Lessons Learned Investigating the Well-being of Children Affected by Armed Conflict

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Introduction

The singular reality of armed conflict is that it profoundly transforms and permanently affects people’s lives – combatants and non-combatants alike. The victims of modern armed conflict are mostly civilians, and the majority of these are children. Klot reports that an estimated 2 million children have been killed as a direct result of fighting in the last ten years, with three times as many seriously injured or permanently disabled, and an even greater number dying of malnutrition or disease caused by armed conflict. Add to this the impact of forced migration. Mawson, Dodd and Hilary report that in 2000, an estimated 13 million children were displaced within warring countries. The cessation of conflict does not, of itself, mean the end of suffering. However, in order to build a sustainable peace, the physical, psychological and social needs of the victims of war, and these include former combatants, must be met. To this end, the United Nations, governments, and in particular, non-government organizations undertake massive relief and re-construction programs aimed at re-building communities and restoring the well-being of those affected by conflict. The provision of what has become known as “psychosocial assistance” to people affected by armed conflict is an increasingly prominent part of humanitarian post-war intervention. Despite this, the field of psychosocial assistance remains relatively unsystematised and lacks a coherent research base to guide the evaluation and development of programs.

This paper will briefly focus on three contemporary conflicts – Gaza, Uganda and Afghanistan – in order to examine the psycho-social programs that are being delivered in these regions to enhance the well-being of children affected by conflict. It will also explore the efforts being undertaken to build a research base for evaluating this work. Finally, the paper will highlight three lessons learned: the need for multi-disciplinary approaches to research, the need for both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, and the need to understand local perspectives of well-being.

2 A Mawson, R Dodd and J Hilary, War Brought Us Here: Protecting Children Displaced Within their Own Countries by Conflict (2002).
The research questions under consideration are: (1) what do children worry about in the Gaza Strip; (2) what is the best way of helping formerly abducted child soldiers in Northern Uganda reintegrate into their communities; and (3) what has been the impact of psychosocial programs on the well-being of children in Northern Afghanistan.

What Do Children Worry About in the Gaza Strip?

In 1998, donor funds were made available to train some 250 school-counsellors who were then to be given the task of providing counselling services to troubled children in primary and secondary schools throughout the Palestinian Territories. In order to design a curriculum for training these future counsellors, MacMullin and Loughry sought to find out what children in the Gaza Strip worried about. The literature at the time suggested that a significant proportion of Palestinian children were traumatised by the on-going conflict with the Israelis and likely to be experiencing symptoms such as bed-wetting, stuttering, nightmares, interpersonal violence, self-harm and the destruction of property. Would these be the issues that children would want to talk to counsellors about, or were there other matters of concern to them?

The research involved three parts. Firstly, 194 children (103 boys and 91 girls, aged 8 to 14) attending a school in Beach Camp were asked to list, on blank paper, the things that they worried about. This generated in excess of 800 items which were then pooled, sorted and reduced down to a list of the 37 most frequently suggested worries, taking gender and age into consideration. In the second part of the research, conducted on the following day, the same children were provided with a questionnaire listing these 37 items and asked to rate the extent to which they worried about each item on the list. Analysis of this data produced a rank ordering of the items from the most to the least worrisome: for all of the children, for boys as opposed to girls and for differing age groups among the children. These results were then discussed with small groups of children (8 to 10 members) during the third part of the study. At group meetings, children were asked to help the researchers understand the results. The researchers asked the children to elaborate on items, to offer explanations as to why certain items were more worrisome than others, and in particular, to outline what strategies they employed to manage their worries. An especially helpful question asked children to outline the kind of advice that they would give their younger brothers or sisters about dealing with the worries that the exercise had highlighted.
