Guest Editorial

Margaret McCallin*

The contributions to this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* describe experience and practice developed by a number of organisations who work with children in emergencies, including natural and man-made disasters, and the many lessons that have been learned that agencies have integrated into their work.

To fit my own experience into the work described, perhaps I could begin with a personal reflection. My first meeting with young people affected by political violence and the displacement occasioned by their involvement was in Botswana in 1977. This was the first time I was confronted by the consequences of political violence.

My husband was working for UNHCR, and as a result of his work we got to know the secondary-school students who had come to Botswana as refugees following the Soweto uprisings in 1976. From time to time, some of these young people would come to our house to talk, have a cup of tea, and play with our children. But there was one boy who touched me deeply. Whenever he came he spent a lot of time playing with our little cat. In our conversations, he told me that the best part of coming home to us, was playing with the cat, because that reminded him of his home in Soweto where his mother had a little cat, and he missed his mother.

To talk of missing your mother speaks of all the losses that are implicit in being forcibly displaced for a child or adolescent. At the time, although there were a range of services available to help the South African students, we had little in the way of language or terminology to understand how these yo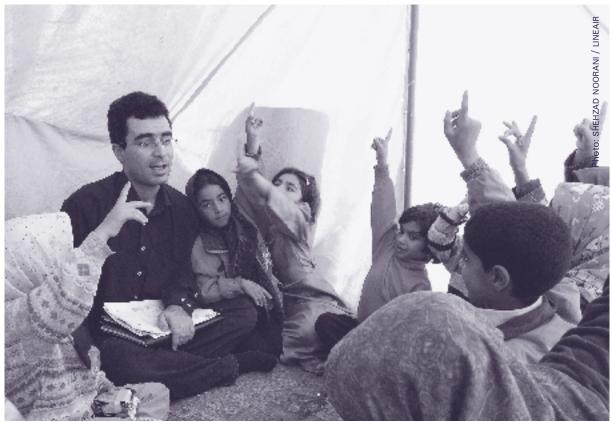ung people had been affected by their experience of and participation in political violence. Nor was there a framework within which any response could be implemented to address their needs.

In the intervening years, much has changed for the good, not least the important degree of collaboration that now exists between agencies: a shared approach and common concerns that inform the response to children in conflict and emergency situations. The integration of experience and interagency cooperation is evident[1], for example, in the procedures that have been developed for the care and protection of unaccompanied and separated children. The benefits of this collaboration were evident in the immediate response to children affected by the Asian tsunami – within days, collaborating agencies (ICRC, UNHCR, UNICEF, World Vision International, Save the Children UK and the International Rescue Committee) had produced the guiding principles for the care of unaccompanied and separated children, and psychosocial care and protection (see page 33).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child and child rights programming

The near universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has brought about the most significant change in our understanding and response to children in emergencies. When governments, international organisations and NGOs were engaged in the drafting process of the CRC, children's needs were emphasised more than rights. Since the ratification of the CRC there has been less of an emphasis on children and their communities as 'beneficiaries' of child-focused programmes, and more on the need to establish partnerships, to see children as 'rights holders' and to assess how programmes enable children to access their rights.

*   Margaret McCallin is Coordinator of Programmes at the International Catholic Child Bureau. Since 1977 she has lived and worked in a number of countries in Africa, Asia and Europe and the USA assessing the psychosocial impact of war and violent displacement on children and families, and in programme development to address these issues. For some years the focus of her work was on the situation of child soldiers, in particular programmes of demobilisation and social reintegration. She is now working in the area of children's rights and resilience, and the development of programmes to address the contextual issues of discrimination, poverty and social marginalisation that put children at risk and violate their rights.

A psychologist from Tehran Psychiatry Institute conducts a session with child victims of the earthquake disaster in Bam, Iran

A number of organisations have instituted a process of reorientation or redefinition from what has been termed 'child-centred community development' to 'promotion of the rights of the child'[2].

The implications for change brought about by the ratification of the CRC were in many ways not anticipated. Organisations were required to rethink their way of working to describe what it meant to be a 'child rights' organisation as opposed to providing services to children in need.

One of the significant differences between the needs-based and the rights-based approaches is that
"a needs-based approach does not come with accountability. There is no moral or legal obligation on the state and/or other statutory bodies to protect or assist. Many rights have developed from needs, but a rights-based approach adds legal and moral obligations and accountability. Equally, in a rights-based approach, the holders of the rights are encouraged and empowered to claim their rights. This means that they are not seen as objects of charity (as they are in a needs-based approach) but rather those who are claiming their legal entitlements."[3]

As knowledge and experience has developed, certain principles and approaches have become more clearly defined in the design and implementation of programmes with children in emergency situations. These are evident as common themes that are echoed throughout the articles in this edition of ECM.

Context
Translating international standards such as the CRC into practical realities gives concrete meaning to international law. This is human rights in action. But to do this you must understand the local situation, and interventions must be based on an understanding of cultural norms, traditions and practices. There is no 'blue print' or template that can substitute for a thorough child-focussed situation assessment.

The general context within which programmes are implemented in disaster situations is described by poverty, social and political instability, lack of institutional capacity, and the breakdown of traditional value systems and social structures. Such conditions do not describe a situation where a 'rights' environment can flourish. They result in increased vulnerability for children. Addressing the situation of children in such circumstances must also take account of the impact on children's development, and ensure that both child rights and child development perspectives are integrated into intervention programmes.

Childhood is neither timeless nor universal: it is not determined only by age, or by biological and psychological factors. Rather childhood is understood by reference to particular cultural and social contexts and to particular periods in history. In the countries of the North, for example, childhood is now seen as an extended period of economic dependency and protected innocence during which play and schooling are seen as central components: but this is far removed from childhood in many other cultures, where work (whether paid, or work within the household) must take precedence over both schooling and play. In many countries of the South, the child-rearing environment is characterised by large families and high infant mortality: a heavy emphasis on parents' efforts to ensure the physical survival of their children means that parents must devote much of their time to economic and domestic activity, with many 'parenting' tasks delegated to other people, often older children. Western notions of childhood often place an emphasis on children's vulnerability and innocence, but again in other contexts this may be much less appropriate[4].

Collectively, the articles describe the environments created by emergencies, conflicts and disasters. This is the daily experience of millions of children and their families. But which children are affected? In most situations it is children already living in poverty, children who suffer discrimination and social marginalisation. The precarious and insecure environments experienced by impoverished and socially marginalised children are characterised by an accumulation of risk. This in itself can lead to abuse and exploitation, but emergencies, conflict

and displacement compound the problem, and children may move from one 'category' of risk to another. The child working on the street can become the child soldier, and once the conflict is over may be caught up in trafficking and child prostitution. The 'double emergency' of HIV and conflict is recognised as putting children and young people at risk from both HIV/AIDS infection and violence.[5]

A rights-based approach addresses the context of rights violations. Rights-based programming requires the analysis of the reasons why rights are breached or not fulfilled and the identification of measures to address this. Addressing the contributing factors within the context where we work automatically leads to activities with wider civil society and government institutions to promote an environment of respect for children's rights and dignity.

Psychosocial interventions
The term psycho-social[6] underlines the close relationship between the psychological and social effects of armed conflict, the one type of effect continually influencing the other. By 'psychological effects' is meant those experiences which affect emotions, behaviour, thoughts, memory and learning ability, and how a situation may be perceived and understood. By 'social effects' is meant how the diverse experiences of war alter people's relationships to each other, in that such experiences change people, but also through death, separation, estrangement and other losses. 'Social' may be extended to include an economic dimension, many individuals and families becoming destitute through the material and economic devastation of war, losing their social status and place in their familiar social network.

The organisations whose work is described in the articles implement psychosocial interventions that are developed within a holistic framework, taking account of the range of factors in the children's situation that can influence their development and well-being. Recent years have seen a dramatic growth in programmes designed to assist in children's recovery from traumatic events and experiences. Many of these have uncritically applied western, individualised approaches to counselling and therapy to cultures in which they do not readily apply. The consequences can be not only wasteful

of scarce resources but also potentially damaging to children. As a general rule, the following should be avoided:

- responses which label children as "traumatised" or "mentally ill" may have an unhelpful, stigmatising effect. It is often more helpful to convey the idea that distressed children may be responding normally to abnormal events.
- responses which isolate children from the many others who may have had similar experiences. Programmes which "treat" children away from their own environment (such as in "trauma centres") are to be avoided, and treating children in institutional settings has the potential to be particularly damaging.
- programmes which use methods that transgress cultural norms – for example encouraging children to discuss and express their feelings about painful memories in cultures which do not sanction such behaviour.
- allowing children to be interviewed, to "tell their story", to researchers and journalists should be avoided: insensitive interviewing can easily cause secondary distress. The child's best interest should be a guiding principle in all situations.

Children who have been exposed to violence, loss and disruption to their lives often express a change in their beliefs and attitudes, including a loss of trust in others. The re-establishment of familiar routines and tasks creates a sense of security, of purpose and meaning and enables them to start functioning again as fully as possible[7]. The role of play and education in normalising the children's lives cannot be overemphasised. We all need predictability in our lives, and the routines of school life can be vital in helping children to recover, and also to learn to build trusting relationships again.

A community-based approach
It is evident that to be effective, rights-based and psychosocial interventions must incorporate the children's families and communities. Without their participation, we cannot gain an understanding of how they have been affected, nor can we incorporate important values and customs which will be of benefit to the children.

Community-based approaches acknowledge, and build on, existing coping strategies within the community, and seek to enhance the resilience of children and their families. Communities identify their needs and participate in identifying and implementing strategies that they consider are appropriate to their circumstances. Experience has shown that community-based approaches are an effective way of restoring the well-being of children affected by conflict, disasters or forced migration, as they:

- enable communities to begin to restore control over their own lives;
- facilitate the development of community facilities such as schools, preschools, health facilities and recreational activities;
- help to restore or create a range of other supportive structures within the community;
- enable people to address those aspects of their lives that continue to create stress for them.[8]

Whilst an understanding of the culture is of fundamental importance, it is also important to realise that it may be beyond our capacity to ensure that people who have lived through emergencies can return to 'normal' life. Emergencies can create enormous social change, and it may not be possible to put things back as they were. In some cases, this can create a 'tension' between intervention programmes that are concerned to implement a child rights-based approach, and communities who feel that their traditional values and customs are under pressure due to the impact of the emergency. Some interventions may directly confront traditional ways of treating certain groups whose experience, within the terms of the CRC, may be considered as discrimination. The most significant issues will certainly address gender issues relating to the role of girls, in particular traditional practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, and the treatment of children with disabilities, whose serious predicament both before conflict and as one of its consequences is so well described in the article on page 55.

What is important to stress is that we must embed any discussion in the reality of people's experience. When a community is confronted with a disaster we must listen and be attentive to what they tell us about how they and their children have been affected, and our response must be informed by this participatory exchange. We must spend time to

understand the meaning of any event for the people involved, and to move forward on this basis. Or, in the words of Dominic Xavier of Reaching the Unreached, explaining the response to communities affected by the Asian tsunami (page 24):

"You have to first of all listen to what people are asking and you have to hear what they are telling you. You have to look at the needs. You must find out what the people themselves can offer, the resources they carry within them, and finally, you have to assess your assets and resources to see what you can do."

Resilience and children's rights

Resilience is mentioned in several of the articles in this edition. Recently it has become something of a fashionable concept, but its implications with reference to intervention programmes for children, and how this may relate to promoting a better 'rights' environment for children are as yet not fully determined.

A short definition describes resilience as "the capacity of an individual person or a social system to grow and develop in the face of difficult circumstances."[9] Resilience and its application has for some time been an integral component of BICE's training and community-based programmes, and we emphasise the relationship between child rights and resilience.

The CRC describes universal minimum standards for the treatment of children, and in its application and implementation serves as an indicator of how well we are doing in this regard. Resilience is a reality of life, one that often surprises us, and which exemplifies human potential even in the most adverse of circumstances. It encourages a focus on the positive elements in people's experience, not only on solving 'problems'. But neither the implementation of the CRC nor the application of a resilience approach is a 'technique' that can be applied regardless of circumstances. Each is a reference point to guide action in a given situation.

This is also why resilience can never be a substitute for social or economic policy. The latter can help build resilience or, on the contrary, destroy it. Resilience stresses interaction and the sharing of responsibility among all people concerned, at all levels of society. Instead of taking responsibility away from the individual or society, it moves beyond such traditional and political dividing lines. The ethic underlying this definition is two-fold: it concerns the life process of the person (or social system) and the life process going on around them.

Resilience is built up in a continuous process over an entire lifetime, through the interaction between individuals (social systems) and their environment. It therefore varies depending on the particular context or stage in life. It is never absolute. It is not a new, generally applicable intervention technique, but it may help us rethink some of our methods of intervention and inspire new ones. It starts with a shift in perspective, a new way of looking at reality, seeking the elements that can help build a life, the resources of the person and his or her environment, and the means of activating them. This is where resilience differs from a purely corrective approach.

A resilience approach focuses on identifying and building on people's strengths and creates a framework within which we can address concerns for children's well-being and protection, considering not only the negative aspects of the child's situation but also the assets that are available to support the child.[10] It defines the approach to conceptualising a programme in any given context, and its subsequent development and implementation. Programme activities are community based, and structured in order to create an environment where the resilience of the children and of their families and communities is promoted. These are generally characterised by:
- activities to prevent harm, and protect rights;
- social mobilisation;
- community empowerment and competence;
- education;
- rehabilitation;
- social reintegration;
- strategies that are appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the people;
- efforts to listen to and attend to people.

In a recent internal BICE study of the factors that promote or constrain the implementation of the CRC[11], two important points emerged from the children's contribution to the study:

- the necessity of developing practice from the children's perspective that responds to their views and concerns;
- ensuring that families support and are themselves involved in activities to promote child participation.

These two issues are integral to a resilience approach and in turn enable an environment where children's rights are promoted and protected. Interventions that incorporate the participation of the children enable their active agency in their own development. They are no longer passive victims of adversity. Their involvement in the design and implementation of interventions can prevent situations of risk, and thereby violations of their rights, and go a long way to enhancing their resilience. The involvement of families will ensure that child participation is integrated into community understanding of child rights, and moves towards sustainable action to promote and protect children's rights.

To sum up
This editorial gives a framework within which the articles for this publication may be understood. As emergencies and disasters continue unabated, so our own efforts to minimise their impact on children must continue. If we could, for example, stop the wars, we would. Reality is harsh, however, and this means that what we are learning is based, and will continue to be based, on the children's horrific experiences of total disregard for their human rights. We do have a knowledge base, and we are developing tools and strategies to work better with and for children. As the article on Protecting Children in Emergencies (page 10) emphasises, however, there remains much work to be done on the political project of implementing international standards to promote and protect children's human rights.[12]

Notes

1 See the ARC Resource Pack on Separated Children at <www.savethechildren.net/arc>. Although not described in this publication, another effective example of interagency collaboration is the Separated Children in Europe Programme <www.separated-children-europe-programme.org>.

2 Kramer. J.Y. 2002. Child rights programming – Experiences from Save the Children Norway. Paper presented to the DSA NGO Study Group.

3 Child rights programming. How to apply rights-based approaches in programming. 2002 International Save the Children Alliance.

4 Cf. ARC Resource Pack: Child and Adolescent Development.

5 Lawday, A. 2001. HIV and conflict: A double emergency. Save the Children, UK.

6 Cf. Cape Town annotated principles and best practice on the prevention of recruitment of children into the armed forces and demobilization and social reintegration of child soldiers in Africa.

7 Cf. ARC Resource Pack: Working with Children.

8 Cf. ARC Resource Pack: Working with Children.

9 Vanistendael, S. Forthcoming. Resilience and spirituality. BICE publication in French, 2002, English translation in preparation. See also: Vanistendael, S. 1995 Growth in the muddle of life. Resilience: Building on people's strengths. Geneva, International Catholic Child Bureau.

10 CCF International/Child Fund Afghanistan. After the Taliban: A child-focused assessment in the northern Afghan provinces.

11 McCallin, M. 2004. Report on consultations with the project staff. Geneva: International Catholic Child Bureau.

12 Child participation is a theme that runs through the articles in this edition of ECM, and it is an important issue in rights-based programming. It was the subject of ECM 103. Gerison Lansdown's comprehensive review in that issue of ECM is recommended for further reading.