

# Children's participation in the context of forced migration

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## Introduction

Forced migration is one of the most significant human phenomena of the 21st century, affecting millions of adults and children throughout the globe. Most displaced populations in the world today settle spontaneously, in the main within their own countries. Only a small minority of those who are forced to flee their homes are registered officially and become part of an organised refugee community and programme. Much of what social scientists and other observers know about displaced populations refers to the minority of displaced persons who are registered. Refugees in camps constitute a captive population for researchers and relief agencies, while, on the other hand, spontaneously settled, "unofficial" populations of displaced people tend to actively seek privacy and anonymity, for fear of antagonism from or eviction by neighbours, or detention and deportation by the authorities.

Global knowledge of the experiences and perspectives of displaced children is extremely limited at this point in time. In terms of research, there are a large number of psychosocial studies of refugee children, but most of these employ a positivist paradigm, with highly structured, pre-coded instruments that reflect the researcher's perspectives rather than those of the child subjects. Other documentary evidence on refugee children and the programmes to assist them tends to be anecdotal, much of it intended for use in advocacy. The bulk of the so-called evaluative research concerning the interventions of agencies that provide support and services to refugee communities is based on self-reporting or investigations by external consultants. In most cases, these studies are more concerned to monitor inputs and outputs, such as school utensils supplied, numbers of refugee children attending classes, or completing a particular grade, than programme processes or outcomes. These latter would have more to do with what children learn, how they view their education and so on.

Based on previous experience in communities in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Peru and secondary sources, rather than primary research, this paper examines some of the key questions and issues regarding the participation of refugee and displaced children in societal and programmatic

processes. Given that there has as yet been very little practical experience or research globally on this subject, this article is of necessity exploratory in nature. The discussion begins by reviewing some of the structural, operational and conceptual reasons why children's participation is, as a rule, highly restricted in refugee and displaced communities, and concludes by considering some recent developments in the field.

## Structural exclusion of displaced populations

It is important to bear in mind that the conditions for child participation in displaced communities may be absent, for cultural or other reasons. Forced migrants often come from comparatively conservative rural areas where gender, generation and class or caste hierarchies are entrenched and interaction between individuals of different social status strictly limited by tradition. When refugee camp officials have tried to implement more liberal and participatory processes for children, this has sometimes been met with resistance by parents and community elders who see such approaches as counter-cultural. In Thai camps for refugees from Cambodia and Laos, parents opposed child-centred education and insisted on the reintroduction of learning by rote, the traditional method of teaching. Community elders were angered by the widespread availability of radios in the camps and by young people choosing to wear western dress. Cultural retrenchment, or the desire to reassert traditional norms and practice, may be a reflection of the overwhelming sense of cultural loss experienced by most adult refugees. It is notable that children tend to be more flexible and adaptable than adults in these situations and, with the benefit of schooling, many are able to learn the language and assimilate the lifestyle of their host community far more quickly. Thus, in many refugee communities the threat to traditional inter-generational power structures results in an adult backlash that impedes the liberalisation of adult-child relations.

More than this, however, refugee communities emerge by definition out of crisis. They are frequently made up of individuals and families that do not share common origins and have no prior connection with each other, who come

together more by accident than design. In many cases, families have been split up and some have been reconstituted, taking in new members, such as orphans or step-parents and siblings. These truncated and revised family relations may prove an obstacle to participation. Sometimes political activists and combatants are housed in camps alongside civilians who may have no interest in their cause. Often displaced communities must contend with the continual threat of forced repatriation. Building trust and confidence in public and collective processes can be extremely difficult in these contexts.

Collective organisation and representation tends to be highly politicised in communities of forced migrants. In conflict and post-conflict situations, information of any kind, however innocuous it may appear, is prone to being perceived as a form of intelligence. Children's protagonism in particular is commonly regarded with apprehension by relief agencies, government officials and others, for it invokes images of children as freedom fighters, combatants, and perpetrators of violence. Collective organisation may be perceived as a potential threat to both the powers that be in the refugees' country of origin and the host government. Refugee representatives in South Africa, for example, argue that both the host government and their own embassies oppose refugee collective activity and organisation since it is taken to be a front for political activism and military recruitment. Several embassies have infiltrated refugee communities in South Africa with a view to monitoring political and military activity. This case illustrates the extreme sensitivity of developing participatory processes among refugee populations.

The experience of forced migration is, by definition, one of exclusion, since involuntary displacement to an alien and sometimes hostile environment fundamentally constrains the contexts, levels and forms of participation available to adults and children alike. Political and social participation in the host society, for example, tends to be extremely restricted in most cases. This may be due to a failure to extend to displaced populations their basic civil rights, including the right to citizenship and an identity, or because of social barriers such as differences of language and religion or social prejudice and discrimination.

In this regard, there are important differences between registered refugee groups in camps and those populations who do not enjoy official recognition. In many instances, refugees in formal programmes are more isolated from normal civil, social, economic and political processes than other displaced populations, since they live in artificial, contained settlements. Until their asylum status is resolved, they are generally subject to a plethora of rules controlling access to the labour market, services and the like. In many cases they are prohibited from leaving the camp. Containment in a camp is a major restriction in

terms of economic participation and often leads to high levels of dependence on rations. However, many camps have quite "porous" boundaries and by bribing camp officials, refugees may take informal jobs outside in the host community. Informal displacement, by contrast, results in extensive economic participation in host economies by both adults and children. This is partly because those who are informally displaced need to blend in as far as possible with the local community, in order to survive economically and avoid eviction. Beyond economic participation, the arenas of collective action for unofficially displaced populations are often restricted to social and spiritual events, such as festivals and religious celebrations, and seldom include meaningful civil or political engagement.

In all cases, because their skills are not acknowledged – due to language difficulties, a lack of social networks or other factors – refugee and displaced populations are extremely prone to exploitation and abuse in the work context. They tend to occupy the most menial and poorly paid jobs, in which the opportunities for collective organisation, self-representation and self-advocacy are minimal. Often they are forcefully dispersed both physically and occupationally, with children taking employment in communities distant from their parents. In Sri Lanka, for instance, girls and young women from refugee communities may be trafficked to the Gulf States, their remitted income making an important contribution to the domestic economy. In Afghan refugee populations, boys are at greater risk of family separation than girls because religious taboos prohibit girls from taking paid employment outside the home or community. On the other hand, prior contact with people from the community of origin can determine choice of settlement and livelihood in displaced populations, sometimes enabling migrants to remain together.

## Operational limitations to participation

### **Short termism**

Given that at present no agency within the United Nations has a mandate to support unofficially displaced populations, organised relief and rehabilitation measures tend to be focused mainly on those populations that are registered as refugees. Thus, membership of a recognised, registered refugee community in theory provides children with the opportunity to take part in decisions and measures designed to assist them. Effective participation takes a great deal of time and considerable resources to develop, however, especially if children are to be meaningfully involved. In most cases, neither the migrant population nor the implementing agency, nor indeed the host community, wishes to conceive of refugee measures as being long term. Most formal refugee programmes, even those that have been sustained over long periods (as

in the case of the many Palestinian camps in the Middle East) are planned as short-term, emergency interventions. Indeed, refugee camps often come into being overnight. Given the artificial nature of refugee communities and the desire of most displaced peoples either to return home or move on to a place where asylum is assured, most forced migrants do not make a major emotional investment in their community. Consequently, there is little motivation to develop the kinds of planning, management and monitoring mechanisms and structures that are required to foster effective participation in community life or programme implementation.

### ***Use of external rather than local expertise***

Another constraint is that emergency interventions tend to be planned on the basis of prior experience and models devised centrally, according to policies elaborated within agency headquarters. This approach invites the use of international experts with previous experience of emergency interventions, as opposed to local experts more familiar with the context and specifics of a situation. Frequently, international staff are unable to speak the local language and are entirely unfamiliar with local custom and practice, which acts as a major barrier to the establishment of participatory procedures and programmes. When use of local expertise is allowed, as for example in many refugee education and health care initiatives, it is sometimes conceived of as a therapeutic measure for the refugees rather than an essential component of a contextually appropriate programme. This situation applies less among refugees who are educated or have a professional background (as in Bosnia and Kosovo), for they are normally better able to assert themselves in the face of paternalistic attitudes, structures and procedures. In a case in South Africa, however, refugees had planned to set up a participatory monitoring and evaluation system as a way of keeping tabs on the conditions and circumstances of their communities. But local support organisations insisted on mediating on their behalf with government officials and others, thereby sustaining a relation of dependency and isolating the displaced population from important channels of political participation. Such evidence raises fundamental questions about the values and attitudes of many relief agencies with regard to their client population

### ***Focus on "basic needs"***

Refugee support measures tend to focus first and foremost on "basic needs" (clean water, sanitation, food, shelter, health care) which are taken to be universal and hence not to require consultation or discussion with affected populations. The lack of consultation applies even more to children than to adults. Only comparatively recently (especially in Bosnia and Kosovo) have implementing agencies begun to appreciate that refugee well-being and rights amount to much more than the satisfaction of mere physical need. Going beyond basic

physical needs certainly requires discussion and joint planning with beneficiaries, since for interventions to be effective, local values, attitudes and practices must be taken into account. However, in practice, this usually leads to consultation with refugee community leaders and representatives, not children.

### ***Inappropriate assumptions about children's best interest***

Agency approaches to refugee children reflect the model of children's rights promoted most widely at present by the international community. This model depends on a triadic structure of child:family:state (although in the case of refugee children, senior members of the relief community often stand in for the absent state). What is missing from this model are peer initiatives and sibling support, these being essential components of any participatory process involving children and crucial to children's survival and well-being in many situations of conflict and flight. Unless relief agencies are prepared to conceive of peers as important emotional, psychological, social and economic resources for children in refugee settings, participatory processes are likely to be little more than tokenism.

There is a very real sense in which initiatives mounted by support and service agencies are in many contexts imposed on refugee children, implying that the role and impact of organised relief efforts on behalf of children need serious evaluation. When children do make their own choices, they often reject the services provided by the relief community. Take the case of a small group of children in Kosovo who were found by a journalist to be living in a derelict building, in hiding not from the bombs but from relief agencies who were intent on evacuating separated children and "reuniting" (or rather fostering) them with families. These children preferred to remain together, even though this meant scavenging and living in grave physical danger.

In Rwanda idealised models about childhood and family drove a massive programme of family tracing and "reunification" involving some 60,000 children. The assumption that children's best interests depend on being in a family was so powerful that relief workers failed to seriously consult and plan with children and foster families about their motives or preferred options for placement. Initially, many agencies even refused to do follow up assessments to establish whether placements had been successful. The one agency that did do follow up work found around 30 to 40% of placements were, for one reason or another, failing, either from the child's perspective or that of the foster parents. This proportion is unacceptably high by any standards, but could be regarded as an inevitable result of the failure to employ participatory processes in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

There are instances in which children's participation in the refugee context, organised often by non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations, results in children and their families being exposed to harassment, violence and imprisonment, or having their asylum status jeopardised. In this regard, refugee support organisations can sometimes be extraordinarily naive, since families and children are sometimes dependent for their survival on the very agencies that put them in danger. In this kind of situation of dependency it is hard for children or their families to refuse to take part in participatory events and activities, however ill-judged, for fear that doing so will result in the removal of essential support systems.

## Conceptual barriers to children's participation

Most forced migrants undergo enormous disruption and upheaval and have suffered great pain and deprivation. Some experience severe long-term psychological and emotional consequences. In many cases, displaced children (especially girls) are at grave risk of sexual violence and exploitation. There are reports from refugee communities throughout the world of very poor personal security and, linked to this, high levels of rape, abduction and trafficking of both girls and boys. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the discourse surrounding displaced communities and refugee children in particular is steeped in notions of vulnerability and incapacity. The forcibly displaced are frequently perceived as traumatised victims, overwhelmed by grief, loss and exposure to extreme adversity, dependent for their salvation on the relief agencies. Relief workers tend to find it hard to imagine children in such conditions as having the will or the resourcefulness to take part in decision making and organised collective activity.

Perceptions of the vulnerable dependent victim are more clearly articulated in relation to children than to adults. This is particularly evident in the imagery of media and fund-raising materials that tend to focus on the starving, dying, grieving or frightened child. Seldom are children portrayed as active survivors and seldom are they recognised as social subjects with a major part to play not just in their own survival and coping, but also in that of their families. Considerable anecdotal evidence indicates that refugee children often run major risks to reach camps and other designated refugee sites and frequently display extraordinary ingenuity in doing so. In many cases, children are not merely important economic actors within the household, but a major emotional resource for distressed and depressed parents. While it is important to acknowledge children's pain and suffering and to recognise that some children are extremely vulnerable, it is quite remarkable how relief workers consistently fail to acknowledge the resourcefulness that many children show in situations of conflict and flight.

Over-reliance on concepts of trauma and sickness leads to reluctance (on ethical grounds) to engage directly with children on their own terms, for fear that this might cause "secondary traumatisation" in children. For example, most agencies prefer to ask teachers, parents or other carers about children's problems and needs, rather than conduct participatory assessments with children themselves. This approach, according to the agencies, avoids opening up distressing memories and issues for children. Effectively, an assumption is made that parents know what their children think, feel and aspire to. This is despite consistent research evidence that in situations of crisis, parents are often too depressed themselves to be aware of children's circumstances and condition in detail. In fact, many parents feel constrained to minimise children's problems, possibly out of guilt or anxiety at having failed to provide them with adequate care and protection during crisis.

For children, one of the most distressing aspects of displacement – frequently overlooked by the relief community – is the loss of roles that they played in their homeland. For example, Somali and Sudanese boys talk about the fact that they are no longer able to tend the animals belonging to their family and community. Intuitively, it would seem logical to argue that when children are deprived of meaningful opportunities to participate in the economic life of their communities, this will have major social consequences for them. Loss of opportunity to work is likely to pose a fundamental threat to children's social integration and self-esteem, since in many contexts it is the accomplishment of gendered work roles that ensure the transition to adulthood. In this sense, girls may be better off than boys since there is greater potential to sustain domestic roles in refugee settings than productive roles. Under these circumstances, when children cannot fulfil their social and economic responsibilities and can no longer learn the life skills of their community, it is hard to imagine how confining children's participation to educational, sports and recreation activities can be very meaningful in terms of child development and well-being.

## Conclusion

Since the advent of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is increasingly assumed that children's participation in decisions and processes affecting them is not just a matter of right, but also beneficial both for children and their families. That said, the goal of children's participation is far from being realised in most settings. Of all groups of children, those who are forcibly displaced are among the most isolated and discriminated against, socially, economically and politically. As the scale of displacement grows globally, so the challenge of ensuring social inclusion and social justice for these populations increases. Nevertheless, the constraints to children's

participation in the context of forced migration are considerable, in some cases presenting very real security risks to children and their families. There is also the concern that promoting the participation of children in provision, policy and other processes could cause serious discord in situations where adults are themselves excluded. These constraints emphasise the need for great caution in advancing participatory models, which unfortunately has been lacking in some instances.

The problems notwithstanding, there have been several positive developments in this field in recent years. For example, the Save the Children Alliance is trying to introduce participatory processes with children in several countries, as in Sri Lanka where war-affected and displaced children are involved in participatory research and problem identification. A similar process has been instigated by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in the Balkans. *Medicins Sans Frontières*, Canada, is developing a training programme for relief workers which is intended to instil attitudes and approaches that acknowledge children as protagonists and social subjects, as opposed to objects of pity and relief. And UNHCR recently commissioned a study of participatory monitoring and evaluation with refugees (not children) that was intended to provide policy recommendations and good practice guidelines. Such schemes need close observation and documentation so that their impact on displaced children, their families and communities can be gauged and disseminated more widely, as an encouragement to further action in the field.

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