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Children as agents in crises: re-assessing adult-child power dynamics in humanitarian action

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The humanitarian sector is not spared from the adultcentrism governing our societies. Taking this notion and its practical implications as a starting point, the two authors deconstruct this doxa and explore what might be achieved if children's voices and expertise were taken into account.

Humanitarian crises present a myriad of threats to children,[1] such as structural and physical violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.[2] Humanitarian response efforts seek to address such risk factors through their programming to ensure a child's protection and well-being before, during and after an emergency.[3] This humanitarian assistance can range from support for basic needs, the provision of shelter, psychosocial and hygiene care to formal and non-formal educational activities in child-friendly spaces.[4] In recent years, humanitarian response efforts have started to embrace children's contributions to humanitarian programming, design and implementation. However, from closer inspection, much of the emphasis on child participation still draws on adult-designed strategies that view children as passive victims rather than actors in their own right.[5] Protections are generally necessary for vulnerable children – but they are frequently overemphasised and can override children's agency even in situations where a participatory approach would be beneficial. Generic, adult-driven processes deny children the opportunity to identify and communicate potential risks and hazards, which can result in their heightened exposure to harm.[6] We argue that conventional top-down approaches to humanitarian assistance should be replaced by child-driven programming that acknowledges children as skilled actors within emergency contexts who are exceedingly capable of shaping their environment and making autonomous decisions.

[1] In the following, we use the term "children" to refer to persons younger than 18 years of age, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, §1.
[2] Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action*, 2019, https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094
[3] Janna Metzler *et al.*, "Educational, psychosocial, and protection outcomes of child and youth focused programming with Somali refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia", *Disasters*, vol. 45, no. 1, January 2021, pp. 67–85.
[4] Guy Thompstone and Jennifer Chen, *The Participation of Children and Young People in Emergencies*, United Nations Children's Fund, East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, October 2007, https://www.lacittadeibambini.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The_Participation_of_Children_and_Young_People_in_Emergencies.pdf
[5] Mónica Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, "Children's rights to participation and protection in international development and humanitarian interventions: Nurturing a dialogue", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–13.
[6] Tom Mitchell *et al.*, "The role of children and youth in communicating disaster risk", *Children Youth and Environments*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2008, pp. 254–279; Kei Nishiyama, "Between protection and participation: Rethinking children's rights to participate in protests on streets, online spaces, and schools", *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 501–517.

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The status quo: adultcentrism in humanitarian assistance

The dominant view on humanitarian assistance efforts places children in the position of passive victims. This perspective comes from a so-called "adultcentrism" mindset – a thought paradigm that considers adults' perspectives superior to those of children. Most adults – particularly those working in the humanitarian field – generally have children's best interest at heart. However, this does not prevent them from applying widely prevalent biases onto their interactions with children.[7] Adultcentrism has developed over the course of centuries and is the dominant view in most cultures worldwide.[8] Within the traditional construction of childhood, children are perceived as "adults-to-be" with a deficiency in knowledge, experience and understanding, rather than being acknowledged as their own persons with a unique view of the world and set of abilities.[9] This "othering" of children is a by-product of the dichotomy between competent adults and incompetent children and often results in children's exclusion from crucial social processes – as evident, for instance, in the expectation for children (especially girls) to obey adults and not ask questions.[10] In contrast to the assumption that children lack the maturity to communicate their needs, studies indicate that it is in fact the social expectation for them to remain silent that may crucially inhibit children from expressing their thoughts.[11]

In the field of humanitarian action, adultcentrism is clearly evident in the predominant view of children as mere beneficiaries of aid.[12] While for years, reform agendas have pushed for more accountability *vis-à-vis* affected people, greater inclusion of marginalised groups and the redistribution of power and financial assistance to local experts, this conversation has failed to make similar progress in regards to children.[13] Research on why adult-child power relations have remained unaddressed is similarly scarce: we suspect several factors play into this paucity. First, adultcentrism is a relatively new concept that has mostly gained traction in fields such as psychology and pedagogy – all the while, adultcentric views remain deeply enshrined in cultural belief systems.[14] Secondly, both international and national child protection systems, around which humanitarian assistance for children is largely structured, are inherently adultcentric: while paramount during a crisis, protection procedures are usually based on the assumption that children are victims with little control over their lives whose fates should be determined by adults.[15] For humanitarian practitioners, this creates what Mónica Ruiz-Casares *et al.* call the "participation-protection dilemma": how to give children a voice while also managing their safety according to protection guidelines?[16] Additionally, many organisations depend on overemphasising children's vulnerability and victimhood in order to secure funding from empathetic donors.[17]

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[7] Sydney Campbell, "The ethics of adultcentrism in the context of Covid-19: whose voice matters?", *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2021, pp. 569–572; Eleonora Florio, Letizia Caso and Ilaria Castelli, "The adultcentrism scale in the educational relationship: instrument development and preliminary validation", *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 57, April 2020.
[8] Sydney Campbell, "The ethics of adultcentrism…", *art. cit.*; Marco Blanco, "Youth are the present, not the future", *Alliance Magazine*, 28 February 2020, https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/youth-are-the-present-not-the-future
[9] Christopher G. Petr, "Adultcentrism in practice with children", *Families in Society*, vol. 73, no. 7, 1992, pp. 408–416.
[10] Mónica Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, "Children's rights to participation…", *art. cit.*; Claire O'Kane, *Guidelines for children's participation in humanitarian programming*, Save the Children, 2013, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/children_participation_humanitarian_guidelines.pdf
[11] Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Routledge, 2016.
[12] Nicola Ansell, *Children, Youth and Development*, Routledge, 2016.
[13] Ruth Sinclair, "Participation in practice: making it meaningful, effective and sustainable", *Children & Society*, vol. 18, no. 2, April 2004, pp. 106–118.
[14] Eleonora Florio, Letizia Caso and Ilaria Castelli, "The adultcentrism scale…", *art. cit.*
[15] Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice,* Routledge, 2009.
[16] Mónica Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, "Children's rights to participation…", *art. cit.*
[17] Kei Nishiyama, "Between protection and participation…", *art. cit.*

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Regardless of the reasons behind adultcentric behaviour, this paradigm remains the starting point of most humanitarian engagement with children. Despite the fact that a growing number of projects are employing participatory approaches, tokenism is extremely common and decision-making processes remain almost exclusively in the hands of adults.[18] The negative consequences of adultcentrism when working with children include "miscommunication (with children), inaccurate judgments (about children's intents and motivations), misuse of power (to limit children's self-determination), and undermining [children's] strengths and competencies."[19] Designing humanitarian programming without accounting for children's priorities and concerns can easily lead practitioners to tackle the wrong action points or fail to identify certain hazards. Adults often presume that they have a complete overview of the risks that children face. In truth, however, children have a unique ability to understand threats and their perceptions may differ significantly from those of adults. For example, in the Philippines, in a context in which adults were primarily concerned with providing for their household, a group of children saw the need to make local livelihood practises more environmentally sound by planting mangroves to provide long-term protection from storm surges.[20] To avoid the downsides of adultcentric control, power structures need to change in favour of allowing children to exercise their agency and contribute to matters that affect them.

Bridging the power gap: the potential of meaningful participation

Children have an intrinsic motivation to participate in processes that impact their lives and contribute to solving issues that concern their safety and well-being. When adults value these contributions, children are able to fully explore their agency. Furthermore, their active involvement can increase their resilience against some of the adverse impacts of and inherent risks in humanitarian crises.[21] By embracing a child-focused approach to participatory humanitarian activities, children are placed at the centre of engagement, encouraging their active participation at all stages of a project or service. Going one step further, in child-led programming, children are able to identify issues, initiate actions and advocate for themselves. The role of adults is rather to act as collaborators or facilitators on the ground, shifting the decision-making power toward children. For humanitarian programming, this means that adults give away part of their control by assuming only a support and advisory role. Although keeping children safe is an essential part of protective measures, children's meaningful participation can only occur in environments not controlled by adults. For effective child empowerment, humanitarian programming must include spaces for children where they feel safe enough to speak up and initiate action as individuals on their own terms.[22] Most importantly, children need to recognise the power they possess and the responsibility that comes with this position.[23] Decision-making with or by children and the resulting power shift is critical for participatory humanitarian action to reach its potential for closing gaps in child protection and care arrangements.

[18] Roger A. Hart, *Children's participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*, Earthscan, 1997.
[19] Christopher G. Petr, "Adultcentrism in practice…", *art. cit.*
[20] Thomas Tanner, "Shifting the narrative: child led responses to climate change and disasters in El Salvador and the Philippines", *Children & Society*, vol. 24, no. 4, July 2010, pp. 339–351.
[21] Anne Trine Kjørholt, "Small is powerful: discourses on 'children and participation' in Norway", *Childhood*, vol. 9, no. 1, February 2002, pp. 63–82; Ganna G. van Bijleveld, Christine W.M. Dedding and Joske F.G. Bunders-Aelen, "Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: a state-of-the-art review", *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 20, no. 2, May 2015, pp. 129–138.
[22] Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation…, op. cit.*
[23] Nicola Ansell, *Children, Youth and Development, op. cit.*

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An example of how meaningful participation can benefit children's health and development is evident when considering the psychosocial consequences of humanitarian crises. The devastating experiences of humanitarian crises (e.g., fleeing from one's home, being separated from family and/or community, witnessing and experiencing violence) can be severely distressing for children. Such extreme and prolonged stress experiences fall under the category of "toxic stress" and, without proper mitigation efforts, can permanently alter children's developing brains, causing health and behavioural issues well into adulthood. Research shows that toxic stress experiences during childhood are directly linked to the development of chronic diseases, heightened risk for drug addiction and increased anxiety and aggression, among other issues.[24] However, studies also indicate that children's feelings of stress and helplessness in crises can be mitigated by fostering a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem.[25] Meaningful participatory approaches do precisely that.

In addition to the psychosocial benefits, empowering children to use their agency also means that they learn to assume more responsibility to improve their everyday situations. As children are the experts on their problems and needs, they are in many cases best suited to identify and tackle them. While children should not carry the brunt of the burden in confronting structural issues, their contributions to solving these problems can drastically improve the effectiveness of humanitarian programming and allow for much more targeted support. Many examples from humanitarian practice illustrate this positive effect: TPO Uganda, a non-governmental organisation working with refugee children, allowed children to decide which forms of therapy they would offer and learned through this experience that music and dance were crucial elements for processing children's emotions.[26] In Nepal and Guatemala, children's groups have developed effective domestic and sexual violence reporting mechanisms, which make use of children's input.[27] In the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan, children set up large speakers in isolated regions to educate their peers through child-run radio shows about the risks of Covid-19 and ways to protect themselves.[28] In the Philippines, many schools in disaster-prone areas have formed emergency response teams for natural hazards which are led by children.[29] In El Salvador, simple teachings about hazard protections in schools progressed into children autonomously leading a risk communication campaign focused on house flooding caused by illegal quarrying in their communities. The children managed to motivate both their parents and peers to support them in pressuring local government authorities to stop the disruptive activities long term.[30] Such child-driven projects also allow children to build new peer support networks. Especially in situations where children are uprooted, connecting with

[24] Jack P. Shonkoff *et al.,* "The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress", *Pediatrics*, vol. 129, no. 1, January 2012, pp. 232–246; Fran Seballos and Thomas Tanner, *Enabling Child-Centred Agency in Disaster Risk Reduction*, Institute of Development Studies, 2011, https://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2011/en/bgdocs/Seballos_&_Tanner_2011.pdf

[25] Kylie G. Oliver *et al.*, "Building resilience in young people through meaningful participation", *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006, pp. 34–40; Michael G. Wessells, "Supporting resilience in war-affected children: how differential impact theory is useful in humanitarian practice", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 78, April 2018, pp. 13–18.

[26] Dinnah Nabwire and Patrick Onyango-Mangen, "Children as multipliers of peace: Exemplars of psychosocial support in Uganda", *PeaceLab Blog*, 14 April 2021, https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/children-as-multipliers-of-peace-exemplars-of-psychosocial-support-in-uganda

[27] Jason Hart, *Children's participation in humanitarian action: learning from zones of armed conflict*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2004, https://inee.org/sites/default/files/Childrens_Participation_in_Humanitarian_Act_EN.PDF; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on violence against children, *Children as Agents of Positive Change*, United Nations Publications, 2021, https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789214030416/read

[28] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on violence against children, *Children as Agents… op. cit.*

[29] Lynne Benson and Jon Bugge, *Child-led disaster risk reduction: a practical guide*, Save the Children, 2007, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/2660.pdf

[30] Tom Mitchell *et al.,* "The roles of children and youth…", *art. cit*.

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other children in their community who experience similar issues can play an essential role in reducing their vulnerability and creating a sense of normalcy and belonging.[31]

Despite the significant advantages child-led humanitarian action can have for children in the short and long term, it also comes with the risk of causing unintended harm.[32] For one, the criticism or ideas that children bring forward could be undesirable to the adults around them or to the community at large. In contexts in which strict social hierarchies are prevalent, children's active engagement could challenge the overall distribution of power and incite backlash. In this scenario, speaking up and taking action could actually have a disempowering effect on children. While younger children are often overlooked or belittled, adolescents who act as drivers of change are frequently perceived as a threat – groups of young people organising themselves may raise concerns among authorities and potentially put them in danger. This is particularly true when the humanitarian crisis arises as part of a political or armed conflict: children's engagement could even trigger dynamics that worsen the overall situation. For example, child-led peacebuilding activities aimed at bringing different ethnic groups in a conflict together may enrage the adults in their environment to a point where such efforts could achieve the opposite effect. In addition, children may want to conduct harmful activities, e.g. projects that entail hard physical labour. [33] Yet, as much as there are risks that need to be considered, there is no gain without challenging the status quo. Risk can be heightened from either the protective or the participatory side of assistance. Effective child-led programming needs to find context-sensitive expert guidance by older peers or adults that actively recognise children's contributions as an opportunity to grow together.

Ways forward

The humanitarian system is shaped by the same adultcentrism that defines traditional adult-child relations across many societies. This focus on adults' perspectives rather than those of children leads to severe shortcomings in assisting children through crises, from missing issues relevant to children to denying them the benefits of active engagement in matters that affect them. Giving lip service to child participation does not help overcome this dynamic: only truly child-led humanitarian programming can close these identified gaps. Humanitarian action needs to shift from the passive engagement of children toward an inclusive attitude that motivates children to take charge and captures their knowledge, concerns and perspectives. Children are the experts on their own experiences – they are part of the solution, not part of the problem. But how can humanitarian actors achieve this shift?

The key to progress is critical self-reflection on the part of humanitarians. Practitioners should train to become effective background actors and provide what children need to take matters into their own hands. Importantly, humanitarians must avoid falling into a pattern where their view of the world and of children dominates the programme design and implementation process. Adults need to learn how to make sense of children's world and acknowledge their position in the power dynamic – this means making themselves and others aware of children's capacities and the role of adults in empowering (or limiting) children's agency. As a part of practitioners' learning process for taking on new roles, they should also consider how children are affected by or can contribute to approaching a crisis, even if the project typically would not include children specifically. In designing humanitarian programming, practitioners should maintain a high degree of flexibility to listen and adhere to

[31] Jason Hart, *Children's participation…, op. cit.*
[32] Nicola Ansell, *Children, Youth and Development, op. cit.*
[33] Jason Hart, *Children's participation…, op. cit.*

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children's priorities and the local cultural, social, economic and political contexts in which they grow up.

When translating meaningful child participation from theory into practice, there are a wide range of challenges to overcome. How can humanitarian programming balance children's need for support and protection and their active roles in finding solutions to the problems that affect them? How should child-driven projects be held accountable? How can child-led activities avoid further exposure to harm? How can adults overcome their biases toward children in a world dominated by adultcentrism? This paper can only pose and not answer these questions – but we encourage humanitarian practitioners and beyond to reflect on these issues and use them as a starting point to create lasting change for children in humanitarian crises.

Biographies

Sofie Lilli Stoffel• Sofie Lilli Stoffel is a research associate with the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Berlin (Germany). She contributes to the institute's work on humanitarian action and peace and security. Sofie's main research focus is on the role of children in conflict and humanitarian crises, which is rooted in her interest in mitigating the impact of violence and trauma on communities and enabling sustainable peace. She previously studied liberal arts and sciences with a focus on international relations, conflict studies and child protection at Maastricht University and held the positions of chief administrative officer and vice president at the German non-profit DMUN e.V., where she advocated for youth participation and empowerment at the United Nations.

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