ALTERNATIVES HUMANITAIRES
HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Issue 19 – March 2022
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Critical perspectives on child protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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In light of a violence prevention programme for children and young people, the author challenges the traditional notions of victimhood and vulnerability. Agentivity and capacity for initiative are valued in order to remove children from categories that can, ironically, turn them into "bad victims".

Since it emerged in the 1980s and was affirmed in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the principle of participation has steadily gained acceptance as a key standard for humanitarian and development interventions. It is enshrined in the minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action[1] policy which sets basic operational principles for aid actors dealing with child protection globally. This focus on participation is rooted in a shift in policy thinking which has moved past a definition of children as vulnerable beneficiaries who require assistance from the family and the State to children as subjects of rights able to actively participate in society and shape their environment.

Contextualising childhood

Though participation – and the concomitant notions of agency and voice – have become part of mainstream humanitarian policy discourse, the operational focus on children remains demonstrably fixed on vulnerability and victimhood. Set in the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this article unpacks two persisting assumptions about childhood – "children are fundamentally vulnerable" and "children are innocent victims in need of protection" – and points out the pitfalls which result from their uncritical use in humanitarian interventions. It argues that, as intellectual frameworks, "vulnerability" and "victimhood" are insufficient to engage with the complex realities experienced by children in conflict zones and proposes a more contextualised vision of childhood.

Insight is taken from the literature on international development and violence prevention, as well as the author's experience observing how the Congolese non-governmental organisation (NGO) Ghovodi (meaning "Group of men dedicated to inter-community development – *Groupe des hommes voués au development inter-communautaire* in French) works to integrate children and youth (age 14-25) in violence prevention programming. Ghovodi's Washindi ("the victorious") approach, rooted in children's agency, competes with the mainstream definition of children as passive victims of conflict and poverty and offers insight into how they can participate in their own protection. Data is drawn from twelve months of participant observation of the NGO's activities for the entire duration of the programme, in addition to the analysis of project learning documents (baseline, endline,

[1] Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action*, 2012, re-edited in 2019, https://alliancecpha.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/cpms_2019_final_en.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35094

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impact analysis) and transcripts from forty-eight focus groups with children and youths. These focus groups were the core of the Washindi curriculum, which includes six weeks of discussions for girls, eight weeks for boys, and two weeks of mixed sessions.

Assumption 1: children are fundamentally vulnerable

Children are a paradigmatic figure of vulnerability. They are considered as fragile, unsteady and dependent on adults for survival and education. Young children and girls stand out as categories of children who are often deemed to be fundamentally vulnerable (regardless of the social structures which generate their vulnerability). This characterisation of children as deficient – that is, lacking skills, autonomy, judgment – is based on an evolutionary understanding of children as adults-in-the-making. As such, children are placed under the tutelage of various institutions – the family, the school, sometimes the church – who are responsible for caring for and protecting them until they graduate into adulthood.

This default state of vulnerability, rooted in biological, physical or ontological criteria, needs to be critically examined. Tal Piterbraut-Merx[2] argues that the notion of children being "naturally" vulnerable is essentialist and obscures the diversity of children's experiences. The concept of "childhood" encompasses various states, from the new-born to the teenager, from the orphan to the head of the household and the child mother, and it is not always clear where the line between childhood and adulthood lies depending on the context. In DRC, children have been identified alternatively as "a person who is less than 2 years old", "a person who is less than 12 years old", or "a person who is not married".

These measures of childhood also vary depending on gender. A boy living in DRC "reaches manhood" in societal terms when he fulfils a number of criteria such as initiation, marriage, or land ownership, and a girl "becomes a woman" when she gives birth to children of her own, regardless of her age. Conversely, a young woman over 18 who does not have a household of her own may not be considered as an adult and may be denied access to some women's spaces. In this context, childhood and adulthood are not only stages in life but also social positions which carry material and symbolic status. When dealing with children, humanitarians should not limit themselves to definitions found in international legal standards,[3] but should endeavour to understand the historical, social and cultural construction of the status of 'childhood'. As Gill Valentine points out:

> "the experience of childhood has never been universal; rather, what it means to be a particular age intersects with other identities so that experiences of poverty, disability, ill health, being orphaned, taken into care, or having to look after a sick parent have all denied many children this idealised time of innocence and dependence".[4]

In contexts like conflict settings, where many children are exposed to multiple risk factors, it is prudent to question how useful the concept of vulnerability is as a tool to orient interventions.

[2] Tal Piterbraut-Merx, « Enfance et vulnérabilité. Ce que la politisation de l'enfance fait au concept de vulnérabilité », *Éducation et Socialisation – Les Cahiers du CERFEE*, n° 57, 2020, https://journals.openedition.org/edso/12317

[3] For the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (art. 1). This definition informs subsequent international standards, including the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (1990).

[4] Gill Valentine, "Angels and devils: moral landscapes of childhood", *Environmental and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1996, pp. 581–599, cited in Liisa Malkki, "Children, humanity, and the infantilization of peace", *in* Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (eds.), *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 58–85.

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Relatively recent approaches in international development have questioned the humanitarian focus on the most vulnerable cases, which overlooks children's capacities of coping and resilience.[5]

These approaches, building on the UNCRC, "moved from seeing children as the objects of others' actions to viewing them as subjects or agents in their own right".[6] By defining children and young people as subjects instead of objects (of aid), this narrative shifts the locus of vulnerability from a characteristic inherent to children's status to a factor that resides in the external world.[7] It also acknowledges the complexity of children's lived experiences and the strategies they put in place to ensure their and their families' survival.

Though these coping mechanisms often fall outside what are considered appropriate activities for children to engage in (e.g. transactional sex and heavy labour), they speak to the choices made by children under constraining circumstances. Natascha Klocker defines this as "thin agency", that is "the decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives".[8] Such a concept, while acknowledging the extreme conditions of adversity in which children are situated, nuances the assumption that children are passive victims of their environment. As Cecilie Lanken Verma[9] argues in her study of child soldiers in Uganda, the assumption that all child soldiers had been kidnapped, that is, involuntary victims of warlords, overlooks the choice that some youths make to join armed groups to seek revenge, escape poverty or get away from abusive families. This oversight can have negative consequences for reinsertion interventions which act on the basis of the (assumed) best interest of the child and thus struggle to account for rates of re-enlisting.

This narrative of child vulnerability, though wielded by well-intentioned actors, can be harmful and ultimately detrimental to programmes aimed at protecting children's well-being. If a blanket assumption of vulnerability and passive victimhood is made, humanitarian actors will potentially overlook broader trends and power dynamics that impact children's lives.

Amongst institutions dedicated to protecting children, the family is often considered as key to healthy and successful development.[10] The family home is thought of as a space of care, security and nurturing in which the child's best interest is prioritised. However, this doesn't correspond to the reality of many families. In my own research in the town of Goma (DRC), 23% of girls and 36% of boys reported having experienced various forms of violence in their homes. This includes physical abuse, psychological and emotional violence, overwork, deprivation of resources, discrimination etc. The family space should not be assumed to be able to provide stability and tools to cope in adverse situations but instead can be a harmful environment.[11] By presenting children as vulnerable, some

[5] Mats Utas, "Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War", Uppsala University dissertation in cultural anthropology, 2003, https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:163000/FULLTEXT01.pdf

[6] Sarah C. White and Shyamol A. Choudhury, "The politics of child participation in international development: the dilemma of agency", *The European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, December 2007, pp. 529–550.

[7] Claudia Seymour, "Ambiguous agencies: coping and survival in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo", *Children's Geographies*, vol. 10, no. 4, October 2012, pp. 373–384.

[8] Natascha Klocker, "An example of 'thin' agency: child domestic workers in Tanzania", *in* Ruth Panelli, Samantha Punch and Elsbeth Robson (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 83–94.

[9] Cecilie Lanken Verma, "Truths out of place: homecoming, intervention, and story-making in war-torn northern Uganda", *Children's Geographies*, vol. 10, no. 4, October 2012, pp. 441–455. See also Tim Molyneux, "It is time to end the child soldier stereotype", *The New Humanitarian*, 9 February 2018, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2018/02/09/child-soldier-stereotype-time-rehabiltation-conflict

[10] Tal Piterbraut-Merx, « Enfance et vulnérabilité… », *art. cit.*, p. 57.

[11] Claudia Seymour, "Ambiguous agencies…", *art. cit.*

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would argue[12] that we restrict them to a state of helplessness, with safeguarding entrusted to adults who are not necessarily dependable caregivers.

The image of the "vulnerable child" and "protective parent" must be critically examined and the relations of power inscribed in that relationship made visible. Indeed, while the concept of vulnerability should not be entirely dismissed as an analytical framework, it should be complemented by a more contextualised understanding of children's experiences and agency. Failure to do so may inadvertently increase or create vulnerability.

Assumption 2: Children are innocent victims in need of protection

The discourse about the inherent vulnerability of children is often accompanied by that of innocence and victimhood. By defining children as vulnerable we promote a vision of children as powerless victims, deprived of agency.[13] This narrative of the child-victim powerfully influences priority-setting in the humanitarian protection agenda. Fundraising campaigns forefront standardised stories of abducted child soldiers, unaccompanied child refugees and malnourished children, and promote the role of benevolent institutions. Communication materials from international organisations and NGOs clearly show the emphasis put on targeting the most visibly vulnerable, innocent and suffering children and the agenda of reintegration into a "normal" childhood. Though this type of story-telling about children victims of conflict is simplified and dramatised to attract sympathy and funds, it also informs the global civil society narratives and agendas, thus indirectly contributing to framing humanitarian responses and priorities.[14]

The urgency often given to save children is rooted in a moral imperative which frames children as "pure" and childhood as a sacred uncorrupted stage in life. In her analysis of humanitarian modes of representation, Liisa Malkki points out that children tend to be presented as apolitical beings not yet caught up in history or politics, and therefore as "untainted", innocent, and worthy of special treatment.[15]

The imaginary of the innocent child in need of saving is also harmful insomuch as it creates hierarchies of vulnerability, where only the children who fit into the narrative of the victim-child can benefit from aid. For instance, while child brides are at the forefront of global campaigns, projects which support young women (willingly) involved in transactional sex are scarce. According to Lorenzo Bordonaro and Ruth Payne,[16] children who engage in risky behaviours are less eligible for help because their behaviour doesn't live up to the normative expectations of what children should be doing and the spaces they should inhabit.

Street children, children in conflict with the law and child prostitutes, though vulnerable, deploy agency out of necessity to survive outside of regular institutions. Yet, in doing so, they are identified in the public discourse as problems to be managed rather than youth in need.[17] This raises the issue of the normative frameworks which permeate interventions, and whether an (unspoken) distinction

[12] Liam Cairns and John Davis, "Setting the agenda: social inclusion, children and young people", *Children & Society*, vol. 18, 2004, pp. 103–104, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/1247.pdf
[13] Marie Garrau, *Politiques de la vulnérabilité*, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 2018.
[14] Karen Wells, "Child saving or child rights", *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 2, no. 3, October 2008, pp. 235–250.
[15] Liisa Malkki, "Children, humanity…", *op. cit.*
[16] Lorenzo I. Bordonaro and Ruth Payne, "Ambiguous agency: critical perspectives on social interventions with children and youth in Africa", *Children's Geographies*, vol. 10, no. 4, October 2012, pp. 365–372.
[17] Heather Montgomery, *Modern Babylon? Prostituting Children in Thailand*, Berghahn Books, 2001.

is made between "good agency" and "bad agency" mobilised by children, separating the ones more worthy of aid.

The ideal of the innocent child should also be critically examined in the context of violence prevention programming. While a large number of children are victims of violence, either inside or outside the home, they also contribute to the cycle of violence which affects them. Indeed, a sizeable amount of research[18] shows how social norms are perpetuated through the socialisation of children, thus reproducing harmful attitudes and behaviours. My own research in Goma shows that some children and young people do hold negative beliefs which condone gender-based violence and discrimination.

These include beliefs about the superiority (and impunity) of boys over girls for example, reflected in this interview with a male teenager: "my sisters cannot say anything in my presence because my father says that I am the boss" (boy, 15, Goma). Boys also have attitudes that directly support violence, such as "It's fine to beat your wife if she disrespects you, she is used to it" (boy, 17, Goma). One girl explained that when she asks her brother for help doing chores, he will slap her and say she is impolite to ask such things of him (focus group with young women, around 25, Goma).

Though fewer, some girls actively subscribe to norms which negatively affect them, for instance by blaming victims of sexual violence for their provocative outfits. Some parents also face social sanctions (often insults) from their children when they adopt non-normative behaviours. Fathers are mocked by sons when they do the work of women, and a woman said she was scared of denouncing her husband's abuse: "My husband beats me every day, but if I denounce him [to the police] my children will attack me" (focus group with women, diverse ages, Goma).

The protection of children cannot successfully be envisaged through the sole prism of the innocent-child-victim. The complexity of the social and cultural context and the role children, as social actors, play in it need to be considered when designing child protection interventions. Children participate in all aspects of life, be it in the family, at school, in the community or in war.[19] As such, the focus of interventions could be valuably expanded to include not only the most vulnerable categories of children ("the good victims") but also children using "bad agency" to survive and those who support harmful norms.

Children's participation in protection against sexual and gender-based violence

In Eastern DRC, the humanitarian discourse on children is still focused on vulnerability and victimhood, categories which are often used uncritically. This article called attention to the representations of childhood in which they are rooted and the potential pitfalls that protection interventions may face if not contextualised.

Referring to children as vulnerable by nature reinforces the notion that it is the child that needs to be targeted rather than the environment in which he or she lives as the object of transformation.[20] Some approaches recognise the fact that, aside from structural factors such as poverty and conflict, the main source of children's vulnerability is violent interpersonal relations, often in the family.

[18] Bronwynne Anderson, "'Coloured' boys talk: constructing heterosexual masculinities in a working class high school context", *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, vol. 20, no. 4, January 2010, pp. 635–646.
[19] United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the world's children 2003: Meaningful child participation from every region of the world*, November 2003, https://www.unicef.org/media/84791/file/SOWC-2003.pdf
[20] Kirrily Pells, "'Rights are everything we don't have: clashing conceptions of vulnerability and agency in the daily lives of Rwandan children and youth", *Children's Geographies*, vol. 10, no. 4, October 2012, pp. 427–440.

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Building on children's demonstrated agency and resilience, strategies can be put in place to strengthen protective factors such as intolerant attitudes toward violence, supportive relationships and parental bonding.[21] One such intervention is Ghovodi's Washindi approach on child participation in norm change.

The Washindi approach acknowledges that, in a context such as the DRC, all children are vulnerable to violence. Therefore, instead of focusing on categories of vulnerability and victimhood, it takes a rights-based approach. This approach emphasises the agency of children as rights holders and their ability to influence their environment in order to access those rights. Participants in the programme include victims of sexual violence, former child soldiers, school drop-outs and children in poor or single-parent households but also secondary students and children who have not directly experienced violence.

The project's premise is that, as social actors embedded in the community, all children are vulnerable as well as capable of supporting social change in favour of a more protective environment. Children involved in the discussion groups not only learn about their rights but are equipped to claim them and advocate for the changes which are meaningful to them in their own individual settings. They express agency by challenging the power inequalities in their everyday relationships and activities, enabling them to establish more protective relationships and build resilience despite a highly adverse context. Echoing Jason Hart *et al.*'s definition of participation as a process by which children may confront and overturn practices that exclude them socially, culturally and politically,[22] Washindi goes beyond idealised notions of what childhood should look like and encourages children to determine which change is important and achievable for them.

Biography

Camille Maubert • Camille Maubert is completing a PhD in international development at the University of Edinburgh. She was embedded for one year with a Congolese NGO (Ghovodi) in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to document social change throughout a positive masculinity and violence prevention programme. Her interest is in how principles of gender rights are understood, negotiated, or resisted by men, women and youths in community settings. She is also a research officer at the University of Sussex's Institute of Development Studies, where she implements the 'new community-informed approaches to humanitarian protection and restraint' project in DRC. Prior to working in DRC she was a development practitioner in a range of countries including Colombia, where she worked on community-based and participatory methods to train youth victims of sexual exploitation to act as agents of prevention amongst their peers in school and at home.

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https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2022/03/25/critical-perspectives-on-child-protection-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/
ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-936-3

[21] Anna Gavine, Stephen MacGillivray and Damien J. Williams, "Universal community based social development interventions for preventing community violence by young people 12 to 18 years of age", *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, no. 1, 2017, art. no. CD011258.
[22] Jason Hart, Jesse Newman and Lisanne Ackermann, *Understanding and evaluating children's participation in development*, Plan International – UK, June 2004, https://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/children%20changing%20their%20world_hart.pdf