Young Peacebuilders: Exploring Youth Engagement with Conflict and Social Change

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Abstract
Changes in the nature of war in the course of the last century are thrusting young people inevitably into more intimate relationships with conflict. This article builds on a critical approach to the issues of young people living in conflict zones which promotes their agency in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. ‘Participation’ is explored in the context of conflict transformation theory and is linked with child rights-based approaches to development. Examples of young people’s contributions to peacebuilding in several parts of the world are shared demonstrating their political and social capacities. The article concludes that there is a need to understand how young people perceive conflict and what drives some to become involved in violent conflict when others choose non-violence. It is argued that it is necessary to seek non-violent ways for young people to impact conditions that lead to, and out of, conflict. This will require young people’s empowerment. Development actors can look to models of conflict transformation and peacebuilding to better understand how to promote inclusion of young people in peace processes and their more constructive engagement with conflict.

Introduction – Beyond Protection
As long ago as the 1920s, Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children, declared, ‘All wars, just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child’ (Jebb Buxton 1931:5). The devastating effects of war on children1 can not be disputed today. In the course of the last century, the frontline in most of the world’s conflicts has moved from distant battlefields on the borders between nations to the centre of social activity in their towns and villages. Such changes are thrusting young people inevitably into more intimate relationships with conflict.

Recent years have seen a corresponding focus among researchers and development agencies on the effect of armed conflict on children. On assignment from the United Nations from 1994 to 1996 and again in 2000, Graça Machel carried out the first global, systematic study on the effects of armed conflict on children (Machel 1996, 2000). These seminal works provide an overview of the vast number of children affected by conflict in a number of ways. Though mention is made of young people as a resource in creating solutions, the focus of the Machel report is the vulnerabilities of children – for example those in flight due to conflict, as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and those particularly vulnerable to exploitation, sexual abuse, injury, and recruitment into armed groups. This perspective was preceded and clearly influenced by the introduction of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. In so far as they address the issue of children in situations of conflict, both the CRC and the Machel report advocate the regulation of war in order to protect children, with little reference to young people as social actors engaged in a variety of ways with conflict and in building peace. Yet the agency of young people must be considered, as they represent a large
constituency that has the capacity to be a resource for promoting peaceful social change, and alternatively, the ability to exacerbate conflict. Recognising this is essential both in terms of improving the lives of young people, and in terms of achieving sustainable peace.

In keeping with the tone of the CRC and Machel reports, perspectives from the fields of mental health and human rights have primarily informed the understanding of young people’s relationship to violent conflict in recent decades. Thus, consequences of conflict for children’s emotional and psychological conditions and violations of their rights have been documented, providing important knowledge and helping to ameliorate negative consequences of violent conflict (Qouta & El Sarraj 2004; Cairns 1996; Dyregrov et al 2002; Husain et al 1998; Cohn 1999; Majekodunmi 1999). The conclusions generally reinforce the view that young people are primarily vulnerable victims, and in the case of child soldiers, young people are most often seen as victims, coerced into joining armed groups. An opposing view is that the child soldiers represent senselessly brutal deviations from childhood norms (Singer 2005).

Such a focus on trauma and vulnerability on the one hand, and unreasonable and ‘un-childlike’ viciousness on the other, risks polarising the perceptions of young people’s engagement with violent political conflict in a ‘victim-perpetrator’ dichotomy. This limited view omits the vast majority of young people whose relationship to conflict is much more complex. It also reinforces the notion of young people as being merely vulnerable and in need of protection. Such a narrow perspective is often at odds with the realities of young people in situations of conflict. It is time to move beyond the logic of protection and to develop strategies which fully recognise the complexity of young people’s engagement with conflict and their roles in peacebuilding. Fortunately, an important discourse has recently begun to emerge which conceptualises this intricacy – including a perception of young people as ‘stakeholders’ for whom engagement with conflict is at times a measured risk, giving consideration to social, economic and political aspirations (McIntyre 2004). This article will build upon the stakeholder role, exploring the capacities and influence of young people in contexts of conflict.

Two major shifts in the development enterprise inform the wider context of this article: first, the move to rights-based approaches; second, a greater focus on the relationship between development and peacebuilding (Miall 2004; Uvin 2002). Since the establishment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognising the human rights of children in international law and its almost universal adoption by the international community, there has been a move by child-focused development actors – such as Save the Children, Plan, and the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) – to make children’s rights the basis for all their work. To take a child rights-based approach to programming means to put young people at the centre and recognise them as right-holders and social actors. This article examines the right to ‘participation’ and argues that forms of participation that most fully recognise the agency of young people as social and political actors are best suited to tasks of peacebuilding.

Exploring young people’s roles in peacebuilding, the article further argues that a comprehensive understanding of peacebuilding efforts is aided enormously by examining the context of such efforts in light of the principles and mechanisms of conflict transformation (see Galtung 1996; 2000; Lederach 1995, 1997, 2005). These arguments are
illustrated by several examples of young people’s engagement with conflict in the context of the political and social realities that drive them, taken from the authors’ field experiences in the Middle East and Asia, as well as from that of noted scholars and researchers.

**Participation & Agency: Children as Political Beings and Social Actors**

Alongside ‘provision’ and ‘protection’ in the CRC, agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children have highlighted the legitimacy and potential of the third key element, ‘children’s participation’. They have put considerable effort into establishing children’s participation as an important element of development programming. This is expressed as a clear strategy and manifested in the publication of a number of training manuals. Gerison Lansdown, a child rights consultant, defines children’s participation as:

- An ongoing process of children’s expression and active involvement in decision making at different levels in matters that concern them;
- Requiring information sharing and dialogue between children and adults, which is based on mutual respect and power sharing;
- Giving children the power to shape both the process and outcome;
- Respecting children’s own evolving capacity, experience and interests in determining the nature of their participation (Lansdown 2004).

This definition points to the importance of involving young people at all levels of programming where they have a stake as active subjects in their own lives – including programme conception, development, research, planning, implementation and evaluation. The alternative is to risk creating interventions which do not address the priorities of young people. The definition also highlights the importance of recognising and honouring young people’s knowledge, power and capacity and in that way mirrors Hart’s distinction between instrumental and ‘transformative’ participation. The former is aimed at achieving a particular outcome with no expectation of a broader impact, while transformative participation ‘is a means to empower affected populations to assume greater control over their lives and achieve structural change in society’ (Hart 2004:9). ‘Empowerment’ is a complex term, often adapted to suit its application, but in general includes ‘access to information, ability to make choices and have greater control over their lives, active roles in political and civic processes, and increased self-esteem related to self-efficacy’ (Chamberlain 1997; Hart 2004).

Thus transformative participation both empowers young people individually and potentially impacts policies and policy makers, i.e. it has both personal and systematic (and synergistic) transformational qualities (Lederach 1995). In this way, the link to conflict transformation, which emphasises process as well as outcome, and the importance of addressing structural issues become apparent. This relationship and the concept of conflict transformation are explored more fully in the next section.

Lansdown’s description of ‘participation’ and emphasis on empowerment resonate with the notion of young people’s agency – ‘the ability to shape one’s own life and to influence the lives of others’ (Hart & Tyrer 2006:8). Generally today, the potential agency of young people in conflict transformation and peacebuilding is often overlooked due to a perception that young people are apolitical. Many researchers have complained that a Western conception of childhood – as a time of innocence, dependency and powerlessness – was first exported through colonialism and now through international aid (Boyden 1997).
Reynolds (1998) has made the point that this Western view also holds children out to be politically ignorant and uninvolved, and she argues that this risks obscuring children’s actual contributions to society. It is well documented that young people in a variety of conflict zones and other dangerous and oppressive environments are aware of and sensitive to political realities, and that they make political and moral decisions accordingly (Coles 1986; Garbarino et al. 1991; Melton & Limber 1992). For example, girls and boys have been involved in the intifadas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Hart reports that children in the OPT 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 (Hart 2004:12-13).

Reynolds makes a similar observation in relation to young people in South Africa choosing to take part in the struggle against apartheid; she stresses that they took ‘profoundly serious political and moral decisions in relation to their own safety and ambitions, as well as the safety and interests of their families’ (Reynolds 1998:45). In Sri Lanka, some feel ‘that given their options, children are making rational choices to join the Government forces, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or groups such as PLOT (Peoples Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam)’ (Zandvliet & Kriemann 2001:15).

Discussion around child soldiers has also until recently tended to overlook issues of children’s political awareness and agency (Rosen 2005; Sanford 2006). Rather, there has been a ‘moral outrage’ about child soldiers that parallels an earlier outrage over ‘street children’ (Boyd 1990:187-188; Cave 1998; Stephens 1995:12) and other cultural-contextual realities such as child labour. For instance, the term ‘child soldiers’ can be misleading and hide a wider problem: that of girls and boys associated with armed forces and fulfilling a variety of roles that may not include direct involvement in hostilities, but which are also a part of the dichotomous yet intertwined dynamics of vulnerability and agency. The images that build up around the term can also polarise. People in the West tend to see child soldiers as victims, while those in their own country may see them as killers and perpetrators of abuses, and the young people may see themselves as freedom fighters and heroes (Straker 1992 cited in Reynolds 2000:147). While violence may be embedded in a particular political culture and may appeal to some, it will appal others. Perhaps, as Rosen suggests, the young people are simply making rational decisions about their survival. Rosen observes that

... the vast majority of child soldiers are not forcibly recruited or abducted into armed forces and groups. Indeed, in Liberia, children were among the first to join the armed groups, and in the Palestinian intifada they have often been the catalysts of violence (2005:17).

Regardless of who holds power in these conflicts, young people are not only victims but also self-motivated participants for a variety of reasons - from spontaneous and self-preservation oriented to quite strategic. Such reasons include revenge, ideology, attempts to gain power, the desire to improve their economic conditions as a means of protecting themselves from attack, or simply because their friends joined, or for the adventure (Sanford 2006, Brett & Specht 2004). Such rationales are not unlike the social, moral and political grounds that motivate adults to join armed forces.
In 2003, a Human Rights Watch report cited 96 of 112 former child combatants interviewed in a study saying they joined the armed groups voluntarily (HRW 2003). Okwir Rabwoni, who himself volunteered to become a soldier in the Ugandan National Resistance Army at the age of 15, argues, ‘If there are good reasons for young people to volunteer to fight, they will do so, and no amount of special programmes and laws will be able to prevent them from taking up arms’ (Rabwoni 2002:163). De Waal, writing of ‘middle teenagers’ (aged 15-17) in Africa, says that

… most of these young people are social and political beings, impatient to express themselves, organise and engage in the social and political affairs of their communities and nations… Given the chance, many join political parties… some volunteer for armed rebel movements, which in some cases can become a means for personal as well as political emancipation (De Waal 2002:18).

What, then, are the ‘good reasons’, as Rabwoni calls them, for young people to opt for violence, and how can development programmes provide other opportunities – safe, constructive and positive opportunities – for young people’s protection and emancipation? From a rights-based and socio-political point of view, one way is to provide them opportunities and skills to participate in peacebuilding initiatives. With that could come opportunities for alternative livelihoods, thus addressing structural barriers to young people’s contribution to development – both individually and collectively. Dialogue with the young people involved is a necessary first step to attaining answers to those questions.

That said, many children also demonstrate their political awareness by taking action that does not involve violence. For Palestinian children, engagement in the conflict is largely about resistance against the occupation, as expressed in a variety of ways through the intifāda, or ‘shaking off’. While a majority feels it is important to be part of Palestinian resistance against the occupation, most are not primarily inclined towards “violent resistance” (Arafat & Boothby 2003:29). The children describe a variety of actions they have been involved with: awareness-raising activities about the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, boycotting Israeli goods, helping families in need, writing slogans on walls and participating in peaceful demonstrations. Continuing their education, maintaining cultural traditions and surviving to the best of their abilities were also mentioned as ways of resisting the occupation. Children are also involved in more directly political ways: funeral demonstrations in the camps, distributing leaflets and hanging flags (Arafat & Boothby 2003:23).³

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Under the Indonesian occupation in East Timor, some estimate that a majority of children and youth were involved in non-violent acts of resistance and voluntary efforts to support the falintil (armed resistance). They covered a range of roles: acting as lookouts, spies, porters and messengers for the falintil. They also caused delays and inconvenience to the Indonesian military and police by deflating vehicle tyres and damaging vehicles, wrote anti-Indonesian graffiti on walls, and participated in the ‘Kapan Pulang’ campaign – which consisted of asking Indonesian immigrants and civilian officials: ‘When are you going home, sir?’ (Kapan pulang, Pak?).⁴

Youth are a potentially powerful peace constituency (Garcia 2006). ‘Their transitional state is regarded as valuable for initiating change at the grassroots level, which can, in
As long as young people perceive the ‘other’ as the enemy, as something not like their group or something less human, sustainable peace is not possible.

Conflict Transformation and the Role of Participation in Peacebuilding

Young people’s involvement in peacebuilding in the context of development programmes begins with soliciting their perspectives in an analysis of the situation. A child rights situation analysis is the starting point for any child rights-based development programming. In a conflict situation, it should include a thorough analysis of the conflict context: the dynamics, the immediate and root causes, and the short- and long-term consequences.

A definition of ‘conflict context’ from a conflict transformation perspective involves a holistic examination of the key elements of conflict – the ABCs: attitudes plus behaviour plus contradiction (Galtung 2000). The contradiction is an expression of opposing goals or wills, also representing the immediate and root causes of conflict. When conflict turns violent, the ABCs convert to violence: ‘attitudes’ to cultural violence (e.g. discrimination, enemy images), ‘behaviour’ in the form of direct physical violence, and ‘contradiction’ in relation to structural violence (e.g. unequal distribution of wealth, poverty, destruction of infrastructure, or barriers to access).

The youth peacebuilding programmes of today are largely focused on transforming attitudes through ‘peace education’ or people-to-people experiences, which aim to build bridges between opposing groups in a conflict. As long as young people perceive the ‘other’ as the enemy, as something not like their group or something less human, sustainable peace is not possible. Young people report from their experiences in such programmes that after a warming-up period, they tend to empathise with or make friends with the other youths. There are limitations, however. For example, Huwaida Arraf, former programme coordinator for Seeds of Peace and co-founder of the International Solidarity Movement, explains:

...while it is important to break down stereotypes and to listen and talk to ‘the other side’, there is a danger in equating the two sides. When Palestinians talks about living in refugee camps, the Israelis talk about the Holocaust. Palestinians had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but it is Israeli policies and actions that caused and perpetuates the refugee situation.6
Another problem is that when young people in conflict situations return to the context of the everyday – where they still encounter the structural barriers emanating from the conflict – they quickly revert to former attitudes (Salomon 2006). Even when they recognise the humanity of the ‘other’, they do not see how peacebuilding encounters can change their lives or their experience of the conflict – especially aspects of structural violence that often underlie violent conflict in the form of poverty, barriers to employment, lack of mobility and access to schools, homelessness and displacement.

This focus on underlying structural violence – which may persist even after the worst of the direct physical violence has ceased (Galtung 1969) – is essential if dissonance is to be avoided between programmatic expectations and young people’s real-life experiences. Effective peacebuilding therefore needs to adopt the holistic approach provided by the conflict transformation model, addressing attitudes, behaviour and contradictions. If the marginalisation of young people is reinforced rather than clearly addressed through programmes, even unintentionally, or if young people are put at risk of alienation in their communities through the process, then harm has been done. This could come about by targeting programming only at particular young people, for example, or by assuming equality among groups when a power disparity clearly exists, or by introducing initiatives aimed at ‘normalisation’, such as encounter programmes across conflict borders.

This examination of the framework of conflict transformation, presented in the work of Galtung among others, has many similarities to ‘transformational participation’ as understood by rights-based development programmes. Those involved in conflict transformation tend to be grassroots organisations, international development and humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Their activities are targeted at those most affected by the violent conflict, and include capacity building and empowerment, development and humanitarian assistance, and human rights work (Bigdon & Korf 2002; Lederach 1997).

The purpose is what Bigdon and Korf refer to as the ‘logic of (local) empowerment’ rather than just instrumental participation. ‘Peace’ is defined in positive terms. Negative peace is the absence of violence, whereas positive peace embraces a stable balance and integration of the various aspects of transformed societies – cultural, direct, and structural – with peace maintained by peaceful means (Galtung 1996:32-33). This often requires an extensive transformation of social relationships and structures, and encompasses activities within both conflict transformation and peacebuilding frameworks.

An examination of the aims and dimensions of peacebuilding as described by Haugerudbraaten (1998) reveals one track which is aimed at addressing root causes of conflict, by broad intervention in political, economic, security and humanitarian spheres; is long-term, involving indigenous actors, where the result is an aggregate process, and the organisation is dispersed to a multitude of actors, with more stress on diversity than on co-ordination (1998:7). An overall goal is positive peace. This description makes it clear that conflict transformation and peacebuilding can be seen as overlapping and complementary activities that theoretically, if not always practically, embrace the participation of young people. How to put that theory into action is a dilemma complicated by the challenges of living in the context of conflict, as illustrated in the following example.
**Stories and Lessons from Sri Lanka**

In a small Sri Lankan village caught in the crossfire at the borderland between government soldiers and the LTTE, a crowd of young people assemble to tell their stories. Some look on with open curiosity, some with warm engagement, and others with scowling scepticism. We gather in the dry garden outside the small shelter Deepashika shares with her grandparents, one older brother, and one younger brother. Her other two younger brothers have become aspirant Buddhist monks. Her father is dead and her mother has gone away to find work and they have not heard from her. As she serves us cold drinks the soft voice of our 16-year-old hostess belies her fervent desire: ‘I want to be a teacher, and come back and teach here in my village’.

‘She is very bright,’ her grandfather adds, proudly. Beneath his pride cling despair and frustration.

The youth tell about their young lives lived in the landscape of conflict, the aspirations which fill their dreams at night and the reality that meets them each day upon waking. No teachers are willing to work in this dangerous area, so the older youth teach the younger children. Resources for further education or employment elsewhere are scarce. Aspiring to become doctors, teachers, and successful fishermen, they concede to the reality of their situation. The older boys describe a future in the military as the only viable alternative, the only sure way of making a living, of achieving status. We don’t talk long before we are discovered and silently surrounded by soldiers. They are there for our protection – such gatherings draw attention. The young people accept this. It was not long ago they had to flee a deadly and destructive raid on their village. The war has infiltrated both warp and weft of their lives; there seems to be no escape. The lure of hope is only a dull reflection in their eyes (Lori Drummond-Mundal – field notes from Sri Lanka, April 2007).

No matter how many soldiers converge around them, the young people of Deepashika’s village cannot ultimately be protected from either direct violence, from structural violence – in the form, for example, of lack of access to education, unemployment and poverty – or from cultural violence expressed in policies of discrimination and intolerance. Rather, the threats themselves must be eliminated through a process of conflict transformation involving actors from all levels of society, including young people, and addressing the issue of local empowerment.

Against the backdrop of a long-standing civil war, the children of Sri Lanka have experienced poverty, displacement and recruitment as child soldiers. The focus on and the money available for peacebuilding work in Sri Lanka have varied following the fluctuating course of peace negotiations and the tsunami of December 2004. Peacebuilding efforts involving young people have mainly centred on inter-community exchanges among groups aimed at developing friendship and trust between opposing sides. Hart makes the point that these initiatives have not been evaluated, and he raises issues with peacebuilding efforts initiated by adults for children. He quotes an agency worker in eastern Sri Lanka who said, ‘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?’ (Hart 2004:26). These statements reflect the concerns raised earlier in relation to the conflict transformation framework, that addressing only one aspect of conflict – in this case attitudes – may be not only unhelpful but also counter-productive. Young people from different social groups naturally make comparisons when they meet. This can be uncomfortable when an enormous
disparity is apparent, particularly when one group belongs to a collective which is oppressed by the other group's collective. As underlined earlier, cross-conflict encounters can be destructive when the social distance is too great due to clashing cultural narratives as explanations for the root and immediate causes of conflict, or to on-going direct violence, or to the entrenchedness of structural violence. Eliciting empathy may not be possible, or even an appropriate expectation. The end result can be that the young people see more differences than similarities, and the distance between the groups is actually increased.

The young people in Deepashika's poor Sinhala village have little contact with young people in the neighbouring Tamil and Muslim villages. Physically they are separated by a space demarcated by checkpoints. They do not share a language, they do not feel safe in each other's space, and they have varying perspectives of the conflict which separates them. Within this context, it should be asked what value there is in bringing them together, and how can the identification of possible commonalities and their contributions to peacebuilding be enhanced through their encounters?

Hart suggests there are benefits to a more gradual approach: 'The assumption of experienced peace workers (in eastern Sri Lanka) 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 in dialogue with children from other communities' (Hart 2004:27). This is in accord with the principle in conflict transformation that the involved parties ought to have achieved a balance of power – through empowerment of the disadvantaged party – before they 'come to the table' (Galtung 1996). In his study of children's participation in humanitarian action, Hart has looked at eastern Sri Lanka's children's clubs.8 In these child-led initiatives, children organise themselves into clubs and then decide together what issues to address and activities to undertake. Hart cites the example of the village of Sivanthivu where the members of the Vivehananda Children Development Club, who had gained confidence from working together to achieve practical improvements in their own village, then invited members of a 'child action group' from a mixed Muslim-Tamil village to visit them. In that way, a process of dialogue and friendship building could begin, fully owned by the children themselves. Several elements of that experience also reflect the earlier discussion of transformational participation. If it is possible to create – at least in the setting of an encounter attempted in a conflict situation skewed by a relational power asymmetry – a balance of knowledge and control over processes and outcome, then young people may be able temporarily to overcome structural barriers.

In his study, Hart also examines the benefits in the areas of protection and peacebuilding. In terms of protection, he finds that children often play a vital role in their own protection and that effective participatory projects can enhance this. The children's clubs give them an opportunity to express themselves and to engage in peacebuilding activities that are socially valuable in both the short and longer term. One theory is that by addressing 'attitudes' when the situation allows, the young people involved will be better prepared for 'peace' in the longer term, when structural peace potentially follows. Though more research is necessary, it may be that having such opportunities helps to persuade the children not to engage in violent activities in order to try to achieve social and political change (Hart 2004:28). Still, an issue begging further research is the long-term efficacy of
such programmes. In terms of peace education generally, the results of such studies are so far not encouraging: short-term gains are not sustained (Salomon 2004).

How can Deepashika and her friends be empowered and compelled to be a driving force for peace? For them, ‘peace’ is a complex and elusive concept, even a foreign concept. The process towards building peace must be taken in stages which feel achievable and through which they gain a direct benefit. These young people need to see that they have hope, opportunities, a future. This must be manifest in more than ideologies; they need to be able to feel the results directly in their lives – the hardness of the school bench, the coins jingling in their pockets, food on their tables, a roof over their heads and the opening of doors of social and economic security through viable institutions.

**Advancing Youth Participation in Building Sustainable Peace**

Clearly, young people have an important role to play in promoting peaceful social change. Focusing only on the vulnerabilities of young people is a limiting perspective that denies them the opportunity to influence their own lives and futures, and overlooks their insights, their rights to participate and their potential to contribute to peacebuilding. To acknowledge that young people suffer as a consequence of political violence without also recognising their desire and capacity to engage in efforts for positive social change would be a grave disservice. Critical and misleading assumptions are sometimes made about protection in approaching development work in areas of violent conflict: first, that it is possible in situations of conflict to protect young people. Reality demonstrates that the contrary is all too often the case. Obviously we must do what we can to protect young people, but this involves a second assumption: that protection requires disassociation. In fact, there is evidence that young people can actually achieve protection through participation (Hart 2002; Newman 2004).

Perhaps the most important requirement of peacebuilding programmes is that they are grounded in young people’s realities. The concepts presented here, including ‘childhood’, ‘participation’, ‘agency’, ‘peacebuilding’ – must be situated in the economic and political, social and cultural contexts. Either we meet young people where they are at, or we are not meeting them at all. In other words, if in a naive attempt to help young people envision a future with peace, we neglect to acknowledge the reality of their everyday encounters with structural violence – with roadblocks, with check points, with curfews and other restrictions to movement which make it impossible to attend school, to get to work, to visit relatives – we will lose them. The dissonance between content of programmes and the children’s actual experience will render us, and more importantly peace efforts with which we are associated, ‘not credible’. Links with local organisations can be an essential bridge to understanding and taking into account contextual considerations – both those that are deeply entrenched and those in constant flux.

Many development programmes fail to take young people's participation seriously enough. The failure is not intentional or ill willed; very often it reflects real challenges to implementation due to ‘facts on the ground’ such as mobility, capacity, or opposition on the part of communities. It may also, however, point to limitations in our ability as adults to embrace the notion of young people's agency and capacity to make authentic contributions. As O’Kane has discovered
... across diverse contexts, the biggest barrier to children's participation tends to be adults' attitudes. Influential adults in children's lives and in society need to be prepared to value and support children's expression, participation and organisation (O’Kane 2007:236).

It is troubling for peace and development actors to be required to take seriously the nature of young people's political engagement, and all that represents which may be contrary to perceptions of 'childhood', 'youth' and how adults relate to young people. Exploring the issues (emotional, psychological or conceptual) that prevent such recognition and acceptance of young people's social and political agency warrants much further exploration. One aspect may be the challenge to power relationships between adults and children. Participation ‘takes time, it questions and dissipates adult power, and it diminishes adult control’ (West 2007:124). However, looking again at the definition of children's participation cited earlier in this paper (Lansdown 2004), it is clear that a key element to genuine and transformative participation is ‘mutual respect and power sharing’ between young people and adults.

Addressing barriers to young people's participation must be accompanied by efforts to identify mechanisms that promote and sustain young people's engagement in political violence, and ways to counter those mechanisms. If the aim of programming is to move young people away from strategies of violence to non-violent efforts towards building peace, then programmes must also result in tangible benefits to young people's lives. Local organisations sometimes ask in regard to international peacebuilding schemes, 'What is in it for the young people? Why would they want to participate in this?' We must be able to provide convincing answers to these questions. Unless programmes are able to offer opportunities for working towards positive, non-violent social change, they risk pushing young people into joining armed groups as a means of achieving their 'rights'. If genuine, non-violent opportunities exist for children and youth to organise and work for social change, then this may divert them from taking part in violent conflict. To be compelling and sustainable, these opportunities must include improved access to resources and services as well as the potential for some means of satisfying basic needs.

Scholar Kevin Clements raises some vital points in his discussion of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, which can be seen to make a case for the advantages of including young people in these processes. He claims that being able to broadly envision a positive future involves 'endeavouring to gather the wisdom of many peoples and traditions since without this our understanding of the way the world works will always be partial and our normative prescriptions always biased'. He goes on to specify the necessity of creating 'opportunities to hear what the voiceless, the marginalised, the excluded and the victims have to say' (Clements 1997:3).

Says Mayerly (16), leader of the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia: 'Children are the seeds of peace; we are the seeds that will stop the war' (Cameron 2001). Ultimately though the onus is on the adults around these young people – parents, teachers, politicians and social development workers among others – to allow and invite that potential. Young people are not only the future, they are also part of the present and must be recognised and supported as capable members of society with vital roles in the human struggle to transform conflict and build peace.
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Endnotes
1 ‘Children’ in this paper refers to young people aged 18 and under; ‘youth’ follows the definition used by most international bodies (United Nations and World Bank, for example) of people aged 15 to 24, and ‘young people’ is a collective term for those who are 24 years old and younger.


3 Additional information in this paragraph was obtained in an interview with Safwat Diab, Programme Coordinator, Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, Gaza City, in May 2005.

4 The information in this paragraph was obtained in correspondence with Patrick Smythe, author of The Heaviest Blow: The Catholic Church and the East Timor Issue (2004 Transaction Publishers, New Jersey).

5 Presentation by Shirley Gunn, Director of Human Rights Media Centre, Cape Town, and former freedom fighter, to the University of Stavanger, Norway, on 1 December 2006.

6 The quotation is from e-mail correspondence with Huwaida Arraf in September 2005.

7 Johan Galtung is considered to be one of the leading pioneers of peace and conflict transformation theory and practice. There are several other pioneers and scholars who are central in the field, in particular John Paul Lederach, who builds on the work of Adam Curle.

8 The clubs were supported by Save the Children Norway and Save the Children UK.

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