

Impact of Armed Conflicts of Children, Families, and Communities

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Introduction

4 October 1990, 11:45 am. My daughter, Agathe, six, came running from school and let herself fall heavily into my arms. She was agitated and her heart was thundering inside her tiny chest. She was not smiling at all.

I immediately realized that she was profoundly upset and was no longer the same. I was trying to utter something, because I felt I had to say something, but nothing came out. Perhaps a question, or soothing words . . . Nothing could materialize out of my lips. While I was struggling within myself, she asked me: "Papa, what ethnic group do we belong to?"

The question and the situation made me almost lose my countenance. The war that had started only four days before at more than 350 kilometers from Kigali had already invited itself in my house. And it was present in the heart of my daughter, I myself was already contaminated.

Not only had it reached Kigali, but also it had started destroying the quietness of children. Perhaps other fathers and

mothers had to answer similar queries. Father-knows-everything? No . . . Father hesitated; Father had no answer; so instead of answering, I asked her a question. "What is that? What sort of question is this?"

She looked directly into my eyes as if to find assurance. I do not know if she found any, but she said: "Father, children at school say that Tutsis are going to kill Hutus during the night."

This incident is still fresh in my memory. It makes me believe that war everywhere has far reaching effects on individuals, including children, especially as parents are no more the sole source of information. In addition, the way adults interpret their thoughts and hatreds impacts on children's visions of the world, which they will organize according to their scheme of thinking and their level of maturity.

When children like Agathe start thinking about death instead of play, we would expect their hearts to be sour, nurturing hatred against the perceived source of death, and eventually devising means and ways to eradicate the "enemy."

It took all my persuasive energy to tell Agathe that she was safe, that I was there, that nobody would reach her . . . She seemed convinced and went to take something to eat, and she restarted smiling again; but her smile was not so much as before. Something had changed. Now she is 20, and I can tell as a witness how the 1990-1994 Rwandan war affected her.

The goal of this paper is to enlighten my perception of the effects of the Rwandan war on children, families, and communities.

Born and educated in Rwanda, I taught English then worked as a translator for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR). I have worked for CARE Australia in Katala, Goma, DR Congo, as Program Coordinator, Foster Care and Family Tracing and as a Social Worker for UNICEF Rwanda Emergency Operations. In 1995, I was offered a scholarship by the University of Western Sydney. When I was trying to arrange for my trip to Australia, I was detained in Kigali, from October 1995 to March 2001. I worked with UNICEF/Kigali as Child Protection Officer and now with UNICEF/Chad, as a UNV Child Protection Officer. I am now in Chad, with my wife Josephine and our five children.



Impact of armed conflicts on children

With the multiplication of armed conflicts around the world, especially in Africa, there are more and more children who are exposed to war related violence. War sows the seeds of fear, restlessness, uncertainty, and despair. Families are scattered, and children are left without care; parents are detained, killed, or disappear. No wonder that children are affected psychologically, physically, socially, and educationally.

Based on my work as foster care coordinator for CARE Australia in Katale Refugee Camp (DR Congo) and on subsequent work as social worker in charge of family tracing and fostering for UNICEF/Rwanda Emergency Operations in Goma, following are some elements characterizing children's tensions due to armed conflicts.

Loss of speech

During our work in Katale refugee camp, CARE Australia managed a Centre for unaccompanied children. The age varied from 0 to 18 years. It was noted that some children could not speak. As we did not know them before, we could not really tell what happened. After three, four, five months, and even after one year, and through psychological attention provided by our psychologist, Nicodème, lots of children recovered their speech. Nicodème used to walk around the camp with some of those children. At one occasion, a 12-year-old girl met her grandmother and immediately started calling her. This was a happy event that comforted us in our opinion that psychological assistance was instrumental in conflict affected settlements.

I discovered, later on, that even some adults had lost their speech. This also encouraged us to think about integrat-

ing the children into the communities, even if the communities themselves were experiencing hardships. With Dr. Jacqueline Hayden's guidance, a fostering program was successfully launched and operated. Most of the infants and toddlers were integrated into the communities that would provide a family setting, and this fostered the children's mastery of speech.

Excessive attachment to adults

In 1994, Theophile was two years old. His mother, Josephine, was a friend of mine (now she is my wife). When the shootings started in Kigali, Theophile ran from the courtyard inside the house, shouting loud: "I am dying; I am dying on my leg My leg is dying."

I came to the rescue. He was holding his right leg, feeling hurt; but nothing had hit him. Once again, I do not know how a two year old would think about death, except that war and armed conflict penetrate even where we think they should not.

From that moment on, Theophile was very much attached to me. He would always look for me. When I was away, he could not sleep. This situation affected him later, when I was detained for about six years. He is still suffering from it, especially regarding his schooling. He seems to lack concentration. He prefers play, but sometimes he is violent in his play, and he cannot explain why he is violent.

The children of this age (less than five years) do not understand the concept of death and consider separation as death. They think that death is reversible, and that the dead will come back.

Bed wetting

In our work with children in Katale, we discovered that witnessing heavy bombardments, heavy fighting, or violence against people they know affects

children's mastery of their bodies. In addition, brutal changes in family environments, for example the disappearance of a family member, together with feelings of insecurity and fear of darkness cause anxiety and affect the psychological development of a child, having a negative impact on the control of his or her body.

Refusal to go to bed is a recurrent pattern of children who are frightened of being alone in darkness, or are afraid of something they dream about during the night. During my absence, some of my children developed this fear. Even today, there are some who require someone to be with them, not only in the room, but on the same bed.

The hour of going to bed becomes dreadful to them, and this affects their work at school the following day. Sometimes, I have to spend some time with them in their room, just a matter of assuring them that I am there, that they are not alone.

Nightmares

In my own house, I often witness nightmares among my own children. Recurring nightmares concern their dead mother or other dead relatives. Or they do dream that I was killed. As their mother was killed, they think I might be killed. When they are at school, I often have to travel to their school in order to tell them that I am still alive. But this did not really have a long lasting effect. My daughters thought that I was safer outside of my country and encouraged me to find a job outside. When I talked about their being alone, they told me they were quieter when I was out of Rwanda.

Night terrors

I have often been awakened by horrendous cries and shakings, generally between one and four o'clock. When

they wake up in the morning, they have already forgotten what had happened.

Anxiety

When my former wife was killed, she was just coming from work and was opening the door when several shots hit her head from behind. Her body fell inside the house, as the children were running to her saying: "Mother is coming, Mother is coming."

They reacted differently. One of the girls tried to hide herself behind the cupboard. Seven years later, while I thought they were coping well, one incident happened. I went out in the courtyard one evening, and the children were inside. The girl came out; I do not remember what she was looking for. She saw me and she uttered a sound I will never forget, went inside running, and tried to hide under the table.

Schooling disorders

The situation of schooling in Rwanda, especially after the genocide and forced repatriation of refugees from the DR Congo, Tanzania, and Burundi has multiple facets. So many children's schooling was interrupted by the situation, they did not have any other opportunity to attend school.

Infrastructures were destroyed, including early childhood development facilities. While these were just starting their development in Rwanda, there was a harsh stop on this development for several years. UNICEF, in collaboration with the Government, developed a sector-wide education policy that encompasses early childhood stimulation, primary education for all, and increased access to secondary education.

However, resources are not sufficiently allocated to this sector, especially as there are other crucial areas that need attention. However, education was

integrated into the national strategy for poverty reduction, and this makes of education a priority sector.

As infrastructures were destroyed, as teachers and teacher training institutions were destroyed or disorganized, the challenge remains significant. The only hope comes from the private sector which, for conjectural reasons, serves only a limited category of middle class officers. Now in Rwanda, we are assisting the development of two strata of the society: those who can afford private quality education and child development facilities, and those whose income barely allows them to feed their children.

Physical development

My work with UNICEF Kigali allowed me to travel to several locations within the country. In Provinces like Kibuye and Gikongoro and several regions of Gisenyi, and Kigali Ngali, it is difficult to guess the age of children by looking at their height. Malnutrition is rampant. This affects the cognitive and physical development of the children, and delays or alters the quality of their socialization.

Socialization

The feeling of loneliness, and perhaps of injustice that follows post conflict societies creates a sort of marginalization of the other. Children are not free to associate with whom they like. Parents or caregivers choose for them. I witnessed lots of friendships in Rwanda that were rigged with mistrust, especially due to ethnic belonging.

When I was in prison, a son of mine, Parfait, was attending kindergarten. He would leave the other children and walk away with another child whose father was also detained, and the two would throw stones on any military vehicle. He was just four. He asked

himself why the military would not let his father go. He said that if the military were not there, he would take his father home. And he did not feel a sense of belonging to the group of children whose parents were not detained.

When he came to visit me, I explained to him in the two minutes allowed to us that he should not nurture hatred against the military, that he should love them, that God did not allow him to hate. Fortunately, he accepted my advice.

But when now I look at my children, I notice that each has developed self protection mechanisms against the outside world. When they enter into their shell, it is sometimes difficult to make them assist to weddings or other social ceremonies. For most of them, there is no love, or love is just pretension, make believe, a sort of drama played by the society. And this feeling I noted during my visits to children-headed households.

In July 2003, in one District of Kibuye, I asked children whom they refer to when they have a problem. The answer was clear: they refer to children experiencing similar problems. No trust in adults. Adults would rob them of their property, or abuse them, or exploit them economically or sexually. This distrust was so much rooted that we had to devise a social and psychological support program through some non-governmental organizations.

My experience with these children heading households, generally having to care for their siblings, makes me acknowledge that the impact of armed conflicts do not last only decades. They may last generations. In the case of Rwanda, if no proactive action is taken to build society through early stimulation and early childhood development programs, the impact of the genocide on the society may last centuries — and I am not being pessimistic, given the current trends.

Conclusion

This paper was written in an attempt to contribute my vision and ideas about the impact of armed conflicts on children, families, and communities.

I prepared this paper while I was out of Rwanda. The theme is meaningful to me, especially as I personally experienced the consequences of Rwanda conflicts and wars in my personal life and in the life of my family. It is my wish to overcome that Rwanda recovers true peace, which is not just the absence of war.

There is hope in early childhood development. However, the country and the families are poor, and only a few people can afford the services of care centers.

The situation in Rwanda is similar to the situation in Chad. Unfortunately, in both countries, the seeds of conflict are still vivid. Poverty comes in as a complicating factor. However, there is more and more awareness that respect of children's rights should be put at the core of all investments for the future. Among these rights, right to quality education, if adhered to, will contribute to the alleviation of sources of wars and hatred.

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