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The Impact of Conflict on Children's Education and Development

International Development Studies:
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REVIEW ESSAY: THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT: In 2000, 162 countries signed the *Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All (EFA)* stating as one of its goals that “all children, particularly girls, those in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality” by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000:8). However, when the situation is warfare, these “difficult circumstances” make it harder for children to access education, “particularly girls”. This essay analyses three different articles by different authors, focusing on the impact war has on children's development and how it affects their education.

Sommers, M. (2002) “Children, Education and War: Reaching Education for All (EFA) Objectives in Countries Affected by Conflict”, *Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit Working Papers*. Paper No. 1.

Boyden, J. (2003) “The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What Adults Have to Fear?”, *Peace and Conflict*, 9(4): 343-362.

Thabet, A.M. and Vostanis, P. (2015) “Impact of Trauma on Palestinian Children's and the Role of Coping Strategies”, *British Journal of Medicine & Medical Research*, 5(3): 330-340.

INTRODUCTION

For almost any governance institution, education is seen as a fundamental instrument for peacebuilding and empowerment. However, there is an alarming concern that in countries where armed conflicts are taking place education is not usually seen by national governments as a priority. There is also an observed lack of interest from international donors, in investing in educational programmes during the emergency phase, possibly due to lack of profitability and the unpredictability of war duration.

Another rising concern is that if education is indeed essential for peacebuilding and empowerment, it threatens the political and economic interest of warfare, thus turning children and schools into targets for military action. Schools are then used as spots for

recruitment, due to their high political value in war strategies since children are susceptible to indoctrination, easier to control and are used as tools to break communities' spirits. In addition, their large numbers in the Global South makes them disposable to militia.

Their vulnerability and dependency on others exposes them to traumas and exploitation which may hinder their development.

This review essay analyses the research done by Marc Sommers (2002), Jo Boyden (2003), and Abdel Aziz Mousat Thabet and Panos Vostanis (2015). It is important to note that Sommers' article is a working paper commissioned by the Education Team of the World Bank's Human Development Network, thus it deals with preliminary findings and has not been through a peer-review process. However, Sommers is a Research Professor with experience in 20 war-affected countries and expertise in education and youth, therefore his investigation should, in my opinion, be taken into consideration.

This essay will begin by presenting a summary of the articles submitted for review, followed by a discussion of common problems highlighted on those articles. These include education and the negative and positive consequences this type of institution faces during war; child soldiers (a risk many children face during conflict); and the psychological risks trauma poses for children's development. Finally, the three papers have different central focus but the combination of the three are interrelated, using these complementary aspects I will discuss their perspectives and possible strategies to ease the impact of war on children.

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

In Sommers working paper, "Children, Education, and War: Reaching Education for All (EFA) Objectives in Countries Affected by Conflict", he tries to demonstrate how countries experiencing conflict will reach the goals set up by the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA). The EFA has six major goals regarding education, and as Sommers shows in his paper education is not always a priority in conflict areas. Written prior to 2015, the date established for the accomplishment of said goals, Sommers discussed in 2002 the data coming from countries still in conflict or emerging from conflict. He addresses the decrease in school enrolment numbers; the use of child soldiers in wars, preventing them from attending school; the dangers children face when schools are used as targets; and the particularly low enrolment of girls. He goes on to criticise the

lack of interest from international agencies in helping emergency education in conflict countries, since these bodies prefer to focus on reconstruction phases. It also discusses the government's priorities which rarely includes education in war times. It goes on to conclude it is necessary more action, more approaches and more creativity, as well as more research in this field. He also points out that at this point it seems impossible that those countries will reach EFA objectives.

While Sommers broadens the education subject to various fields on his paper, Boyden focusses specifically on the development of children who are directly involved in war. Written in 2003, “The Moral Development of Child Soldiers: What Adults Have to Fear?” addresses the issue of children being used as instruments of battle, whether voluntarily or forced, because of their efficacy on breaking communities' spirits during war time and as a strategy. Her goal is to study whether children's moral reasoning will be permanently affected after conflict ceases and the fighting stops. She discusses the available literature on children's cognitive capacity and reasoning, in order to analyse if they have the capability to comprehend the consequences of violent acts perpetrated during war. She also emphasises how difficult it is to make a clear assessment since the environment cannot be fully recreated and it is difficult to access prior and post conflict phases on the children's moral development. She concludes that not all child soldiers can be reintegrated back into society due to severe broken development, but for those who are able, social acceptance is the major component to ease integration, something which is not always easy due to exclusion suffered from the communities in which they live.

The third and most recent article (2015) is a research paper on the “Impact of Trauma on Palestinian Children's and the Role of Coping Strategies” which addresses the mental health problems originating from constant traumatic events suffered during war, and the role of coping strategies used by children to decrease the consequences it has on their development or worsen the aftereffect of trauma. To analyse the interrelation of traumatic events and coping strategies, the researchers have used different assessment methods adapted to a Palestinian context such as PTSD, depression and anxiety scales, and Kidcope for children. From their findings it was possible to denote that there was no gender difference regarding the number of events experienced but coping strategies differed slightly from boys to girls. There were also no significant differences in exposure to trauma regarding age and income, but children ranging from 7 to 11 years old are more vulnerable to the negative effects of traumatic events, as well as children from lower

incomes. And even though wishful thinking is the most used coping strategy it is also directly related to symptoms of depression. The authors called for more community intervention to teach children how to manage these events, namely schools.

EDUCATION

In his paper, education is the main focal point of Sommers, namely primary education without, however, excluding further education on his research. When countries engage in wars, whether that is between neighbouring countries or civil conflicts, enrolment numbers in schools drop (Sommers, 2002:5). He states that it is hard to make children attend school when oftentimes these children are preoccupied with self-preservation actions such as hiding, fleeing or even fighting (Sommers, 2002:6). However, when children have the opportunity to attend school there are other underlying issues that can prevent them from doing so. Schools are common war targets and parents will withdraw their children from school over fear of rape, abduction and other dangers that may surface (Sommers, 2002:6). Which leads him to address another issue: girls are less likely to attend school, this can either be over fear for their own safety, or because they have other responsibilities, such as taking care of younger siblings (Sommers, 2002:7). He uses this point to highlight the need to test distance education (Sommers, 2002:26) and for pre-schools in areas where wars are taking place (Sommers, 2002:21), this will give more girls the opportunity to attend school. The third points he criticises in education during times of war is the lack of governmental focus (Sommers, 2002:10) and the lack of studies executed in emergency education (Sommers, 2002:9). Governments and international donors prefer to wait for a war-re-emergence period before they direct funds for education projects, due to the unpredictability of war (Sommers, 2002:10). He does, however, mention schools as a point of stability for children during wartime, where parents can hope for their children's future and children can regain a sense of normality while addressing some psychological issues (provided there is a programme for it) (Sommers, 2002:11).

Boyden focuses on education as an aftermath. Due to several psychological traumas that child soldiers face, reintegration into society can prove difficult. Boyden mentions her own findings when interviewing former child combatants in Gulu. Children and youths saw education and vocational training as a necessary element to resume normal life and reintegrate back into society (Boyden, 2003:357). This goes in line with what Sommers

argues in his paper regarding child soldiers: that the structured environment provided in schools might be beneficial for children in order to re-establish their lives, however he points out that child soldiers, are not always allowed to do so (Sommers, 2002:26).

Thabet and Vostanis do not address education in their research of war trauma in children and coping mechanisms, but they do present schools as one option for trauma prevention and suggest the establishment of mental health programmes in schools carried out by trained specialists (Thabet and Vostanis, 2015:338). Sommers shares the same opinion and he emphasises the need for psychosocial interventions during emergency education (Sommers, 2002:22). Although it could help substantially, it is necessary to note what Sommers points out in his text: schools are usually unstable or inoperative during times of conflict, something Thabet and Vostanis do not consider when suggesting schools as a means of trauma prevention.

CHILD SOLDIERS

There are many forms of child exploitation that can occur during times of war which keep children away from school, from forced labour to military recruitment, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Both Sommers and Boyden mention children being seen as valuable instruments of war because they provide unquestioning obedience and are easily replaced.

Sommers focuses on one point made by Boyden on a previous article (not the one being referred for analysis) that youths can begrudge the education system because it makes them feel excluded from more serious roles which are in their view participatory in society. This presents activity in war as an opportunity with enticing rewards and levels of power they may have trouble to renouncing later when the war is finished, thus hindering their educational development (Sommers, 2002:7). Children feel a sense of empowerment that comes from participation in war activities and going back to a life where they do not feel included may pose difficulties. Thus, receiving education even after the conflict has ceased is not always achievable. He calls out for a need to renounce authoritarian teaching styles and adoption of more inclusive approaches (Sommers, 2002:7). Later, he mentions that teachers are not always paid which leads them to abandon teaching (Sommers, 2002:17). This and the lack of funding for education programmes reduces the number of activities available for children which puts children at risk of exploitation and makes them turn to the militia (Sommers, 2002:12).

Boyden's focus is on the impact of participatory activities in war on children's moral development. As mentioned above, they are often used because they are seen as easier to control. Boyden also points out that children are not always able to understand the seriousness of what they are doing because their moral comprehension is less developed, leading them to perform more gruesome acts (Boyden, 2003:347). This leads to the belief that their moral development might be irreversibly damaged since the constant performance of violent acts make it seem as a standardised norm (Boyden, 2003:348). Although there is a lack of substantial data on this issue, Boyden asserts that children who engage in war activities suffer from a developmental disorientation, which can affect boys more than girls (Boyden, 2003:352). She does denote that even though there are some psychological impairments, these children are not unethical (Boyden, 2003:353). There is however a strong desire for social acceptance and a willingness to do the necessary work to reintegrate back in society - it is up to their communities to ensure the processes that make it possible for them to do so (Boyden, 2003:356).

Even though Boyden mentions the conflict between Israel and Palestine in her study of children's moral development, Thabet and Vostanis focus on the psychological traumas Palestinian children face during war time, but present children as indirect victims of war activities and do not consider children who participate in armed conflicts, even if briefly, there is therefore a lack of data on the levels of PTSD, and anxiety and depression symptoms in children who experience traumatic events such as war engagement.

TRAUMA AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Sommers argues that perpetrators of war manipulate children's trauma by giving them an enemy to destroy and that they can hate, this gives them back a purpose in life which is used as a coping mechanism to deal with war and makes them loyal (2002:9). In his argument, these perpetrators compete with entities who wish to provide schooling for the children. In his opinion, schools are structured environments which can provide psychological programmes to create normalcy and where children can make sense of trauma in order to build resilience. He also mentions that it gives less time to relieve the traumatic experiences. He clarifies that trauma debilitates learning and by creating psychosocial interventions applied in schools, these difficulties could be reduced (Sommers, 2002:22).

In his article, Sommers uses Herman's view of trauma as "two opposing psychological states" (Herman, 1997, cited in Sommers, 2002:8). Cambridge Dictionary defines trauma as a "severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). So, although Boyden's focus on trauma is very vague in her article the fact that she targets children's moral development after being submersed by a "extremely upsetting experience" and oftentimes the emotional state experience by these children are "opposing psychological states", it could be argued that the whole article is centred around a type of traumatic experience.

This being said, she criticises the research done where children are seen as isolated from their environment and she denotes that children's moral development is not independent from their community's perception of right and wrong (Boyden, 2003:352). Several studies conclude that exposure to violence causes a certain mental health impairment which leads to more violent behaviour (which is more severe in boys than girls); these children do not lack morality (Boyden, 2003:353). She emphasises that children who decide to join voluntarily are quicker to accept their actions but also show willingness to make amends, while children who were forced to fight show internal contradictions and have a harder time reaching acceptance (Boyden, 2003:354). She concludes that there is a strong personal desire from these children, once the conflict is over to reintegrate to a civilian life even though they are conscious of the sacrifices it entails, they share the same concerns as any other children regarding future prospects thus proving that their moral capability is not destitute by the impacts of war (Boyden, 2003:357).

Panos and Vostanis's whole research paper focusses on trauma and how it affects children's development. They observed no particular differences between sociodemographics and the number of traumatic events experienced, but the higher the number of events experienced more prevalent the symptoms of PTSD (Panos and Vostanis, 2015:334). This is explained since children who have experienced trauma before are more at risk of developing PTSD, anxiety and depression (Panos and Vostanis, 2015:336) which could be due to the ongoing conflict in Gaza. According to them, five particular events are correlated with traumatic disorder and the persistence of these symptoms are linked to ineffective coping strategies (Panos and Vostanis, 2015:337), this is why they call out for community interventions to teach children how to manage stress reactors positively, in order not to cripple their development (Panos and Vostanis, 2015:337).

INTERRELATION OF THE TEXTS AND ASSESSMENT OF INTERRELATIONS AND GEOPOLITICS

Further research has shown that only a “third of countries reached global education goals” proposed by EFA, and out of school children is still a major concern in conflict areas (United Nations, 2015).

The major issues of education in times of conflict surface when these crises arise from civil war and ethnic conflicts. There is a culture of fear that can be instituted in school systems, whether these are formal or informal schooling, often times there is a rising concern about the type of indoctrination being received which instead of building peace can propagate hate and conflict. Sommers expresses concerns over the usage of language as a way to exert dominance, as seen when Serbian government forbade Albanian as the language of instruction (Sommers, 2002:1). The use of the education system to pressure teachers into their own political agenda and indoctrinate students in a way that will further propagate conflict (Sommers, 2002:7). It is necessary to acknowledge that youths are the key elements for future generations and are therefore essential to post-war peacebuilding strategies. The quality and content received when schools are actually an option should then be a major concern, and international agencies need to work more closely with governments and communities to develop curriculums that are widely accepted and executed in neutral languages which do not propagate hate (Sommers, 2002:24).

However, the relationship between international humanitarian agencies and national governments are not always free from strife. There is often a lack of interest from ministries to support education during crisis, which leads to exasperation from international actors due to governments inaction (Sommers, 2002:19). Other times international agencies will arrive and hinder the work that has already begun taking place by communities or local NGOs, marginalising their participation. This leads to conflicts which surface between different bodies of the same international agencies themselves, or other local agencies (Sommers, 2002:14). Such conflicts create anxiety in governments who do not believe international actors will manage. Sommers requests that international humanitarian organisations work as mediators between donors and local NGOs but that they should also collaborate with local entities (Sommers, 2002:24).

Children in refugee camps are more likely to attend school. But oftentimes, refugees or internally displaced persons who do manage to attend school cannot prove it once they

cross borders due to lack of recognition (Sommers, 2002:18). Sommers speaks about the need for international recognition of school certificates.

This also means that children who are not in camps are less likely to attend school. As seen in the mentioned texts poverty, gender, trauma and lack of activities such as education make children vulnerable to exploitation. The shift between intergenerational power relations is a very powerful tactic used to terrorise communities. Child soldiers are common instruments of war, and if children exploiters understand the value of children and use them to break communities' spirits then the same value should be given to reinforce their spirits. Children should feel valued in times of conflict so that they will feel empowered and avoid participating in war activities. This feeling of empowerment that comes from participating in violent acts is by far one of the greatest threats to children's development, it is necessary for education systems in countries of war to reform their education strategies be more inclusive.

Boyden shows that when it comes to children's moral development in areas of conflict, they are influenced by the collective values of the society in which they live. Hence, when considering it in a geopolitical context such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the ideological commitment that calls for a shared sense of patriotism and need for an "enemy" negates moral dilemmas and acts of violence become acts of heroism. It is not always the observation of violence and participation in war acts that influences their development but also their socio-cultural environment (Boyden, 2003:354).

It is safe to assume that conflict poses a great threat to children's education, however, although it impacts children's development it does not deform them. Children have a very good resilience.

Thabet and Vostanis focus on the impact of war on children's mental stability, and analyse how different coping mechanisms can provide strategies for either reducing said impact or proliferating its symptoms. As shown by Boyden and Sommers, psychologically vulnerable children are more exposed to exploitation which can lead to decisions or acts which will enhance their psychological instability. It should be argued that the three articles agree that children have proven to be resilient multiple times and more often than not overcome these adversities, however, as Sommers stresses in his article education and schools (when well-regulated) can provide safety and the structured environment to prevent these impacts or facilitate its recovery.

However, the biggest issue posed in education during times of war is the facts that schools are targets for bombing and kidnapping. This idea of unsafety regarding schools poses several risks in children's education and creates traumas into adulthood that will have major impacts. There is a lack of evaluation of resources available regarding emergency education which puts future adults at risk.

CONCLUSION

After analysing the intertextuality of these three articles, it can be concluded that although they contrast on their focal points they somehow complement each other.

Sommers' working paper is in my opinion the most complete. It provides an overview scope of a plethora of factors that can impact children and their education. His method of analysis consists of comparing different enrolment ratios from 12 different countries prior to and during conflict and then processes it to form his own opinion, the analysis of literature available and originate possible strategies for improvement. However, his paper's question is directly answered from the beginning: he does not believe countries affected by conflict can reach EFA goals.

Boyden criticises the limitation of research available on this subject to make a well-founded analysis. The evidence gathered is very theoretical and poses flaws that cannot be used in the context of conflict. She admits the limitations of this debate but also believes that children's moral reasoning is not damaged, however I find her view on children's wish to reintegrate very optimistic. It is not that I do not believe they lack such ambition, I find it a more complicated act to achieve because as we seen above war events can be deeply traumatic for children, I can only assume the increased severity in the participation of such events, yet with a lot of psychological support and deep commitment I believe it to be possible to achieve.

Thabet and Vostanis' article is a well-organised study performed by trained individuals with an inclusive sociodemographic. The measures used were standardised but also specific to the region being studied. It considered passive exposure to violent acts and their impacts, but does not consider active exposure to traumatic events, meaning when children participate in said activities. The authors admit the limitations of their studies but fail to make an important connection: the prevalence of "watching mutilated bodies on TV" as the most experienced traumatic event and its interrelation with symptoms of

depression. In my opinion, the authors could have argued for an intervention strategy filtering children's exposure to media.

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