Reconceptualising Child Protection Interventions in Situations of Chronic Conflict: North Kivu, DRC

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Introduction

The lives of young people in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa have been dramatically affected by the experience of violent conflict, with repeated displacement, threats to physical security and lack of access to even the most basic social services only some of conflict’s immediate negative consequences. The focus on children and their experience of war was galvanised with the publication of a 1996 study led by Graça Machel on the impact of war on children. This study helped to provide renewed attention to children’s experiences of conflict throughout the world, showing how children are especially vulnerable to the negative consequences of modern warfare.¹ Concurrently, ongoing efforts to

¹ Research into children’s experience of conflict is not new; as early as the Second World War, child psychologists conducted studies of how children cope with destruction and loss (Freud & Burlingham 1943).
institutionalise the concept of universal child rights were making progress; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which had been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989, was further strengthened by instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Optional Protocols to the CRC, and the International Labour Organisation Convention 182 against the worst forms of child labour—each including provisions guarding against the exploitation and abuse of children living in situations of conflict.

In the two decades since then, significant amounts of political, financial and practical energy have been channelled towards the protection of children in war environments. A large number of actors now focus their efforts on protecting children in armed conflicts, including, inter-alia, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and other offices of the United Nations, child-focused international non-governmental organisations, as well as national and local actors. What could be considered as an emergent international child protection regime—i.e. actors and actions buttressed by established international legal norms—the focus of these actors is to support national governments in fulfilling the basic protection needs of children. In situations of violent conflict, especially when the state has either collapsed or is not effectively functioning, these actors play a dominant role in supporting the provision of children’s basic needs, including access to healthcare, hygiene and education. Beyond basic survival and development, these actors also respond to other protection concerns, including the use of children by armed groups, the sexual exploitation of girls, or children separated from their families or orphaned by war.

On the other side of practice is the burgeoning field of academic research into children’s experiences of war. Two separate fields of literature have notably emerged, the first within the field of psychology, from which exten-

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