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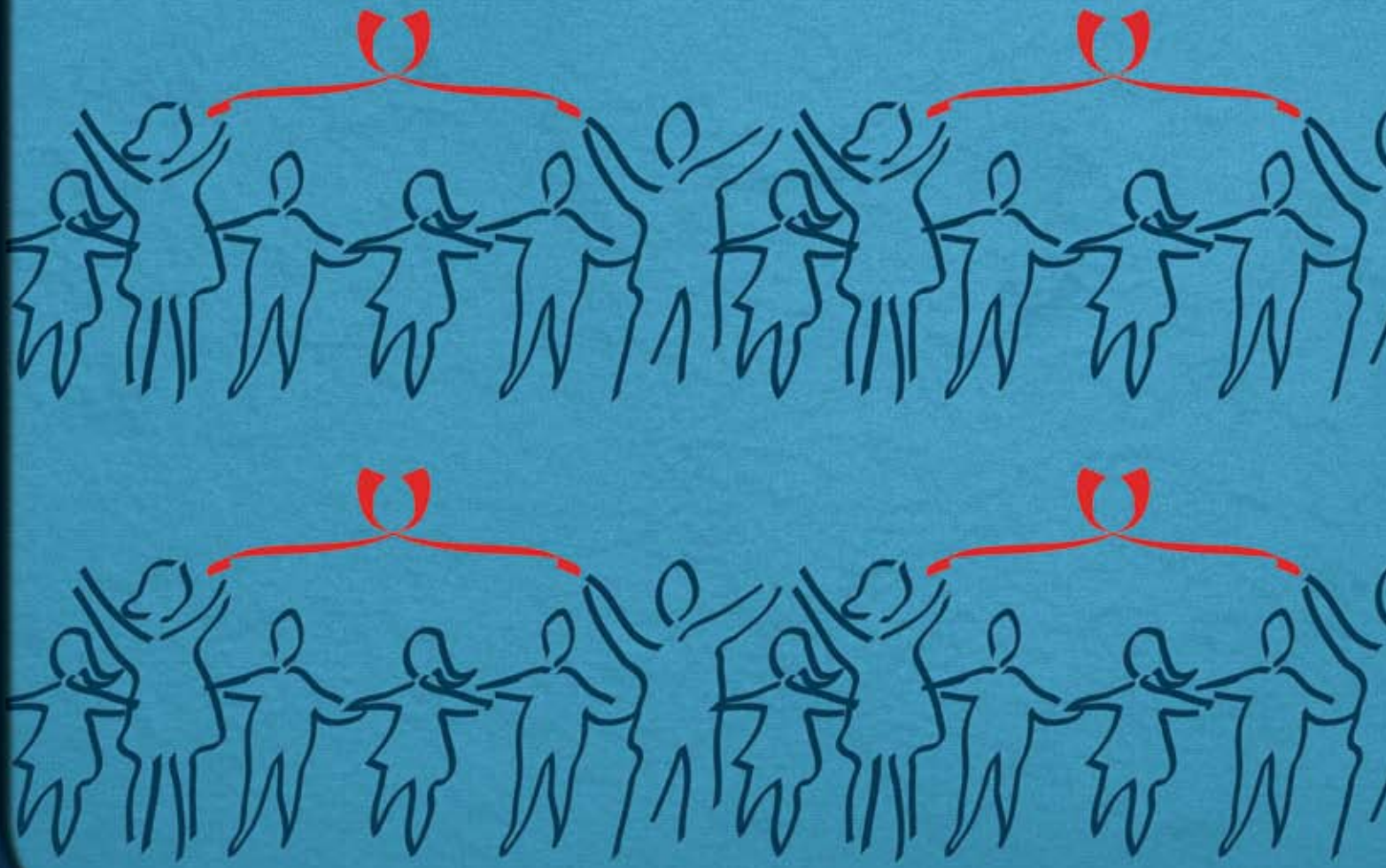
CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION:

Learning from Zones of Armed Conflict



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Children's Participation in Humanitarian Action: Learning from Zones of Armed Conflict

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Glossary

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CPN (Maoist)	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
ESCO	Eastern Self-Reliant Community Awakening Organisation
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ("Tamil Tigers")
PA	Palestinian Authority
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PYALARA	Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation
SAPI	South Asia Partnership International
SCN	Save the Children — Norway
SCUK	Save the Children — United Kingdom
SLA	Sri Lankan Army
TDH	Terre des Hommes
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

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Fieldwork was undertaken at intervals during the period from March 2002 to April 2003. In each of the three locations visited for research, I was fortunate to enjoy the support of a child-focussed agency: Save the Children Norway in Nepal and Sri Lanka, and UNICEF in the West Bank and Gaza. I am grateful to the staff in these organizations, who facilitated and enriched my research immensely. I should particularly like to mention Chandrika Khatiwada at SCN in Kathmandu, with whom I worked on the Nepal study, and Jude Simion and Felician Thayalaraj, who assisted with the Sri Lankan fieldwork.

In addition to the above-named organizations, countless others in all three locations kindly shared their insights and literature, sparing time to meet in spite of the tremendous pressures they were often under. Lack of space prevents me from naming and thanking the individuals and organizations concerned individually.

Finally, I should like to express my debt of gratitude to the children and adolescents in the three locations, who met with me to reflect on their experiences, describe their activities, and share their concerns and aspirations. In some cases, these young people had travelled several miles, often on foot. In others, they had been compelled to pass through checkpoints, hurrying home again before the start of a curfew. Their strength and cheerfulness, in spite of the frequently harsh conditions of daily life, were in themselves evidence of the positive impact of participatory activities on their lives. I hope that this document will elicit further support for such activities, so that a greater number of young people, living in the midst of armed conflict and displacement, can benefit in like manner.

While many individuals and organizations have generously assisted in the conduct of research, I take sole responsibility for the views expressed in this document. Endorsement by any specific agencies or persons should not necessarily be inferred.

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Executive summary

This document considers the benefits and challenges of pursuing children's participation in humanitarian action. Its findings and analysis are based upon the study of projects in three different locations: eastern Sri Lanka, the West Bank and Gaza, and Nepal. These projects generally involve adolescents aged 12 to 18 and are supported by international and local organizations. The study also draws upon the observations of informants from academia, donor agencies, and government and non-governmental agencies.

Efforts are growing steadily in many parts of the world to introduce and expand children's participation in the activities of developmental organizations. Some resistance may remain, however, to the idea of children's participation in humanitarian efforts, particularly in the unstable conditions of armed conflict. Here the emphasis tends to be upon the provision of services to children and on their protection by agency staff and mobilized adults in the community. Participation may be seen as too risky or simply not essential during a time of emergency. Nevertheless, as will be argued, children's participation may be a crucial means by which protection is enhanced and the efforts to build peace are pursued more effectively. In addition, the evidence suggests that, when given a chance, young people are able to make a valuable contribution, benefiting themselves and their communities.

In the first section, we offer an explanation of the aims of the study, provide an overview of the three locations in which it was conducted, and briefly describe the manner in which the research was conducted. In particular, we consider the challenges and opportunities that armed conflict may create for children, and suggest that participatory projects can and should be developed to empower them to face these challenges and opportunities more effectively.

The main body of this document considers the benefits and challenges of children's participation. The benefits relate to two distinct (but interconnected) areas: protection and peacebuilding. Our discussion of protection is further divided into seven different areas: (1) personal empowerment; (2) relationships; (3) dealing with abuse; (4) access to services; (5) communal identity; (6) play and recreation; (7) psychosocial well-being. In each of these areas, and in relation to peacebuilding, we provide examples that demonstrate the positive role that children can play when their participation is supported effectively.

In terms of challenges, discussion focusses principally on the risks that may be involved for participants. These risks may be environmental, arising from the reaction of outsiders to children's participation. They may also arise as a direct result of the experience of involvement in some form of participatory activity. In this section of the paper, we also draw attention to the efforts needed to ensure that the positive impact of children's participation is "scaled up".

The concluding section of the study contains a number of recommendations. Although they relate to the experience of projects in the three specific locations visited for this study, it is hoped that they may promote further reflection among agencies seeking to introduce or further develop their participatory programming with children. These recommendations may be briefly summarized as follows:

Summary of key recommendations

- Consider children's participation in positive relation to protection.
- Develop a sound grasp of historical, cultural, and social conditions as these pertain to children's participation.
- Adopt a proactive stance toward donors to support children's participation.
- Work with other agencies to build a strong consensus on ethics, methods, and concepts relating to children's participation in situations of armed conflict.
- Start any project through on-the-ground analysis undertaken together with children and other community members.
- Ensure that the safety and well-being of participants and supporting staff remains the primary concern at all times.
- Adopt a gradual approach to the development of activities.
- Open up the space for children's participation through engagement with families and community members.
- Develop close collaboration between local and international agencies for the support and safety of participants.
- Provide staff and participants with ongoing training activities to build their capacity.
- Encourage children to take responsibility at every possible opportunity, and in each stage of the program cycle, including the management of resources.
- Offer continuous support to children's activities.
- Link existing child-led projects to the wider context of civil society and local governance.
- Encourage and promote a culture of participation within the agency itself.

See page 27 Conclusion for details.

Introduction

Project rationale

In recent years, the involvement of community members in development processes has become a growing priority for international and local organizations working in countries of the South. For the most part, the participants have been adults. Children's participation, in contrast, remains an issue of concern to child-focussed agencies alone (and not even all of these). Such agencies are commonly motivated by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which highlights the right of children to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Their activities to realize this right are one aspect of a so-called "rights-based approach" to programming. Some argue that the achievement of the right to participation is not only a goal in itself but a vital means for the realization of other rights.

In 2002 ALNAP,[1] an international inter-agency forum that works to improve learning and accountability within the humanitarian system, commissioned research in six case-study countries to consider beneficiary participation in humanitarian action. To date, this is perhaps the most concerted and deliberate effort by the community of UN and international agencies to reflect on the challenges and potential benefits of participation in the context of an emergency. Mindful of the need to ensure that this new departure includes a focus on the young, the Child Rights Unit at CIDA generously offered to fund a companion study looking specifically at children's participation in three case-study countries.[2] The first of these, undertaken in March–May 2002, was Sri Lanka. This was followed by fieldwork in the West Bank and Gaza, carried out during June–July 2002. Research conducted in Nepal in March–April 2003 provided the basis for the third, and final, country case study.[3]

As well as seeking to place the issue of children's participation on the agenda of humanitarian organizations, this project has been motivated by additional, specific concerns. First, a belief exists that there may be special constraints and challenges in the promotion of children's meaningful participation: particular skills, ethical considerations, and methods would all seem necessary. For this reason, fieldwork in all three locations inquired into the experiences and perceptions of agency staff about the actual practice of implementing and supporting participatory projects with children.

Second, it was felt that a strong need exists to document examples of good practice in a range of different settings. In the context of war and displacement, the traditional approach of humanitarian agencies has been to focus on the provision of basic services to children and their families. The documentation of activities in which children regularly participate could provide material to challenge the view that, in such circumstances, young people are solely or principally passive victims. It was hoped that field study would elicit experiences that bring into question the common assumptions about children's lack of ability to undertake action to improve their situation and that of peers, family, and community. Indeed, as this document reveals, in each of the three countries, we found examples of children running their own initiatives to precisely this effect.

1. Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action.
2. The most recent edition of the Sphere Handbook (2004 Edition), which articulates minimum standards in the response of agencies to disaster, makes encouraging mention of the need to involve children as participants in the various stages of the project cycle (page 10). See www.sphereproject.org.
3. The individual country case studies can be found on the website of INTRAC: www.intrac.org.

Most importantly, however, we wished to investigate the potential benefits that participation in such action can bring to children themselves. In this way, we have sought to gather data that may encourage the international humanitarian community, including donors, to think more deeply about the potential value of a participatory approach to working with children, specifically those living amid the conditions of armed conflict.

With regard to the ages of the young people we met, it should be noted that the majority were between 12 and 18. Particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, some additional discussions were held with young men and women who were older than this but were still involved, often in an advisory or mentoring capacity, with projects of which they themselves had been members. This particular age range appeared to demonstrate the current focus of most child-focussed agencies. It would seem that "children's participation", whether explicitly or not, is intended for adolescents rather than younger children. The participation of pre-adolescents may pose particular challenges and opportunities of its own. It appears that the development of conceptual clarity and appropriate technical skills, to effectively promote participation for this age group, is still in its early stages.

Definitions and framework

For the purposes of this project, we adopted an understanding of "humanitarian action" in line with that of ALNAP, that is to say, as "assistance, protection and advocacy actions undertaken on an impartial basis in response to human needs resulting from complex political emergencies and natural hazards". The activities that we visited inevitably differed widely in nature, reflecting both the needs arising directly from conflict, as well as the particular social, economic, physical, cultural, and political conditions. In section 1.3 below, we provide a brief overview of the most pertinent contextual factors in each of the three countries where research was conducted.

In this study, "participation" is understood to refer to processes of information sharing, consultation, decision-making, implementation, and resource control, with, of, and by beneficiaries of humanitarian action. These different facets of participation are often taken to represent increasing gradations of beneficiary involvement in projects, as follows:

- Information sharing: Minimally informing affected populations about measures and decisions affecting them.
- Consultation: Some level of consultation with beneficiaries within program guidelines.
- Decision-making: Direct involvement of affected populations in decisions made during the project cycle.
- Implementation: Engagement in the practical activities related to implementation of the given project.
- Resource control: Control over project resources assumed by the beneficiary population, which made all the major decisions over these resources and over any new initiatives.[4]

4. INTRAC (2001) *Research Priorities for ALNAP's Global Study on Consultation with and Participation by Beneficiary and Affected Populations in Planning, Managing, Monitoring and Evaluating Humanitarian Aid*. Oxford.

The two main motivations for agencies to pursue participation in programming may be defined as "instrumental" and "transformative". The former is based upon an assumption that stakeholder participation improves the accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency of humanitarian interventions. In other words, participation is viewed as a means toward an end, which is the delivery of effective projects.

In contrast, for some agencies, participation is principally a means to empower affected populations to assume greater control over their lives and achieve structural change in society, leading to positive and sustainable change. "Empowerment" is understood to be manifested by community members in the following ways:

- exercise of choice and assumption of greater control over their lives;
- undertaking of successful action to improve their circumstances;
- assumption of an active role in political and civic processes;
- establishment of relations with others that contribute to peace and to the development, security, and general enhancement of the wider community; and
- increase of access to resources, services, and the means of securing livelihood.[5]

Within the development field, there is an emerging discussion about the benefits of children's participation in terms of project effectiveness.[6] Nonetheless, the main focus of agencies appears to be on the potential of participatory projects to transform children's lives. The processes by which this may be achieved, and the range of possible outcomes and impact resulting from children's participation, are issues that are starting to receive sustained attention.[7] Having said that, several of the above-suggested dimensions of empowerment go beyond the stated aims of most programming by child-focussed agencies. It is probably only the first two of these aims that are commonly made explicit. For the purposes of this study, however, we have aimed to consider the impact or potential impact of projects in relation to all five of these dimensions of empowerment.

The insistence on keeping this larger picture in mind is partly motivated by our understanding of the changes that armed conflict may often create in children's daily lives.[8] Any consideration of children's participation in humanitarian action in the context of conflict must consider these changes and the new or additional needs, challenges, and even opportunities that may consequently exist for the young. This is a subject that merits a lengthy discussion in itself. For our purposes here, the potential changes resulting from conflict may be briefly summarized as follows:

❖ **Lack of service provision and inadequacy of infrastructure**

Armed conflict and displacement commonly result in the loss or reduction of children's access to properly functioning health and educational services. Not only is existing infrastructure often destroyed; the development of service provision that might otherwise take place is also usually arrested. Humanitarian agencies

5. See also INTRAC, "Participatory Tools for Food Security". Draft report prepared for WFP www.intrac.org.
6. Phillips, B. (2000) *The End of Paternalism? Child beneficiary participation and project effectiveness*. The Hague: ISS. Also published in *The Oriental Anthropologist*, June 2001.
7. For an overview of the current writing on these issues, see Ackerman, L. et al. (2003) *Understanding & Evaluating Children's Participation: A review of contemporary literature*. Document produced for Plan UK / Plan International http://www.plan-uk.org/action/childrenindevelopment/.
8. See, for example, Machel G. (1996) *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, UNICEF www.unicef.org; Boyden J. *et al.* (2002) Children Affected by Armed Conflict in South Asia: a review of trends and issues identified by secondary research, RSC Working Paper No. 7, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford www.rsc.ox.ac.uk.

often have a large role to play in providing health and education services to the young but, in most cases, needs massively outweigh resources. An important and valuable role may therefore exist for children, their families, and communities to help fill the gaps.

- **New or expanded roles for children within the family and community**

  This may often include the greater involvement of children in economic activities, in domestic duties and caregiving, in the physical, moral, and emotional support of siblings, peers, and adults. While not all of the new responsibilities and duties need necessarily entail risk for children, there is often a greater exposure to exploitation and to involvement in hazardous activities. This is clearly exemplified by involvement in military-type activities, in direct political violence, and in the numerous ancillary roles associated with fighting forces.

- **The exposure of children to more diverse and acute risks to their well-being**

  Armed conflict commonly exposes children to greater physical, social, emotional, and psychological risk. Physical harm can result, for example, from the presence of landmines and other weaponry, through increased risk of malnutrition and the lack of adequate health care, through abuse and harassment by military forces, and so on. The loss of educational and recreational opportunities, the experience of bereavement and displacement, increased social marginalization and isolation — these are some of the factors that may pose a risk to children's sense of well-being and their healthy psychosocial development.

- **Challenges to family, community, and society**

  Armed conflict often seriously affects familiar social structures and institutions. For example, well-established values, surrounding intra-community and intergenerational relations and gender, may be brought into question. Prescribed practices may be partially or wholly abandoned. In such a situation, social cohesion may be lost. Networks of support and care are severely reduced in their capacity. This clearly holds risk for children.

  At the same time, it is also possible that opportunities may emerge for them to renegotiate social relations and established practices in an advantageous manner. In other words, from the most local level to that of the wider society and country, children may be able to achieve an enhanced role for themselves within institutions that directly affect their lives, enabling their particular concerns and aspirations to be more widely heard and more fully addressed.

Overall, the changes resulting from armed conflict, and the associated challenges and opportunities, compel us to think further about the empowerment of young people. Whatever our own ideals of childhood may be, the fact is that war and political violence commonly result in children participating more fully than ever in economic, social, and political activities. Particularly in Africa and Asia, the influence of war and political violence in this respect builds upon emerging demographic trends, whereby the percentage of the population under 20 is growing rapidly. Thus, in any case, children are gradually coming to play a bigger part in society, due to sheer weight of numbers. The potential of participatory projects to equip and facilitate them to undertake their new or expanded roles effectively, and to reduce the attendant risks, merits much greater consideration, informed by experience in the field.

Fieldwork locations

Eastern Sri Lanka
March–May 2002

Research was conducted in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, two of the three districts forming the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, the other being Trincomalee to the north. The conflict in this part of the island dates back to 1983, sparked by riots and intercommunity violence. Aside from short periods of cease-fire, violent confrontation has continued since then between the forces deployed by the Government of Sri Lanka and those of Tamil rebel groups, most notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This has led to the death and injury of countless civilians and to numerous human rights abuses, including disappearances, arbitrary arrests, rape, and torture.

The population of Batticaloa District and eastern Ampara District is almost exclusively composed of Tamils and Muslims. On the whole, the members of these two groups tend to live apart, either in ethnically homogeneous villages or in distinct neighbourhoods within the bigger towns. Over the past two decades, episodes of violence between the two communities have occurred at regular intervals, most notably in the early 1990s, when a number of intercommunity attacks and massacres took place.

While Ampara District is technically under the complete control of the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), Batticaloa is a patchwork of government and LTTE-controlled enclaves. Civilians residing in the LTTE areas have suffered particularly from the lack of infrastructure, paucity of economic opportunities, and difficulties of mobility. Furthermore, they have been put under pressure to support the military efforts of the LTTE. At times, this has reportedly included the widespread recruitment of children, often by force.

A cease-fire between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in February 2002 has led to a significant reduction in military activity and in tension among the local population. Movement between SLA- and LTTE-controlled areas is generally far easier, and investment in infrastructural development has led to some improvements in the quality of life of ordinary civilians. Nevertheless, a secure peace settlement remains elusive. There are continued reports of conscription of children by the LTTE. Intercommunity relations are still fragile, particularly between the local Tamil and Muslim populations. Meanwhile, the LTTE is making steady progress in efforts to gain effective control of social, economic, and political life in areas of the east that are nominally under the government.

At the community and family level, cease-fire has not necessarily eased many of the social and economic problems created or exacerbated by the conflict. Acute poverty is still endemic in this area, especially in areas controlled by the LTTE. This in itself has led to a widespread outmigration of individual family members. A large number of these are women, including many mothers, who pursue work as domestic servants in the Middle East. Within villages and towns, the social fabric is often severely weakened by suspicion and animosity arising from the different manner in which families have engaged in the conflict, particularly in their relationship with the LTTE. Furthermore, alcoholism and suicide are rife. In the view of many commentators, this has been fuelled by feelings of despair among ordinary people. In such an environment, children may often fail to receive adequate care and attention from parents or other caregivers.

Israel took control over these lands in 1967, but the legitimacy of this move has not been recognized by any other member state of the United Nations.[9] The "Oslo Peace Process", which was formally initiated in September 1993 through the signing of a Declaration of Principles by the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, began to falter seriously in the late 1990s. Frustration simmered among ordinary Palestinians at the lack of perceived change. This frustration was ignited in September 2000 by the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Haram al-Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem. Violence flared up, directed against the occupation forces and, increasingly, against Israeli civilians. Soon it became clear that this was not a brief outbreak of unrest but rather the starting point for a sustained campaign. Eight years after the demise of the original intifada, or uprising, the al-Aqsa intifada began.

At the time of fieldwork, during the spring of 2002, the IDF was deployed throughout the West Bank, effectively re-occupying territory ceded to Palestinian control under the Oslo Peace Process. Thousands of homes have been destroyed, and the movement of goods and people has been brought to a standstill for extended periods. The territorial integrity of the West Bank and Gaza, respectively, has been effectively negated through the sealing of individual cities, towns, and villages. Schooling and health care services have been prevented from functioning normally, and studies indicate that there is a growing problem of malnutrition. Violent actions by settlers, upon neighbouring Palestinian villagers in the West Bank and Gaza, have also been a distinct characteristic of this uprising.[10]

The effects of Israeli occupation upon the fragile Palestinian economy, and the measures introduced during the course of this second Intifada, have been devastating. Since the start of the uprising, the Israeli government has further tightened the restrictions to the point where only a very limited number of civilians living in Gaza have been allowed to enter Israel in pursuit of work. In the West Bank, the effect of restrictions has been compounded by the imposition of curfew, which prevents everyone from pursuing normal employment, whether locally or inside Israel. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has increased the pressure on children to engage in some form of employment to help feed their families.[11]

Growing up in the West Bank and Gaza, young people are often willing participants in the national struggle. Their political consciousness is developed to an extent, and from an age, that commonly takes outsiders by surprise. They also display great awareness of their role, as children, in the effort to influence public opinion through the media.[12] When agencies seek to work with young people in participatory ways, they are obliged to take the political awareness and motivation of Palestinian children fully into account if they are to engage successfully with them and support the establishment of meaningful activities.

9. Texts of the relevant UN resolutions may be found at http://www.miftah.org/.
10. See the numerous reports compiled by Be'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. www.btselem.org.
11. See, for example, "Fahdi's Summer Camp", article by Gideon Levy in *Ha'aretz Magazine*, July 19, 2002; "For hire: the boy human shields in Gaza's most desperate town", article by Jonathon Steele in *The Guardian*, August 6, 2002.
12. "Palestinian children and youth … live a life that contrasts sharply from (the) apolitical Western experience. For them, it seems that every facet of their lives is informed and shaped by political history and current political dynamics and realities of which they are very aware." Barber, B.K. (1999) "Politics, Politics and More Politics: Youth Life Experience in the Gaza Strip", draft chapter, page 1, for Bowen, D., and Early, E. (eds.) (2002) *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, 2nd edition, Indiana University Press.

Nepal
March–April 2003

Fieldwork in Nepal focussed on programming in relation to two different humanitarian crises in the country. The first of these is the consequence of conflict between the Maoist rebels and the forces of the Nepalese government. This conflict is affecting a growing number of districts in the country. Much of the fighting has taken place in rural areas, but the influence of the Maoists is increasingly being felt within urban centres. Second, around 100,000 refugees from Bhutan have been residing in seven camps in the southeast of the country since the early 1990s. A number of local and international agencies have been involved in supporting this population under the aegis of UNHCR.

❖ The Maoist "People's War"

On February 13, 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched its "People's War". In the movement's own words, this event "ushered in a new era of democratic revolution in all spheres of the society".[13] The diverse support base for the Maoist "People's War" reflects the sense of marginalization and discrimination felt by many sectors of Nepali society. It encompasses marginalized ethnic/caste groups,[14] rural populations and, in some districts at least, a large number of women who have filled the ranks of the fighting cadres.[15] There are also numerous reports of children joining the movement and taking up ancillary roles as information gatherers, messengers, porters, and decoys.

For the first few years, the "People's War" was relatively low key in character, with isolated skirmishes between Maoist cadres and the Nepali police. However, since 2000, the country has witnessed a steady increase in the number and scale of incidents. In November 2002, for example, clashes in several districts caused the deaths of hundreds of civilians and combatants. Toward the end of January 2003, the two sides agreed to a cease-fire that was formalized a month later. This was intended to pave the way for a peace process. However, in September 2003, five months after the completion of fieldwork, fighting began again between the two sides.

The impacts of the conflict upon children are not yet well understood. Some have undoubtedly been affected directly due to the violence, either through their own death or injury, or that of family members. It has been claimed repeatedly that the Maoists have recruited children for various roles, a claim that has been vigorously denied. Beyond such obvious and immediate impacts, it is widely believed that children are also suffering from increased poverty, malnutrition, and loss of services occasioned by the conflict. Many rural communities have become fractured and dislocated, with family members heading in different directions in search of economic opportunities and safety. It is widely believed that many children have been compelled to leave rural areas and seek refuge in the cities. Here, they join the ranks of other children, working in conditions of severe exploitation.

❖ The Bhutanese Refugees in Southeast Nepal

In the early 1990s, approximately 97,000 refugees from Bhutan took up residence in camps in the southeast of Nepal. These camps are still in existence, supported principally by UNHCR in conjunction with WFP, several international non-governmental organization (INGOs), and local non-governmental

13. *The Documents of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)*, p.1. http://www.partizan.org/nepal.htm.
14. Personal communication with INSEC (Informal Sector Service Centre), Kathmandu, January 2001.
15. Manchanda, R. (1999) "Empowerment with a twist", *The Hindu*, November 21. See also Onesto, L. (2001) Nepal: Women Hold up Half the Sky! RW Online www.rwor.org.

organization (NGOs). After a decade of fruitless negotiations between the governments of Nepal and Bhutan, agreement was finally reached to institute a process of verification, in order to determine the validity of the refugees' claims to Bhutanese nationality and right of return. This process commenced in March 2001. Refugees themselves generally met this process with guarded optimism. However, the slow pace of verification has quickly soured this mood. So has the refusal of both sides to allow any third party to be involved in the process. Human rights activists estimate that, at the current rate of verification, it could take at least six years to process all the residents of the camps. Furthermore, the Bhutanese government's framework for determining nationality and genuine refugee status has generated strong feelings of resentment.

In the meantime, the refugees themselves can only sit and wait. Inevitably, the conditions of their residence in Nepal, with severe limitations on freedom of movement and the ability to engage in any form of enterprise or paid employment, are further contributing to feelings of frustration, particularly among the ever-growing number of educated young people. Within the camps themselves, there are reported to be numerous social problems, inevitably exacerbated by the crowded living conditions, poverty, and lack of economic and social opportunity. The alleged trafficking of girls out of the camps, in order to work in the sex industry in India, is one consequence of the refugees' vulnerability and insecurity.

It is fair to say that the predicament of the Bhutanese refugees has attracted relatively little international attention. In late 2002, however, incidents of sexual abuse by agency-employed workers came to light, drawing comment from international human rights organizations and some sections of the world's media.[16] The victims of this abuse were principally students attending schools run by an INGO with funding from UNHCR. This led to an immediate review of operations by the latter organization, personnel changes, and a general strengthening of their protection work.

Field research

In each country, we generated data in three main ways: group discussions and other research activities with young participants in agency-supported projects; interviews with staff of international and local development and relief agencies; survey of program literature, reports, and evaluations. In the West Bank and Gaza, a number of individual interviews were also conducted with young people. Dialogue was continued by electronic mail with a small number of children in the West Bank and Nepal. Translators were used for research with children, parents, and some local NGOs in Sri Lanka. In Nepal, Chandrika Khatiwada (from SCN) was involved as a researcher, enabling much dialogue to happen in Nepali. We were able to use English with the Bhutanese refugees and to talk in Arabic with those Palestinians who were not fluent in English.

Meetings with young people usually lasted for about two hours. They involved both boys and girls together. Particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, it was possible to attend project activities as an observer. Through role play, some PRA-type exercises,[17] and focus-group discussions, we explored the following main themes with children:

- the particular challenges faced by children, including those created by armed conflict;
- the evolution, nature, and structure of activities, including the role of adults in support;

16. Amnesty International, November 22, 2002, ASA 31/071/2002.
17. These exercises are in keeping with the approach associated with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). The PRA emphasizes local knowledge and enables local people to make their own appraisal, analysis, and plans.

- constraints on activities and the benefits derived by participants; and
- possible future activities.

In general, we met children aged from 12 to 20, reflecting the composition of the projects themselves. The agencies visited in each country commonly appeared to focus their participatory activities on this older group. To varying extents, the location, timing, and nature of research activities depended on specific political and security conditions. For example, it was not possible to enter properly into the Bhutanese camps in Nepal, due to restrictions imposed by the Nepali authorities. In the West Bank and Gaza, measures imposed by the Israeli army, often at short notice, created endless delays and challenges to mobility. In the districts of rural Nepal, where we visited children's clubs, it was felt inadvisable to speak openly about the armed conflict. Similarly, certain issues, such as child recruitment by the LTTE, had to be discussed obliquely, if at all, in some villages we visited in eastern Sri Lanka.

The benefits and challenges of participation

Project rationale

In this section, we review key findings from the research. Discussion is organized under the broad heading of "benefits" and "challenges". "Benefits" are divided into the two areas of "protection" and "peacebuilding", since these generally appeared to describe the major aims of child-focussed agencies.

Protection is a very broad area that embraces the material conditions of children's lives, as well as their psychological and emotional well-being. Indeed, there are few aspects of programming with conflict-affected children that do *not* relate to protection. "Peacebuilding", however, is a discrete, separate area that seems to attract dedicated funding and the engagement of staff with specific skills and experience. Protection and peacebuilding activities were balanced differently in each of the three countries. At the time of fieldwork in Sri Lanka, there was an increasing investment of resources in peacebuilding activities, prompted by the recent cease-fire. The West Bank and Gaza had lost much of the former enthusiasm for peacebuilding activities, which had flourished in the post-Oslo years of the 1990s. Agencies appeared to focus their efforts on protection measures for children. This included emergency relief and activities intended to address the impact of the conflict on children's psychological and emotional state. In Nepal, where conflict-focussed activities were just beginning, the focus was predominantly on protection.

1. Benefits: Protection

Protection may be seen as a crosscutting objective of humanitarian action.[18] The basic components of emergency aid — food, shelter, health services, water and sanitation — are clearly aimed at the protection of people's lives and well-being. The humanitarian community is also increasingly focussing on the protection of a wider range of rights beyond those of mere survival, particularly in relation to "vulnerable groups", including children. Nevertheless, the social protection of the young remains generally weak, as demonstrated most dramatically by recent scandals involving abuse of minors by agency workers in refugee camps in both West Africa and Nepal.[19] The research for this project suggests that children often play a vital role in the enhancement of their own protection. Good participatory projects can further facilitate this. In this section, we provide examples of this in practice. We have organized the discussion into the following broad areas:

- personal empowerment;
- relationships;
- dealing with abuse;
- access to services;
- communal identity;
- play and recreation; and
- psychosocial well-being.

18. Sphere Project Handbook, 2004:12. www.sphereproject.org.
19. For an account of the West African case, see Naik, A. (2002) "Protecting Children from the Protectors: Lessons from West Africa", *Forced Migration Review,* No.15. www.fmreview.org

1.1 *Personal empowerment*

In the introductory section of this document, we explained that participation is seen as a means to empower community members. Although the notion of empowerment has been developed by agencies principally working in the development context, it has important implications for humanitarian settings. The ability of civilians, including children, to access services, to establish relations with those that may help them, and to undertake action to improve their own circumstances, would seem fundamental to the enhancement of protection in the face of conflict and political violence.

Together with the practical ability to enhance one's own protection in this way, comes the development of self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy. However, while successful action within everyday life will presumably enhance confidence, we suggest that the basis for this cycle of empowerment is likely to come from within the individual. In other words, some initial spark of self-belief may be necessary for action. This may pose a particular challenge for children. In general terms, children are relatively powerless in comparison to adults. Children may be subject to innumerable practices and attitudes that assume them to have only certain, limited capacities. Among children themselves, some will be further disempowered in relation to their peers. Girls, disabled children, those from ethnic minorities, and those from lower caste/class backgrounds commonly occupy a lesser position in comparison to other children. We would suggest, therefore, that the first and perhaps most fundamental protection-related benefit of children's participation is the enhancement of individual children's sense of their own efficacy and the confidence to take action.

The process of building confidence through participation can be seen in the example of Hamdan, a young man from Bethlehem who has been disabled since birth. Disabled people are likely to feel particularly strongly the adverse effects of armed conflict upon the care and protection given to children. Their specific needs are invariably a low priority for humanitarian organizations concerned with basic provision for the majority. Furthermore, steady efforts are necessary to promote public awareness about disability issues. These efforts are usually an early casualty of governmental and civil society organizations during times of conflict.

However, as Hamdan's experience demonstrates, participatory projects can make an immense difference, even to young people marginalized due to their disability. Hamdan was born with a physical condition that severely affects his ability to walk unaided. He related that, as a child, "I was always alone, always crying. I didn't feel human. My family didn't know how to help me or care for me." In 2000, a chance encounter led to an invitation from a youth media and rights organization, the Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), to attend a journalism course in Jordan. Hamdan felt this "was the first time people treated me with respect." After two years of regular involvement with this organization, during which time he was able to greatly develop his skills and confidence, he took responsibility for the production of a four-page special feature in the organization's journal, *The Youth Times*, focussing on disability issues. This led him to find, meet, and encourage various young people with disabilities, living in conditions as bad as or worse than those of his own childhood. He was able to bring cases of appalling neglect to light and to raise public awareness about the needs of differently abled children. He explained his motivation for this as follows: "I don't want others to live a hard life like me. I have a message in my life that I must offer. Even if I die, I must paint a smile on disabled people's faces."

Summing up the effect of participation in PYALARA activities on his life overall, Hamdan explained that "it has helped to make me part of society".[20] Furthermore, it was evident from meeting him, in the setting of his family home, that he now enjoys the affection and full support of relatives and neighbours.

20. Interview with Hamdan al-Ja'yuwee, Bethlehem, July 23, 2002.

1.2 *Relationships*

The conventional view of many agencies is that the family/household is best placed to offer care and protection to children in the midst of war and displacement. Yet, even when parents or other close family members are on hand, it cannot be assumed that they are able to do this effectively. Of course, this may be true in any setting, but the pressures upon parents and adult relatives are often especially acute in the conflict and post-conflict situation. They may be unable to meet their children's material and nutritional needs, due to their own war-inflicted injury or to worsened economic conditions. One or both parents may have had to leave home to pursue economic opportunities abroad. Nepali men and Sri Lankan women were notable in this regard. Furthermore, the impact of loss of homes, experiences of violence, bereavement, and so on, may seriously impair their capacity to extend love and nurturance. In some war zones, military groups seek to destroy family relationships and structures by forcing children to spy on or even kill their relatives. Although such extreme actions did not come to light in any of the countries visited for this project, in all three places, traditional attitudes of respect for parents and elders were clearly threatened by *both* children's direct engagement in military-type action *and* by the efforts of military authorities to humiliate adults in front of their children.

❖ **Family care**

Participatory projects appeared to counter the negative effects of conflict upon the provision of care by families. We heard reports from children themselves about the improvement in family relations that had come about as a direct result of their participation. For example, one 14-year-old girl in a child-led club in eastern Sri Lanka reported that she now received proper care at home and enjoyed a much better relationship with her mother. In her view, this was a result of two factors: (1) the engagement of the adult facilitator of the project in regular dialogue with all of the families of child participants, including hers, which had focussed on positive caregiving practice; (2) her own development of the confidence and skills to communicate with her mother, enabling her to explain her needs more effectively.

❖ **Peer support**

As well as enhanced care and protection within the family, participatory projects commonly seem to promote supportive relationships among peers. The support of other participating children may provide a vital resource for those whose needs are not met within the home. This can be seen in the example of the club for separated children run by a local NGO in an area of eastern Sri Lanka controlled by the LTTE. Concerned about malnutrition among some of their peers, club members decided to take action. They agreed that all of them would collect a small amount of rice every day from the household supply. At the end of the month, they would bring the accumulated rice to the club meeting and decide on a child whose household would receive this gift. Initially, the recipients were all members, but the participants have since chosen to expand their scope to include children in their communities at large. This example illustrates the concern found generally among participants for their peers who do not attend activities and who may be facing particular difficulties economically, within the home, or in other ways.

A noticeable feature of the projects visited in the three countries was the cooperative and respectful atmosphere in which activities were conducted. Many child-led initiatives had formulated their own rules and codes of conduct, to ensure that meetings took place in an orderly manner that afforded all participants the opportunity to voice concerns and opinions. Furthermore, given the general absence of adults in a strongly directive role, children appeared to assume cooperative ways of working to fulfil their responsibilities. As one group of adolescents remarked in a computer project in Gaza (al-Muntada): "We have learned how to

work democratically and cooperatively, with respect for each other … At first, the boys knew more about the Internet than the girls but, by cooperating and helping, the girls have been able to raise their level, and we are now all more or less at the same level."

Agency staff commonly remarked on the strong bonds of trust and mutual support that children were evidently creating through their involvement in projects. Particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, this was contrasted with the more confrontational modes of interaction among young people, and the disrespect that was often expressed by boys toward girls.

❖ **Mentoring relationships**

The role of older children and youth as mentors also seemed to be of great value. In Nepal, members of several of the children's clubs we visited were involved on a regular basis in educational support to their peers and younger children. In Gaza, older children, who had "graduated" from the parliament facilitated by the Cana'an Institute, played a valuable role in supporting the younger members who had newly joined. At the time of fieldwork, PYALARA had recently embarked on a project that involved university-level students in a mentoring and counselling role with adolescents. According to the organizers, this was proving a great success, due both to the energy and enthusiasm of the students, and to the fact that the adolescents seemed to feel particularly comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns with people who were only a few years older.

1.3 *Dealing with abuse*

In suggesting that children may have a role to play in identifying and dealing with abuse, it is not our intention to take away any of the responsibility for protection from adults and from the agencies who work with displaced and war-affected communities. Rather, as an example from the Bhutanese camps in Nepal illustrates, when children are well organized and focussed, and when adults are prepared to listen carefully to their concerns, protection measures may be significantly enhanced. In 1997, Save the Children - United Kingdom (SCUK) established a network children's organization in each of the seven Bhutanese camps in Nepal through discussion with their field staff and refugee children. These came to be known as the Bhutanese Refugee Children's Forums (BRCF), and SCUK supported them until the end of 2000. The adolescents of the camps elected representatives from among their peers at different geographical levels (ward, sector, and so on). It was the representatives' duty to air the concerns and aspirations of their constituents at regular meetings of their camp's BRCF. The elected representatives were trained on a range of issues, including community health, leadership, and facilitation skills. According to one SCUK employee, the BRCF served to raise issues of abuse, including sexual abuse, drawing on reports from child representatives. Advocacy and awareness activities were staged in response to such issues, not always with the full support of local adult institutions. Looking back on this period, numerous commentators acknowledged that the activities of the BRCFs made a significant contribution to the lives and well-being of children in the seven camps.

1.4 *Access to basic services*

The shift of government spending from health and education to defence, the destruction of facilities, the targeting of teachers and health workers — these are some of the ways in which conflict can lead to the reduction or loss of basic services to children. The relevant authorities, of course, continue to bear the onus for ensuring that such provision is restored as soon and as fully as possible. Nevertheless, various child-led initiatives demonstrated that children could themselves play a valuable role in the enhancement of otherwise inadequate services.

One of the most impressive examples of this was in the village of Sivanthivu in eastern Sri Lanka. At the time that children first formed themselves into an organized club, schooling in the village went up only until Grade 6. Children then had to travel into Valachchenai, the nearest large town, by bus or boat, to attend school. For security, practical, and economic reasons, few children pursued this option. ESCO (Eastern Self-Reliant Community Awakening Organization), a local NGO, facilitated a meeting between club members and the Zonal Director of Education, who promised to supply additional teachers if the young people themselves provided a structure that could be used for further classes. Save the Children offered to fund the construction of a temporary building but requested that the children produce a detailed budget. With assistance from both agencies, ten young people undertook their first-ever visit to Colombo to check on the price of needed materials. Working alongside their parents, the children of Sivanthivu constructed a building measuring 60' x 30', which has enabled a further three years of schooling to be provided within the village.

In the West Bank, adolescents have joined the ranks of volunteers supporting the activities of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS). Of approximately 3,250 volunteers, an estimated 40 to 50 percent are aged 16 to 18. PRCS is involved in a wide range of activities. The nature of each volunteer's involvement is the consequence of individual assessment and personal choice. These activities include running summer camps for younger children, visiting the injured and the families of those killed, facilitating the donation of particular items to local communities, and so on. No activities are forbidden to those under 18 years of age. Thus, a number of younger children currently assist the emergency medical teams that travel in PRCS ambulances. These young people make a much appreciated contribution. According to the PRCS volunteer and youth coordinator, the 16- to 18-year-olds are "very useful: they have time and energy, and they are quick-thinking".[21]

1.5 *Communal identity*

The issue of communal identity rarely figures in the literature of humanitarian agencies. Yet it is important to remember that the UNCRC (Article 30) explicitly mentions the right of a child "to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language". Armed conflict is often fuelled by the denial of this right to particular populations. This is an issue of relevance in all three countries visited for our study. In addition, as the example of the Bhutanese refugees illustrates, people are often forced into exile precisely because of their presumed group identity — in this case as members of a Nepali-speaking minority. Although it may not feature as an important aspect of protection for humanitarian agencies, the maintenance of communal identity and the voicing of communal aspirations may be an important priority for displaced and conflict-affected populations, including children.

The Rose Class Project in the Bhutanese camps in Nepal is a good example of children involving themselves in activities in support of the concerns and aspirations of their community — in other words, to protect their communal identity in the face of indifference from the international community and denial from the Bhutanese authorities. A monthly newspaper in English, *The Shangrila Sandesh*, is produced by participants in the project and distributed in the camps, in Kathmandu and abroad. The newspaper serves as a medium for discussion of Bhutan, its history, politics, environment, and so on. The eagerness of children to discuss feelings about their lives in the camp, and their desire for return to Bhutan, is apparent from the numerous articles and poems carried by *The Shangrila Sandesh*. Through this newspaper and the other activities of the

21. Interview with Khaldun Oweis, Jerusalem, July 20, 2002.

Rose Class Project, such as photographic and art exhibitions, children are able to discuss, learn about, and advocate for their situation as Bhutanese refugees. This appears to be greatly valued by the participants themselves, whose account of the benefits of their activities included the following:

> "Other countries will also learn or know the present situation of Bhutanese refugees, such as how we are spending our day in the refugee huts."
>
> "We can give more ideas and knowledge to the children who are born in Nepal about their motherland."

Moreover, young people's efforts as *community members* are often much appreciated by adults. This is illustrated in the following quote, taken from the letter of a reader of *The Shangrila Sandesh:* "At the time when youths are to enshoulder [*sic*] the responsibility of caring for the nation's children and elderly people, our youths have succeeded to become journalists to highlight and disseminate the problems."[22]

1.6 *Play and recreation*

Article 31 of the UNCRC speaks of "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts". In spite of this explicit statement, the right to play is not always a strong focus of protection efforts by humanitarian agencies. From the point of view of healthy child development, opportunities for play and recreation are commonly considered to be vital, promoting self-confidence and the elaboration of a range of cognitive and communication skills. Should conflict or displacement make formal schooling impossible, such opportunities become especially valuable. In addition, play and recreation are an important means by which the often-immense stresses of life in a war zone may be mitigated.

Children's games, cultural activities, and sports need not necessarily be conducted through a participatory approach. However, several of the projects we visited appeared to promote an especially rich array of activities, in which children took particular pleasure in being both the organizers and the participants. In Nepal, children's clubs have developed their own repertoire of songs, games, arts, and cultural activities. These activities encourage the development of talents and skills and, notably, involve both boys and girls. Many clubs were active in raising community awareness about social issues, such as girls' education, through street theatre. A UNICEF initiative in the West Bank and Gaza, "Adolescents… for a change!" had sparked off a number of small-scale projects involving organized groups of children in community-focussed action. One group in Gaza had used UNICEF funds to undertake a "Healthy Teeth Campaign", for which it had produced its own songs, slogans, and artwork.

The Butterfly Peace Garden in Batticaloa, eastern Sri Lanka, places particular importance upon children's play and recreation. This is a unique endeavour: an actual garden where children particularly affected by the conflict participate in various activities — including artwork, crafts, performance arts, storytelling, gardening and animal care — one day a week over a nine-month period. Rather than direct such activities, adult animators work to create an environment in which participants feel able, at their own pace and in their own way, to explore and express difficult aspects of their lives in the company of their peers.

22. Letter from P. Acharya, *The Shangrila Sandesh*, November 15, 2002, p.2.

1.7 *Psychosocial well-being*

Conventional approaches to addressing the psychosocial well-being of conflict-affected children have tended to be built upon the expertise of trained adults. It is they who are responsible for the assessment of children's mental and emotional state, and for offering some form of healing intervention to those deemed to be particularly affected. In spite of the growing endorsement of "child-centred" and "child-participatory" approaches to data gathering and needs assessments, when it comes to children's psychosocial well-being, adults alone are generally believed to possess the relevant insights.

In the context of other kinds of programming, particularly social development, it is increasingly accepted that the perceptions, needs, and aspirations of children often diverge from those of adults, and are not always well understood or articulated by parents, teachers, and other caregivers. Yet this view is apparently put to one side when it comes to efforts to address the psychological and emotional well-being of conflict-affected children.

This would seem to be exemplified by the program response of child-focussed INGOs to the conflict in Nepal. At the time of fieldwork, only two agencies had yet developed such a response. Both included a major component of psychosocial programming in their strategy, according to a conventional, adult-led model. This involved the training of adults to identify and work with troubled children, referring individuals with greater apparent need to specialist experts. In spite of the fact that both agencies had been instrumental in establishing and promoting a huge network of child-led clubs throughout the country, when it came to psychosocial programming, no role was imagined for children themselves. This suggested that children's participation remained a sector of programming, rather than a crosscutting approach or philosophy.

How might children be involved as participants in psychosocial programming? There are two broad areas for this: (1) in the design and monitoring of interventions, and (2) in the actual implementation of activities. We discuss these in turn.

❖ **Participation in design and monitoring**

We suggest that children might valuably participate in the design and monitoring of psychosocial interventions. Our suggestion is motivated by the conviction that adult agency staff is not necessarily best placed to anticipate the primary concerns of children. There is a general tendency to assume that past experiences of war will weigh most heavily on children's minds. However, as discovered by a recent participatory study with children in Kabul, it was often the challenges of current daily life that especially troubled young people. As the authors observed, "a child is much more likely to be preoccupied with the difficulties of crossing a minefield to fetch water today, than remembering an experience of fighting which happened several years ago".[23]

This would strongly suggest the need to engage children directly in the design of intervention to ensure that their priority concerns are met. A further lesson may be drawn from the study in Kabul. Even in the midst of dire circumstances, children are capable of commenting on their situation and articulating their concerns in a manner that is useful for those responsible for program design.

23. Save the Children (U.S.)/UNICEF (2003) *The Children of Kabul: Discussions with Afghan Families.* www.savethechildren.org/publications/children_of_kabul.pdf.

In the course of fieldwork, we did not come across a psychosocial project that had been designed and was being monitored with the participation of children. The above-mentioned projects, developed in Nepal, were based on some data collection with children about their specific problems. However, this did not appear to amount to a genuinely participatory process, not least due to the fact that the numbers of children in the sessions were so large and the time allocated so brief.

A recent research project in eastern Sri Lanka has demonstrated the possibility and value of engaging with children through participatory methods focussed on psychosocial well-being.[24] Working in collaboration with Terre des Hommes (TDH) and a local organisation, Koinonia, the research team conducted numerous sessions with children, aimed at testing methods that may be used to understand the particular challenges they face in their daily lives, the resources they draw upon, and the ways that program interventions might be more closely attuned to their situation. As with the project in Kabul, children revealed a range of concerns, only some of which related directly to the violence of the conflict. Indeed, snakebite generally emerged as the greatest threat to their well-being and the cause of considerable fear and alarm. It was the researchers' belief that addressing issues such as this should be as much a priority as any other for the development of the psychosocial intervention of TDH/Koinonia.

Furthermore, the actual process of bringing children together to engage in different activities — focussed on the exploration and consideration of their circumstances — appeared to be valuable in itself. Through repeated visits to the same children over time, the researchers noticed steadily increasing levels of confidence and focus among individual children, and greater cohesiveness as a group. It may be further suggested that the participation of children to discuss and reflect on their circumstances, and their aspirations for program development, is likely to encourage a sense of solidarity, self-efficacy, and control over their own lives and situation.[25] Such feelings, in themselves, are important components of psychosocial well-being.

❖ **Participation in implementation**

As already discussed, psychosocial programming is commonly built upon the assumption that healing processes rely on the expertise of trained adults. It is thus especially radical to suggest that children may themselves be agents of their own healing and that of their peers. The research for this project indicated, however, that this might well be the case.

Simply through enhanced peer interaction, children may derive significant benefit. Although experienced through an individual's emotions and mental disposition, psychosocial well-being is not produced in isolation. No different from adults, children are fundamentally social beings, for whose mental and emotional health it is vital to enjoy positive connections with others: a sense of consistency, continuity, and reciprocity in relationships. Conflict may threaten children's well-being, since it commonly shatters social networks in a variety of direct and indirect ways, through death, displacement, the loss of trust, and so on.

The experience of the Butterfly Peace Garden (BPG) seems illustrative of a shift from an individual, medicalized, and adult-led approach to one that is more participatory and socially oriented. This project grew out of a study that looked at the mental health of children living in eastern Sri Lanka. The study

24. This project was funded by USAID and run through the office of TDH in Batticaloa. The team consisted of Miranda Armstrong, Jo Boyden, Ananda Galappatti, and Jason Hart. Dissemination of findings, through a report and journal articles, is pending.
25. Jo Boyden, personal communication.

itself adopted a medicalized PTSD approach, in which adult experts assessed the levels of trauma among children, with a view to developing a program response of some kind. The Butterfly Peace Garden was thus created. However, the BPG has largely moved away from the so-called "trauma approach". Instead, the BPG has chosen to create a safe space, in which children are supported by each other and by well-trained animators, as they engage in various arts-related activities, gardening, and caring for animals. In the words of its organizers:

> The Garden gives children the opportunity to engage with and learn from plants, animals and other humans in a physical environment which is safe, rich and varied compared to the devastated (sometimes mined) landscapes, impoverished homes, orphanages and resettlement camps from which they come. As they explore the Garden's diverse spaces and learn to care for, respect and understand its creatures, children discover new aspects and energies within themselves and their world which are transformative and healing.
>
> It is commonly observed that new arrivals whose behavior is instinctively destructive, violent or cruel towards other children and animals soon learn more humane ways of relating. And children whose trauma express itself in shyness and withdrawal gradually come out of their shells, letting sorrow flow out of them in gardening activities, paint, song and theatre play.

The Butterfly Peace Garden is apparently successful in strengthening children's psychosocial well-being. This demonstrates the value of supporting children in their own development of new or deeper relationships with peers, animals, and the natural environment.

Previous sections have mentioned positive impacts of participatory programming. These aspects should also be considered from the perspective of psychosocial well-being. The opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of a strong communal identity, the enhancement of family relationships, opportunities for play and recreation, and even the improvement of basic services — all seem likely to contribute to children's mental and emotional good health.

In spite of the benefits, however, it would appear that children's participation is not often considered in the implementation of psychosocial interventions. This was particularly striking in the West Bank and Gaza. Recent studies have consistently claimed that Palestinian children are at great risk, due to the intense frustrations and pressures of life under occupation. For example, one report quotes a 17-year-old girl as saying, "We are living in a prison named Gaza. Day after day we do the same things, see the same faces, and you can imagine what effect this has on our state of mind."[26]

In response to the negative feelings expressed by their young respondents in the course of research, the authors of the study from which this quote is taken principally recommend that "there needs to be an increase in counselling services and rehabilitation."[27] This is indicative of the general response of humanitarian agencies in the West Bank and Gaza and elsewhere, based upon the assumption that adults alone possess the capacity to determine the nature of intervention and to implement this.

26. UNICEF/Birzeit University (1999), *Risk Factors and Priorities: Perspectives of Palestinian Young People*, page 34.
27. Ibid., pages 36–37.

However, our own research with participants in youth-led initiatives in the West Bank and Gaza strongly suggested that such activities might offer a valuable channel for frustrations. For example, participants in the computer project of al-Muntada in Gaza make a direct connection between their psychosocial well-being and the opportunity to engage in a participatory project that has real meaning for them:

> Our mental health has improved. We now have the capacity to be able to give a new image of Palestine to the world. The world thinks we are backward and chaotic. America thinks it is better than us, but we can do things: we can handle advanced knowledge, we can be scientific, we can organise ourselves—we're not chaotic. By increasing our skills we can become more capable of fighting the occupation with our minds.

Furthermore, as a founding member of PYALARA reflected:

> PYALARA has given me motivation to move ahead in life, to go on in spite of the frustrations and to make a difference to society. At the start of (al-Aqsa) intifada, when Mohammed al-Dura was killed,[28] we did a brainstorming and realized that most young people are unable to express themselves and that this leads to an explosion in society. I want to spread the word that youth can do something.[29]

The experience of the West Bank and Gaza, in particular, would seem to suggest that participatory programming has great potential to protect and enhance children's psychosocial well-being. Nevertheless, for this potential to be fully realized, it may first be necessary for agencies to rethink their approach to psychosocial interventions, to understand that engagement in meaningful social action in a supportive environment with peers may be at least as valid as the introduction of more explicitly "therapeutic", adult-led interventions. In the words of one humanitarian worker, "In this suffocating context, adolescents need more than ever to have a cause. 'Give them a role, give them a voice'—this is what, put simply, could summarize the aims of programs that must be implemented."[30]

2. Benefits: Peacebuilding

In Sri Lanka and the West Bank and Gaza, efforts have been made over many years to involve children in processes of peacebuilding. Numerous activities have been conducted with the aim of bringing children together from different communities on opposing sides of the conflict, so that they can develop familiarity, friendship, and trust. In spite of the considerable funds that have been invested in such endeavours, it seems that little has been done to evaluate their impact on the attitudes and behaviour of participants. Particularly in Sri Lanka since the cease-fire of 2002, foreign donors have been providing large sums for peacebuilding initiatives that include this kind of intercommunity exchange with children.

28. Muhammed al-Dura was a 12-year-old boy killed by Israeli sniper fire during a gun battle in Gaza in the early days of the al-Aqsa intifada. Images of him taking cover with his father, and eventually being shot, were broadcast around the world. Muhammed's death has become a powerful symbol of Israeli oppression and brutality throughout Palestinian society.
29. Interview with Salim Habbash, Ramallah, July 25, 2002.
30. Bertrand Bainvel (2001), *The Thin Red Line: Youth Participation in the Times of Human-Made Crises*. Unpublished draft discussion paper, UNICEF-OPT, page 6.

When viewed from the perspective of children's participation, the commonly taken approach appears problematic. In this section, we highlight some of the potential difficulties of peacebuilding efforts that are initiated *by* adults *for* children. We also explore the particular advantages of a more fully participatory approach, based upon the ideas, experiences, and concerns of children and youth.

2.1 *Adult-initiated peacebuilding*

The cease-fire in Sri Lanka has brought innumerable benefits to ordinary people. Aside from the great reduction in violence in most parts of the north and east, there is now the opportunity for investment and reconstruction. Nevertheless, it will take considerable time to overcome the destruction, personal loss, poverty, and lack of services resulting from the conflict. In the meantime, children in many communities undoubtedly continue to suffer immense deprivation. It is unclear how, if at all, peacebuilding will address this in the immediate term. Moreover, we need to ask if Sri Lanka's current surging interest in peacebuilding programs reflects children's own aspirations or, as seems more likely, a continuation of donor and agency-led programming.

Adult-initiated peacebuilding projects are potentially problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, they may be created through diversion of resources away from interventions that meet children's own priorities in terms of services, infrastructural development, and so on. Secondly, if they occur at a time and in a manner that does not fully take into account the realities of children's daily lives, they are unlikely to prove sustainable and may be counter-productive, contributing to a sense of disempowerment and alienation among participants. In the words of one local agency worker in eastern Sri Lanka, "How do you expect children who do not have enough food and no proper home to meet with children on the other side who have these things?"

This question resonates strongly in the Palestinian/Israeli context, where children from both sides of the conflict have been involved in joint activities for many years, such as summer camps held in locations outside the Middle East. Children living in the West Bank and Gaza are invited to join their Israeli peers in Europe or North America. They must then return to the brutal conditions of occupation. What effect does this sudden experience of free movement, proper nourishment, and security have upon them, when they are then sent back to their normal lives, from which they have little or no possibility of release? How do they feel about their Israeli peers for whom schooling, health care, regular food, and free movement are assured, albeit in an atmosphere of fear?[31] Certainly, the majority of young Palestinians that we met in the West Bank and Gaza were outspoken in their rejection of any initiative to bring them into dialogue with young Israelis. Young Palestinians suggested that such initiatives were an insult in the context of ongoing oppression by the Israeli authorities.

2.2 *Participation and peacebuilding*

2.2.1 Intercommunity exchange

Agencies seeking to promote peacebuilding, *and* to ensure children that participate to the maximum extent possible, face a potentially difficult situation. What to do if children themselves have no desire to engage in cross-community activities? The answer from eastern Sri Lanka has been to take a gradual approach. The assumption of experienced peaceworkers in this part of the country is that children must already be engaged in a genuine process of self-empowerment before they are likely to want or be able to participate meaningfully

31. According to anecdotal reports of one such activity in summer 2003, the Palestinian participants in a summer camp in Italy were distraught for several weeks following their return to the West Bank.

in dialogue with children from other communities. The role of the facilitator is thus to support and encourage such self-empowerment and, at most, to offer suggestions about possible exchange activities when the time seems appropriate.

A good example of the value of this approach comes from the village of Sivanthivu, mentioned in Section 1.1.2. During the period of research, the first exchange was held between members of the Vivehananda Children Development Club in Sivanthivu and the Child Action Group of a mixed Muslim-Tamil village. This took the form of a two-day visit to Sivanthivu by 40 members from the village. We visited Sivanthivu the day before the arrival of the Child Action Group and found the club members busily engaged in preparations. Much thought had gone into finding the best way to welcome their guests and make them feel comfortable. During our brief discussion, children spoke about the particular dietary requirements of the Muslims who would be coming. For many participants, it would be the first-ever opportunity to meet and spend time getting to know Muslims of their own age, and they were particularly happy about this.

This exchange was a clear product of the development of the children and their programs in both villages. Particularly in Sivanthivu, the practical improvements they had achieved, and the confidence they had gained as a result, seemed to have encouraged them to look outward and seek dialogue with others. In hosting the children from the other village, the children of Sivanthivu called upon the support of parents, and so involved the community in the process of building dialogue and trust. Members of the two clubs are now corresponding regularly, and a return visit has taken place. In an area of the country severely affected by conflict between Muslims and Tamils, the creation of a sustained exchange among young people from these two communities is especially rare and valuable. To be clear, this achievement has taken time and much careful effort by supporting agencies. It is a process of building friendship and trust, which the children themselves fully own, and not a simple response to adult agendas.

2.2.2 Addressing the causes of conflict

The example of Sivanthivu illustrates children's potential to contribute to the kind of social change that seems necessary to secure long-term peace. We would contend that this potential is far more likely to be realized through a genuinely participatory process than one that is adult-led. The participatory projects that we visited in all three countries seemed to provide opportunities for children to channel their energy and commitment into addressing issues of abuse, discrimination, and injustice, which lie at the heart of the conflicts that surround them. This was particularly striking in Nepal. As noted in the first section of this study, discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, and social/occupational background has led a growing number of ordinary Nepalis to offer their support to the Maoist rebels in their struggle with the ruling authorities. It is this discrimination, and the poverty and marginalization arising from it, that children spoke about at length in the many clubs and groups we met. Some were engaged in addressing the discrimination that led to the denial of educational opportunities to girls. Others focussed their activities specifically on improving the situation of Dalits ("untouchables") and other low castes. We met one group of children in the town of Nepalganj. They had come together to challenge the discrimination they experienced as members of an ethnic group associated with sex work. The leader of a children's club, in the Dalit community in the town of Bandipur, described their challenge as follows:

> In Bandipur, most of the children are left behind from education. They didn't want to join at school and learn. ... This happens mainly in low-caste children's homes and poor families. … As a result of poverty, they have to work hard and support their family, even from childhood. So they are mentally not prepared for studies. So, to remove this problem, our club is trying to call parent-children's meetings. We discuss with each other and point out problems, put problems in front of them. Mostly, parents don't come to the meetings. But we are trying.

Providing opportunities for children to address issues such as discrimination, which profoundly affect their lives, seems a valuable means to channel their energies into activities that are socially valuable and potentially contribute to peace. Perhaps even more importantly, it may help to keep them from engaging in violent activities aimed at social and political change. The following quote, from a young woman involved with the Maoists in Nepal, illustrates the process by which such engagement may come about:

> Before the initiation of the People's War, I did not know anything about politics or parties. But after the initiation [of the armed struggle], one of my relatives suggested I take part in the local cultural group and asked me to go to its rehearsal. I didn't tell my mother or father about this. I told only my older brother, who said, "Go ahead, if you want to die … Can you carry a gun on your shoulder?" I replied, "You didn't give me a chance to study, and now I am eager to solve the problems of the people and the nation. I want to fight for liberation. If you won't allow me to go, I will rebel.[32]

The involvement of Palestinian children in violent confrontation with the Israeli authorities is familiar to us from the media. Here, we would suggest, there is an especially great need to offer opportunities for meaningful, socially oriented, and peaceful action. Earlier in this study, we cited the words of one young man involved in a youth media project, who felt that "most young people are unable to express themselves and that this leads to explosion". This is especially disturbing in a highly militarized environment that offers so few avenues for the young to play a meaningful role in the struggle of their people. As one humanitarian worker in the West Bank commented, "Now, if you want to serve your country, the only way is to be a fighter or suicide bomber. Politically, socially, in the family and school, any questioning by children about their future is crushed."

From this perspective, it seems clear that the provision of suitable opportunities for expression and engagement should be considered as an emergency intervention, rather than a measure for when the conflict has subsided. The value of creating such opportunities is illustrated by this quote from a group of adolescent journalists at PYALARA: "Sometimes, we would sit for a whole week at home without knowing what to do. We couldn't tell people what we feel about Palestine, there was no one to tell. But now we can write something at home and send it to PYALARA. It gives our hearts energy, and we don't feel sad."

3. Challenges: Risks of participation

3.1 *Associated security risks*

In an unstable political and security climate, simply bringing people together for activities may entail risk. Such risk may be increased in relation to adolescents, due to the fact that, in many societies, the energy and enthusiasm of adolescents are seen not only as a resource but also as a possible threat. Activities that require large numbers of young people to gather in a public place may therefore create anxiety among military authorities, leading to possible harassment or other problems.

In the West Bank and Gaza, many projects involve children from different towns and villages, coming together at a central location. At the time of fieldwork, this often required them to pass through several military check-points and to remain constantly attentive to news about the sudden imposition of a curfew by the Israeli authorities. During the time that a state of emergency was in place in Nepal (November 2001–August 2002), it became particularly unsafe for young people to gather. It seems that many children's clubs suspended or scaled back their activities in response.

32. Onesto, L. (2001), *Nepal: Women Hold up Half the Sky!* RW online. www.rwor.org. page 1.

For fighting forces, which seek to bring children into their ranks, regular gatherings of young people may represent an opportunity for recruitment efforts. This was a concern voiced by agency personnel in all three countries visited. In Nepal, participatory projects were being conducted in many remote villages. This posed a particular challenge for monitoring by supporting agencies. In the West Bank and Gaza, some agencies were nervous about simply providing a space for young people to meet, in case some political element was introduced into activities, attracting a response from the Israeli military authorities and hostile media attention.

In Sri Lanka, where the LTTE have reportedly been active in recruiting children, strong concerns were expressed that participatory activities may raise the profile of participants. Furthermore, the leadership and other skills that they develop, through their involvement in child-led initiatives, may make them especially attractive to the LTTE on one hand, and highly suspicious to the Sri Lankan army on the other. The evidence for these views did not appear straightforward. The children's club in one Tamil village, located between the two forces, reported that they had been able to establish better relations with the government forces than had existed prior to the club's inception. Incidents of harassment had significantly reduced, allegedly due to the fact that the local SLA commanders perceived that the children were actively involved in activities that did not relate to the ongoing conflict. At the time of visiting, it seemed that these children had largely been spared the recruitment efforts of the LTTE, which were believed to be taking place in other villages in the area. However, we learned that at least one senior member of the club was recruited some months later.

A further potential threat to children's safety may come from their own communities. Participatory activities can lead young people to take action or speak about issues that local adults find objectionable, or which are perceived as a challenge to existing power relations. This is a concern at all times but, in a setting where the threshold of violence may be particularly low, the consequences of threatening adults in this way require special consideration.

In a mixed Muslim-Tamil village in eastern Sri Lanka, the children's club was the only institution that brought members of both communities together on a regular basis. The children themselves were determined to build strong relationships of trust and respect across an otherwise uneasy divide. While their efforts appeared to encourage positive attitudes among many of their parents, certain sections of the local population were very unhappy about the mixing of boys and girls from both communities. They have created serious obstacles to activities. Even though the village is in an area under government control, at one point, local Tamils managed to involve the LTTE, which issued orders against continuation of the children's intercommunity activities. This was a source of immense frustration and sadness to the participants themselves.

In the conditions of armed conflict and displacement, the sense of control over one's own circumstances may easily be lost. It is possible that their children are the only area over which many adults retain a feeling of their own ability to exert authority. The empowerment of young people, which participatory projects often encourage and facilitate, can be very unwelcome to some parents and other adults, especially in societies with a strong hierarchy based upon age and gender. The assumption of roles considered inappropriate to the young (and female) runs the obvious risk of producing a backlash. In a refugee camp in Gaza, a youth club's committee members expressed extreme indignation at our suggestion that young people might participate in the club's decision-making processes. It seemed this was the preserve of men in their mid-40s upward, for whom committee membership was a mark of their status in the community. As one committee member explained, it was unthinkable that young men should sit "chair to chair" with their elders. To insist on the full participation of young people in the running of such a club, albeit one intended for young people themselves, would clearly run the risk of upsetting a certain section of the community and creating a negative backlash.

3.2 *Direct negative impacts*

In societies experiencing armed conflict, children may be compelled to assume new or expanded roles or responsibilities. It is thus important that participatory activities should not add an extra burden. When many adult community members may be suffering from despair and apathy, as a consequence of loss of property and bereavement of loved ones, youth's energy and enthusiasm are especially valuable. However, there is an obvious danger that children, as members of an organized and motivated group, may become a willing resource, carrying an undue responsibility for the moral and physical reconstruction of their communities. In Nepal, for example, the children's clubs are often highly active in undertaking regular tasks on behalf of their villages, such as street cleaning, maintenance of public facilities (including latrines), organization of educational activities, and so on. Careful monitoring would seem necessary to ensure that participation does not become exploitation, albeit unintentionally. Similarly, the efforts of young Palestinians and Bhutanese to advocate about the plight of their people, and the abuse of rights that they experience, should not become a substitute for the continued efforts of adult members in their communities, of dedicated human-rights organizations, and of the international community at large.

Although often highly aware about social relations in their immediate community, children may lack a sufficiently detailed understanding of the wider political context in which they live and conduct activities. As a consequence, they may not fully anticipate obstacles to their intended course of action and the achievement of their goals. This can result in feelings of failure and despondency when unrealistic expectations fail to be met. The above example of the mixed Muslim-Tamil village would seem to illustrate this point.

Finally, caution seems necessary in relation to the involvement of children in peacebuilding efforts. Children have often proven to be powerful and persuasive advocates for peace, as is notably the case in Central and South America. They may also be able and willing to bridge the divide that exists with other communities. However, it is precisely their capacity in this respect that puts them at risk from those opposed to peace efforts and intercommunity exchange. Visibility in an unstable political environment always entails risk. Encouraging children to hold views and espouse values that are not endorsed by many adults, particularly those holding power, only adds to the potential danger.

4. Challenges: Scaling up

A fundamental motivation of the participatory approach is to ensure that young people's own experiences, concerns, and aspirations have a bearing upon the decisions that affect their lives. We would argue that this should hold true in societies experiencing political unrest and conflict, as much as it does elsewhere. Indeed, in situations where children are compelled to take on expanded roles and responsibilities, due to the conditions created by conflict, the need becomes even greater to ensure their input into decision-making processes. The practical and ethical challenges to achieving this are similarly increased.

The tendency of some agencies supporting children's participation, however, seems to be to contain the energy, ideas, and activities generated. We might call this approach "participation in a box". The clearest example of this came in Nepal. Since the early 1990s, a growing number of village-based children's clubs have been established with the support of numerous international and local agencies. A huge network of such clubs now exists across the country. All are geared toward facilitating children's participation in development. Due to the worsening conflict, a few child-focussed agencies have begun to develop conflict-related programs. Nevertheless, at the time of our fieldwork, none of these included children as participants in any meaningful way. The clubs themselves appeared to have no role, either as sources of information about the impact of the conflict on children, or as sites of intervention. In this way, children's participation has been kept "in a box", rather than integrated as a working principle across programs.

Participation has been constrained in a further way. This relates to the connection between participatory projects and the local-level processes of governance and decision-making. Within the child-led clubs and groups, children not only achieve clarity and agreement about the problems with which they need assistance, but they also acquire the confidence and communication skills that may be required to advocate for themselves and their peers in formal meetings where adults predominate. Nevertheless, we heard of few examples of agencies actively seeking to link the children in their projects with the fora of local-level governance and decision-making, and to secure a regular space for them there. One exception was in Surkhet District, where SCUK supports more than 300 child clubs. It has been able to secure four places on the District Child Welfare Boards (DCWBs) for children elected through the network of clubs. According to SCUK staff, the benefits of children's regular involvement in the DCWB have included greater support for children's activities in the district, the facilitation of children's access to senior officials, and a general change in attitude among adults, who have begun to listen more earnestly to children.

Seeking to involve children in fora where political or budgetary decisions are made raises issues about security. Clearly, the first priority must be to ensure that individual children are not exposed to undue risk. If such risk appears likely, then it may be necessary to consider how the views and concerns of children can be represented without their direct involvement in person.

However it is achieved, the benefits of establishing functional linkage between child-led initiatives, and the institutions and processes of governance, need to be understood and further explored. Engaging the energy and commitment of young people, in their concern about issues that are causes or consequences of conflict, may have important benefits in terms of positive social change and long-term peacebuilding.

Conclusion: Key recommendations

In many parts of the world, efforts are steadily growing to introduce and expand children's participation in the activities of developmental organizations. However, some resistance may remain to the idea of children's participation in humanitarian efforts, particularly in the unstable conditions of armed conflict. Here, the emphasis tends to be upon the provision of services to children and on their protection by agency staff and mobilized adults in the community. We visited a range of activities that demonstrate, not only the possibility of children's participation in emergency situations, but also the important benefits that arise from this. This study has considered some of the most important benefits. To conclude, we here summarize the principal findings in terms of key recommendations that may be relevant for humanitarian agencies seeking to pursue a participatory approach in their work with children.

- Consider children's participation in positive relation to protection. Children living amid armed conflict, particularly 12- to 18-year-olds, are often at risk from frustration, isolation, and hopelessness. Furthermore, they have a potentially vital role to play in enhancing their own protection and that of their peers, especially when conflict has disrupted regular family and community life. The provision of opportunities for participation in meaningful social action, which empowers the young to better protect themselves, should thus be considered as an emergency measure, and not as an option to be explored when circumstances improve.
- Develop a sound grasp of historical, cultural, and social conditions, especially with respect to the involvement of the young in social action and decision-making processes. For example, in the West Bank and Gaza, it is important for policy makers to have good knowledge of children's participation in the first Intifada, and what this has subsequently meant for Palestinian society and young people.
- Adopt a proactive stance toward donors, encouraging their appreciation of the importance of participatory programming with the young.
- Work with other agencies to build a strong consensus on ethics, methods, and concepts relating to children's participation in situations of armed conflict.
- Start any project through on-the-ground analysis, undertaken together with children and other community members.
- Ensure that the safety and well-being of participants and supporting staff remains the primary concern at all times. The agency remains responsible for this. The responsibility should not be passed onto children themselves. Be prepared to suspend activities or to make alterations in light of changing circumstances.
- Adopt a gradual approach to the development of activities. Allow time for children to gain trust and confidence as they begin to articulate their ideas and build a solid network, and for family and community members to get used to and feel comfortable with this way of working. In many cases, it will be very unfamiliar.
- Open up space for children's participation. This is unlikely to exist already and so must be created by gaining the understanding and support of parents and community figures.
- Develop close collaboration between local and international agencies. This is invaluable, since they have a complementary role to play in ensuring the success and safety of participatory projects. Furthermore, both may have a function in facilitating the efforts of children to make contact with government bodies and other organizations.

- Provide staff and participants with ongoing training activities to build their capacity. Training content should be negotiated with participants and reflect their expressed needs and aspirations.
- Encourage children to take responsibility at every possible opportunity, and in each stage of the program cycle, including the management of resources.
- Offer continuous support to children's activities. The most important element of this support should be provision of an on-hand fieldworker, ready to advise and assist when requested.
- Link existing child-led projects to the wider context of civil society and local governance.
- Encourage and promote a culture of participation within the agency itself. If organizations maintain strongly hierarchical relations among staff members, they are unlikely to prove successful in the long-term promotion of participatory activities with the young. Self-reflection, and the willingness to explore new models of working, would seem desirable.