Serbian soldiers. Early marriage constitutes another protection strategy, and young Kosovar girls sometimes instigated marriage in order to avert the possibility of rape, or to secure protection and provision for themselves and their dependents.<sup>124</sup> For young Palestinian girls, early marriage represented a means of escape for those facing unbearable conditions in their own homes, such as high levels of domestic abuse.<sup>125</sup>

#### *Arranging care*

Young people regularly make choices about their own care in situations of danger and deprivation. As Mann's research with displaced Congolese youth reveals, many chose to leave their families in Tanzanian refugee camps and become separated urban refugees in Dar es Salaam, where they believed that access to resources, opportunities

for employment, and chances of survival would be better. Among those young people living clandestinely in the city, some went underground, disconnecting themselves from their pasts and choosing to live alone and earn their living on the streets. Others sought lodging and employment as domestic workers, and still others sought assistance from old friends, neighbours, or concerned adults such as church ministers or congregants.<sup>126</sup> In Liberia and Rwanda too, many young separated refugees chose to live by themselves rather than in foster-care. According to these young people, foster-care was a less desirable option due to frequent abuse, discrimination or neglect and a heavy burden of work carried by many foster children. Instead, they preferred independent living that allowed them financial independence.<sup>127</sup>

Research with “bush wives” in northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique suggests that in the aftermath of conflict, some young girls voluntarily choose to remain with their captors due to suspicions that returning home represents a less safe option.<sup>128</sup> Realizing that they are likely to be ostracized from their communities and that they have better chances for food, shelter and protection with their abductors than in their own families, some young girls may actively resist international demobilization and family reunification efforts.

In addition to arranging their own care, displaced young Congolese in Dar es Salaam also protected themselves by concealing their identity as refugees. As Mann notes, the vast majority of Congolese adolescents and youth maintain a false Tanzanian identity, allowing them to benefit from the services of Tanzanian child-centred NGOs; avoid being sent back to refugee camps; and escape the persecution inevitably resulting from refugee status. Such purposeful manipulation of their identities is symptomatic of young people’s fierce desire for self-protection amidst a fragile, illegal existence.<sup>129</sup>

#### *Protection in relief*

Relief interventions often constitute an essential part of young people’s coping strategies and protection mechanisms, though not always in the ways envisioned by agencies themselves. Acceptance into DDR programmes, for example, may be coveted by former combatants who recognize such interventions as a source of social and economic benefits (food, clothing, shelter and companionship) unlikely to be available upon return to their villages. Fearing discrimination in their communities, former combatants in Liberia, for instance, were reluctant to leave transit centres and extended their stays there due to the protection they offered.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, there are numerous anecdotal stories about young people adopting false identities or physical attributes in order to confer upon themselves special needs status and thus reap the associated benefits.

The above examples unmistakably represent the capacity of young people to confront the dangers that threaten them, often using their social roles or status to their advantage. They are testament to the fact that even amidst situations of extreme adversity, young people do not lose the ability to respond to events, but take active steps to negotiate the scale of their suffering. They highlight the varying ways in which young people act to moderate the impacts of abuse, comply with events to their advantage and manage to retain a degree of control over misfortune.<sup>131</sup> Most importantly, they attest to the fact that in many situations, young people’s survival does not occur by accident, but is a result of considered, strategic decisions taken in



order to maximize opportunities for protection as well as economic, political and social gain.<sup>132</sup>

Such evidence has radical implications for the way the international community conceptualises and responds to young people exposed to armed conflict and forced migration. That young people use their agency in a variety of productive, imaginative ways challenges the legitimacy and effectiveness of emergency interventions which treat them as helpless and incompetent in the face of adversity. Indeed, since young people are already working to overcome hardship in their lives, they may well be better served by taking on a practical role in their own protection and some responsibility for their own personal safety.

### **3.1.1. Resources for Adversity Management**

Ethnographic evidence also suggests that even when adversity is unavoidable, youth and adolescents may have distinct resources available to them that help to mediate their experiences of conflict, and aid in the recovery from devastating loss. Until recently, studies conducted in conflict situations have produced a largely uniform body of ideas which have led to the widespread proliferation of psychosocial interventions for war-affected youth.<sup>133</sup> In general, psychosocial programming assumes that war results in negative consequences for long-term development and that war-affected youth are psychologically and emotionally vulnerable and in need of rehabilitation. Medical research has afforded much insight into the impact of war on young people, and has successfully heightened concern for their therapeutic, development and protection needs. To this end, the trauma model has provided the basis for many worthy interventions in health, education and psychosocial support for war-affected youth.<sup>134</sup>

As growing scholarship argues, however, adversity is much more contextually defined and culturally determined than the international protection community generally appreciates.<sup>135</sup> As such, western models of human suffering often fail to adequately understand the mediating effect that social and cultural forces have on experiences of adversity. New research brings into question the inevitability of disastrous effects of war on youth, and suggests that a discourse of trauma and victimization may be an equally misleading basis for protection as one of vulnerability and dependence. Instead, it argues that young people have social, cultural, political, and historical resources for resilience and adaptation, and that an appreciation of context should form the basis for humanitarian responses and protection mechanisms for youth.<sup>136</sup>

#### *Cultural training and social roles*

In many societies, young people's ability to cope with misfortune is enhanced by cultural training in resilience and risk management which takes place during adolescence. Ceremonial transitions from childhood, for example, often prove to be a source of strength in times of crisis. Work with former combatants in Ethiopia, for example, suggests that adolescent boys who had undergone initiation ceremonies prior to conscription showed better resilience to conditions of war than those who had not been initiated.<sup>137</sup> As Tefferi argues, initiation ceremonies involving ritual scarification or circumcision stress a transition to manhood through acts of independence, bravery, responsibility and strength. Afterward, initiates are seen as adults, a status which accommodates the activities of warfare, and carries with it expectations for defending a family's social and economic interests. Thus, coming of

age ceremonies and societal expectations enabled adolescent boys to assimilate their experiences of violence, while those who had not been initiated had great difficulty reconciling the atrocities they'd committed with their status as children.<sup>138</sup>

Young people may be particularly prone to hazard in times of war, but they also have resources to draw upon – social, personal, religious, traditional, political and economic ones – which ensure that they are rarely overcome by single traumatic events. Emphasizing such complexities, recent research with war-affected youth has made significant contributions to a slowly emerging critique of trauma models in determining young people's protection and assistance needs. It argues that biomedical approaches and trauma are culturally distinct phenomenon, and thus may not be relevant, valid, or appropriate for universal use.<sup>139</sup> Instead, social, cultural, historical and political experiences should be recognized as major determinants of the ways young people process adversity and recover from it. Insofar as they shape the meaning of events, they will reveal what therapeutic efforts will be relevant and successful, what risks remain in place, what protection strategies are best pursued.<sup>140</sup>

### **3.2. PAST PRACTICE**

Currently, agency interventions in conflict-affected areas are characterized by a striking lack of engagement with youth. In part, this is due to the general construction of a depoliticised humanitarian space in which individuals, and particularly young people, are cast merely as aid recipients, without relevant personal or historical identities.<sup>141</sup> Such perceptions have long served as convenient justification for policy and practice which relies on adult opinions and involves low participation from youth in determining the nature of protection efforts on their behalf. To this end, young people are generally treated as objects of adult decisions rather than social actors with insights and ideas of their own,<sup>142</sup> and adult informants are relied upon to provide information about young people's needs and well-being.

But adults frequently misinterpret young people's lives. As a result, agency interventions are often unrevealing of young people's own priorities at best, and detrimental to their protection and well-being at worst. Firstly, past interventions have often failed to address young people's most pressing concerns, and recent consultations with youth and adolescents have produced unexpected revelations regarding their sources of fear and distress.<sup>143</sup> Studies suggest, for instance, that the most devastating threats to young people's well-being often result from prolonged conditions of poverty and insecurity – which result in malnutrition and difficulties accessing health care and education – rather than from exposure to violence.<sup>144</sup> In post-war Angola, for example, many youth appear to be far more concerned with continued survival and access to food, clothing and adult care, than with past experiences of death or destruction.<sup>145</sup>

Agency programming is often predetermined by international headquarters in the West,<sup>146</sup> and therefore tends to be driven by global fashion or political agendas rather than by consideration of young people's greatest needs. Widespread international attention to issues such as child soldiering, for example, often means that the greatest numbers of war-affected young people with the greatest needs are not supported. While funding for interventions with young combatants grows steadily, the more mundane issues – such as access to basic healthcare services – that threaten far more

young people on a daily basis are often neglected. This implies an urgent need to develop more holistic programming which is open to looking at young people in their relation to society as a whole rather than to single issues or specific events about which we have great concern. In short, an ‘evidence-based’ approach to programming rather than one determined by current global values is crucial, as such efforts may reflect the values of a relatively small number of people.<sup>147</sup>

Secondly, studies that disregard young people’s opinions may result in misplaced interventions which have adverse effects for youth. For example, contemporary support mechanisms provided by international NGOs tend to be based on the presupposition that parent-child separation is always an accidental and unwanted occurrence, and thus family reunification is given first priority. And yet, evidence to the contrary suggests that amidst war and tremendous family strain, youth exercise their agency by making decisions based on the selection of the best of the limited choices available to them, some which may entail separation from families in search of better protection. If we take such insights seriously, we are forced to radically rethink the kinds of interventions being designed for separated youth.<sup>148</sup>

### **3.3. TOWARD BETTER PROTECTION: DEVELOPING PARTICIPATION**

Sustained research with young people has unearthed compelling evidence that there is an urgent need to reconsider objectives, approaches and strategies in humanitarian protection and assistance. In general, it has supplied new information regarding youth and adolescents’ particular susceptibility to hazard during warfare, and stressed the need to guard against assumptions about sources of risk and safety. Instead, it advocates for protection measures to be built around young people’s own beliefs, practices and realities. It has also provided new insights into the nature of young people’s resilience, arguing that war-affected youth are not merely passive, traumatized victims in need of salvation and protection, but social actors in their own right, often competent survivors with methods and strategies for protection all their own.

But how are we to move forward from observations regarding susceptibility, resilience and coping to devise better protection policy and practice for young people in conflict situations? Such questions inspired Cumberland Lodge, the Refugee Studies Centre and the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children to organize a conference on young people affected by war and displacement. This event was conceived as a crucial step in an ongoing process of discussion and learning across professional and institutional boundaries, disciplines, agencies, cultures and geographic regions. It aimed to draw upon experience from academia, practitioners, policy makers and war-affected young people themselves in order to develop a more holistic and comprehensive framework for protection.

The following points were intended to provide a general basis for discussion during the course of the conference. As this paper has argued, there is much need for reflection regarding the social construction of protection and danger, how best to capitalize on and reinforce young people’s resources for resilience, and how to encourage competencies that will lead to self-protection. To begin, it has been proposed that we must do away with the “problem-solving imperative” that drives much research and practice today, emphasizing instead the abilities of young people

to confront their own problems and take at least some action on their own behalf by using indigenous mechanisms and techniques to deal with misfortune.<sup>149</sup>

*Protection should be based upon young people's beliefs, practices and realities*

As we have seen, young people frequently negotiate their own protection on a daily basis, often long before the arrival of the international relief community. Therefore, it is argued that we would do well to engage young people as active participants in the establishment of protection mechanisms with constructive roles in and responsibility for their own safety. First and foremost, this means that their views should be treated as a source of strength. It requires doing research with young people, encouraging them to explain their worlds and provide insights into their lives. It requires consultation and collaboration with the young, and challenges adults to allow space for young people to educate us about problems and solutions of which we may be unaware. To this end, there is a need for participatory research methods and operational strategies that are adolescent/youth-centred and context-specific, and that involve youth as participants in the analysis of their own situations, needs and capacities.<sup>150</sup>

Failures of the international protection community with regards to youth combatants, for example, may be in part the result of policies and practice only loosely constructed around young people's own perspectives, priorities and realities. Youth participation in combat has now become an intensive focus of advocacy and humanitarian intervention, with programmes geared primarily toward providing psychosocial assistance to former combatants.<sup>151</sup> And yet, many young people remain with fighting forces in the aftermath of war, or rejoin after demobilization. Such trends are likely the result of interventions which fail to address young people's diverse experiences of war: that militaries represent a source of basic resources, self-esteem, protection, power, wealth, even family, or that conflict may be a positive experience.<sup>152</sup> Some young people are afraid to return home to a life of ostracism and isolation in their villages,<sup>153</sup> others feel safer in a community that understands their experiences. Still others are unprepared to relinquish the prestige and authority earned through military service, particularly for a life of little satisfaction without education or employment opportunities in their homes. Some worry about being restored to the status of children, and bristle at the thought, for example, of having to renew their disrupted educations in schools alongside young children.<sup>154</sup> Without understanding such complexities of experience, how can we provide attractive alternatives to military service?

Starting from young people's own beliefs and practices is equally important in developing relevant and effective reproductive health programmes. In order to adequately address the spread of HIV/AIDS, for instance, it seems crucial to address the underlying reasons for increased voluntary sexual activity and sexual exploitation, and the social customs and taboos which render at-risk youth especially unlikely to receive treatment. In general, absence of educational and economic opportunities not only provides explanation for the large numbers of girls turning to prostitution for sustenance, it also explains boys increased idle time and need for alternative routes to sexual relationships.<sup>155</sup>

Young people's own perspectives and realities have profound implications for programme design and operational strategy. In most countries, young people are

highly vocal about the importance of educational and livelihood opportunities for overall protection strategies. Firstly, they emphasize the potential for education to endow them with vital survival skills and preparation for job markets. They highlight the inadequacy of primary education and call for age-specific educational strategies relevant to their life phases and their needs to assume constructive, productive roles in society. To this end, they require educational opportunities that provide vocational training and enable them to generate a livelihood. Young people also recognize education as a means to protection through the transmission of crucial knowledge such as reproductive health information.<sup>156</sup>

Secondly, young people claim that without vocational skills, they are ill-equipped to provide for themselves and their families, and may be forced or drawn into exploitative activities such as military service or prostitution. Thus, they are anxious for apprenticeship, technical skills training and income-generation opportunities, which are repeatedly heralded as the most important factor mitigating the hardships of life in the aftermath of war and contributing to resilience and survival.<sup>157</sup>

*Interventions should build upon young people's skills, knowledge and experience*

There is a major gulf between the stereotypical view of young people as beneficiaries or passive cases in need of protection and their own perception of themselves as competent social and economic actors with insights into their own problems and ideas about how to solve them. Indeed, young people's own personal identities are often constructed upon a view of themselves as contributing members of society with competencies and capacities that are vital to their families and communities.<sup>158</sup> Agency interventions should build upon their knowledge, skill, and experience in order to improve the quality of protection mechanisms. This requires devising appropriate ways for young people to be involved in relevant fora and mechanisms related to the design, management and implementation of protection solutions.<sup>159</sup> Though there are a growing number of positive examples of participatory work with war-affected young people which suggest that their participation markedly improves the quality of protection interventions,<sup>160</sup> there is enormous scope for development in this area.

Young people's participation may do more than improve programme quality, however. It also has the potential for positively impacting their overall well-being<sup>161</sup> by encouraging and supporting those competencies and skills which play a crucial role in determining resilience and self-preservation amidst adversity. To this end, it is essential that we support young people's strengths and skills – even those learned in combat, such as leadership, teamwork, resourcefulness and courage – so as not to undermine their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and eventually, their capacity for self-protection. In fact, situations of adversity may well be the most important context for encouraging young people's abilities, as taking away even the smallest elements of power can be very harmful.

*Protection should be rooted in indigenous mechanisms for survival and recovery*

Participatory approaches suggest a radical shift away from traditional victim-patient models and from dangerous misconceptions about young people's inability to cope with or respond to adversity. Integral to such efforts should be a recognition that people and communities have methods and measures for healing in the aftermath of crisis, and that processes of reconciliation and reintegration are largely dependent

upon varying approaches to and concepts of sickness, suffering, misfortune, health, healing and recovery. Agency interventions should be supportive of indigenous measures, as they ultimately promise to have far more sustainable impacts on young people's well-being than interventions devised by outside 'experts.'<sup>162</sup>

A popular example of the vast discrepancies between various western and indigenous techniques for dealing with violence and distress revolves around the treatment of young ex-combatants. While humanitarian agencies often establish reintegration programmes which offer psychological counselling to individual returnees, many African communities rely on collective healing methods involving ritual purification and the exorcism of evil spirits.<sup>163</sup> According to Honwana, healing and protective ceremonies rarely involve verbal recollections of traumatic experiences, which often carry deep social taboos, as it is thought to invite harmful spirits to penetrate and do harm to combatants and their communities.<sup>164</sup>

Much research is needed in order to understand local resources at hand for restoring young people's well-being, and sincere efforts should be made to integrate alternative philosophies and approaches to health into agency interventions, as western psychosocial programmes may be highly inappropriate and even damaging to young people in other parts of the world.<sup>165</sup> To this end, how can we develop more holistic approaches to programming aided by policies that allow for less centralized planning and greater sensitivity to local conditions and complexities?

*Interventions should focus carefully on the restoration of communities*

Research and practitioner experience emphasize the fact that little real healing can occur for young people without the restoration of communities and social structures, revitalization of services and rebuilding of productive capacity.<sup>166</sup> And yet, research also warns us that we must be wary of our impulse toward "restoring normality" for young people through the rebuilding of communities, as "normal" life is often characterized by the extreme structural violence of poverty, social exclusion, abuse and exploitation *within* communities.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, it is critical to remember that normality itself often encompasses grave injustices and inequalities for young people which may be accentuated in post-conflict situations.

We are consistently reminded that the most effective and sustainable interventions are those rooted in principles of social and cultural appropriateness at the grass-roots level. This means fitting projects within and around local beliefs and practices in order to increase likelihood that a protective environment will subsist for young people long after the humanitarian community has gone. It means reliance on culturally grounded methods, on local resources, and on integration of projects within existing community processes.<sup>168</sup> It means, for example, being wary of protection interventions based upon globalized understandings of 'family', since what comprises family for some young people may be dissimilar to what practitioners presume. In many cases, sibling groups or peer groups have become family, and may provide interdependence and emotional ties stronger than those existing between youth and their parents.<sup>169</sup> Such realities cast serious doubts upon our proclivity for family reunification programmes, and appeal to agencies to carefully determine the varying constructions of family before designing related interventions.

### *Ways forward*

Overall, research with war-affected youth highlights the urgent need to resist hasty action in emergency situations which allows for interventions to be assembled quickly and with little supporting knowledge or research. Such interventions are too often characterized by unacceptable policies and practices that are ineffective at best, and limiting or harmful to youth at worst.<sup>170</sup> Most modern conflicts are protracted, and wax and wane over long periods of time. A result of this unfortunate trend is that under such circumstances we can afford to encourage research-based interventions built on participatory work. Interventions that continually strive to support the active role of youth in those decisions and processes affecting their lives.

In essence, it seems fundamentally detrimental to young people's well-being to discount their perspectives and contributions, as in doing so we risk undermining their strengths and the positive roles they play in their own protection, and rendering them perhaps *more* susceptible to danger. Instead, our principal strategies should perhaps be based upon identifying sources of strength and resilience in young people, and reinforcing their existing competencies through active participation in protection mechanisms on their behalf. Listening to young people reveals that that protection is already taking place in myriad small ways, though evidence of this is buried beneath stories about their suffering during war. And yet, though the fabric of young people's lives may be badly torn, individual and collective resources for survival still exist, and thus the fundamental challenge before the humanitarian community is to involve young people in the active exploitation of those resources which provide them safety amidst the chaos of war.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Sommers, 2002: 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Boyden, *et al.* 2002 : 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Machel, 1996: 13.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid: 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Hart, 2002d: 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Machel, 1996: 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid: 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid: 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003: 7.
- <sup>11</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 54.
- <sup>12</sup> Machel 1996: 59.
- <sup>13</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 54.
- <sup>14</sup> Machel, 1996: 59-64.
- <sup>15</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 55; Nicolai and Triplehorn, 2003: 8.
- <sup>16</sup> WCRWC, 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid: 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid: 2-9.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid: 4.
- <sup>20</sup> WCRWC, 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002a; 2002b.
- <sup>21</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid: 1.
- <sup>23</sup> Ahearn and Athey, 1991.
- <sup>24</sup> Hart, 2002d: 2-3.
- <sup>25</sup> Bracken 1998; Bracken and Petty 1998; Dawes, 1999; Dawes and Honwana, 1996; Eyber, 2002; Eyber and Ager, 2004; Gibbs, 1994; Honwana 1999; Loughry and Eyber, 2003; Summerfield, 1998.
- <sup>26</sup> Dawes, 1999; Panter-Brick, 2000: 4; Stephens, 1995; Woodhead, 1997.
- <sup>27</sup> Boyden, 2000: 63; Dawes, 1999: 19; Stevens, 1995; Woodhead 1997.
- <sup>28</sup> Boyden 1997, 2000; Dawes, 1999: 4; Jenks, 1996; Panter-Brick, 2000: 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Panter-Brick, 2000: 4-5.
- <sup>30</sup> Boyden: 63.
- <sup>31</sup> Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 3; Eyber, 2002: 23; Gibbs, 1994: 270; Loughry and Eyber, 2003: 6.
- <sup>32</sup> Eyber, 2002: 3; Eyber and Ager, 2004: 302.
- <sup>33</sup> Eyber and Ager, 2004: 303.
- <sup>34</sup> Dawes, 1999: 15; Dawes and Honwana, 1996: 3.
- <sup>35</sup> WCRWC, 2000.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid: 3.
- <sup>37</sup> Dawes, 1999: 4; James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996: 29; Schafer, 2004: 154.
- <sup>38</sup> Boyden 2000: 68.
- <sup>39</sup> Mawson, 2004: 226.
- <sup>40</sup> Eyber and Ager, 2004: 314.
- <sup>41</sup> De Berry, 2003.
- <sup>42</sup> Tefferi, 2003.
- <sup>43</sup> WCRWC, 2003: 3.
- <sup>44</sup> Tefferi, 2003.
- <sup>45</sup> De Berry, 2003.
- <sup>46</sup> Boyden 2000: 68.
- <sup>47</sup> Mawson, 2004: 219.
- <sup>48</sup> Schafer, 2004: 154.
- <sup>49</sup> Tefferi, 2003.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Schafer, 2004: 176-177.
- <sup>52</sup> WCRWC, 2000.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Machel, 1996: 18.
- <sup>55</sup> Sommers, 2002: 26.



- <sup>56</sup> Ibid: 18-19.
- <sup>57</sup> West, 2004: 185.
- <sup>58</sup> Honwana, 1998; Machel, 1996: 19; Peters and Richards, 1998: 82.
- <sup>59</sup> McCallin, 1998: 66.
- <sup>60</sup> Utas, 2004: 344.
- <sup>61</sup> McCallin, 1998: 66; Peters and Richards, 1998: 77; Utas: 343; West, 2004.
- <sup>62</sup> Schafer, 2004: 157.
- <sup>63</sup> Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 7.
- <sup>64</sup> Peters and Richards, 1998.
- <sup>65</sup> Tefferi, 2003.
- <sup>66</sup> Eyber and Ager, 2004: 314.
- <sup>67</sup> Tefferi, 2003.
- <sup>68</sup> WCRWC, 2002a: 11.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid: 10-13.
- <sup>70</sup> WCRWC, 2001b: 10.
- <sup>71</sup> Utas, 2004: 344.
- <sup>72</sup> McCallin, 1998 : 66.
- <sup>73</sup> Boyden *et al.*, 2002 : 47.
- <sup>74</sup> WCRWC, 2002b: 5.
- <sup>75</sup> Mann, 2003a; Tolfree, 2004: 165-166; Tolfree *et al.*, 2003; WCRWC, 2000.
- <sup>76</sup> De Berry, 2004: 90; Machel, 1996: 22; Swaine and Feeny, 2004: 132; WCRWC, 2000: 42.
- <sup>77</sup> Machel, 1996: 23.
- <sup>78</sup> De Berry, 2004 : 104-105; Machel, 1996 : 24.
- <sup>79</sup> De Berry, 2004 : 101.
- <sup>80</sup> Boyden, 2000: 70.
- <sup>81</sup> Swaine, 2004: 135-136.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid: 129.
- <sup>83</sup> De Berry, 2004: 102-104.
- <sup>84</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 25
- <sup>85</sup> Mazurana and McKay, 2003.
- <sup>86</sup> Swaine, 2004: 135.
- <sup>87</sup> WCRWC, 2001a : 24.
- <sup>88</sup> Machel, 1996: 43.
- <sup>89</sup> WCRWC, 2000: 4, 32.
- <sup>90</sup> WCRWC, 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002a.
- <sup>91</sup> Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 8-9.
- <sup>92</sup> Boyden 2000: 70.
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid: 70.
- <sup>94</sup> Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 9.
- <sup>95</sup> Mann, 2003b.
- <sup>96</sup> De Berry, 2004: 102-103.
- <sup>97</sup> Boyden, personal communication.
- <sup>98</sup> De Berry, 2004: 102.
- <sup>99</sup> Chatty, 2002: 24.
- <sup>100</sup> De Berry, 2004: 104.
- <sup>101</sup> Tolfree, 2004 145.
- <sup>102</sup> Mann, 2003a; Tolfree, 2000: 145-150.
- <sup>103</sup> Boyden, 2000: 70.
- <sup>104</sup> WCRWC, 2002b: 13.
- <sup>105</sup> Palma, 2003.
- <sup>106</sup> Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 21.
- <sup>107</sup> WCRWC, personal communication.
- <sup>108</sup> Save the Children, 2003; Swaine, 2004: 151; WCRWC, 2001b, 2002a; West, 2004.
- <sup>109</sup> Boyden and Gibbs, 1997.
- <sup>110</sup> Petty and Jareg, 1998; Tolfree, 2004.
- <sup>111</sup> Swaine, 2004: 137-138.
- <sup>112</sup> Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 24.
- <sup>113</sup> Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 21; WCRWC, 2001a.
- <sup>114</sup> Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 21.
- <sup>115</sup> Boyden, personal communication.

- 116 Cairns 1996; Eyber and Ager, 2004: 302.
- 117 Eyber and Ager, 2004: 304.
- 118 Dawes, 1999: 3.
- 119 Eyber, 2002: 23.
- 120 Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 7; Gibbs, 1994; Panter-Brick, 2000: 6-8.
- 121 Hinton, 2000.
- 122 De Berry, 2002: 92.
- 123 Ibid: 101, 104.
- 124 Swaine, 2004: 136, 139.
- 125 Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 23.
- 126 Mann, 2002: 117, 2003.
- 127 Mann, 2003a: 40; Tolfree, 2004; Tolfree *et al.* 2003: 33; Veale, 2004: xv.
- 128 Mazurana and McKay, 2003: 27.
- 129 Mann, 2002: 121.
- 130 Save the Children 2003: 3; Tolfree, 2004: 28.
- 131 De Berry, 2004: 108.
- 132 Mann, 2001a: 92.
- 133 Bracken and Petty, 1998; Eyber, 2002; Loughry and Eyber, 2003.
- 134 Boyden and de Berry, 2004: 5
- 135 Bracken, 1998; Bracken and Petty, 1998; Dawes, 1999; Dawes and Honwana, 1996; Eyber, 2002.
- 136 Bracken, 1998; Bracken and Petty, 1998; Summerfield, 1998.
- 137 Tefferi, 2003.
- 138 Ibid.
- 139 Bracken, 1998; Bracken and Petty, 1998; Dawes, 1999; Dawes and Honwana, 1996; Eyber, 2002; Honwana, 1999; Summerfield, 1998.
- 140 Bracken, 1998: 55.
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- 142 Boyden, 2000: 78.
- 143 MacMullin and Loughry, 2000.
- 144 Cairns, 1996; Eyber, 2002: 22, Eyber and Ager, 2004.
- 145 Eyber and Ager, 2004.
- 146 Chatty and Hundt, 2002: 7.
- 147 Hart, personal communication.
- 148 Mann, 2001a: 93.
- 149 Boyden and de Berry, 2000: 36.
- 150 WCRWC, 2000: 71.
- 151 Mawson, 2004: 218, 227; Mazurana and McKay, 2003.
- 152 Utas, 2004; West, 2004.
- 153 Save the Children, 2003.
- 154 WCRWC, 2000.
- 155 Sommers, 1998: 9; WCRWC, 2002a: 17.
- 156 WCRW, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a.
- 157 Mazurana and McKay, 2003: 15; McCallin, 1998: 72; Peters and Richards, 1998: 82; Tolfree *et al.*, 2002: 46.
- 158 Gibbs, 1994: 272; Hart, 2004: 279.
- 159 Boyden and Mann, 2000: 21.
- 160 See in particular Hart, 2002b, 2003; WCRWC, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a.
- 161 Hart, 2002a, 2002b, 2003.
- 162 Dawes and Honwana, 1996; Hinton, 2000; Honwana, 1999; Wessells and Monteiro, 2000.
- 163 Mawson, 2004: 227; Honwana, 1999; Wessells and Monteiro, 2000.
- 164 Honwana, 1999: 6.
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- 166 Summerfield, 2000; Wessells and Monteiro, 2000: 198.
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- 169 Mann, 2001b; Tolfree, 2004: 161-162.
- 170 Tolfree, 2004: 37.

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