

# Disabled children in conflict situations

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Conflict<sup>1</sup> is a fact of life for a large number of countries. However, the impact of war extends far beyond the life of the conflict itself, into the lives of the children affected. From field experience, the literature and life stories, we know that war deepens the cycle of poverty, exclusion and consequently disability. Even the recent document from Save the Children Norway (2005), *Global evaluation: Children affected by armed conflict, displacement or disaster (CACD)*, in general overlooks the situation of disabled children, and as a consequence its programmes currently exclude disabled children. This has serious implications for ensuring that all children have equal rights and achieving development goals in situations of conflict.

## Basic concepts

Disability<sup>2</sup> is a social construct that is caused by attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers. By this definition it is society that ‘disables’ a child and not the impairment itself.

Inclusion means respecting the full human rights of every person, including acknowledging diversity, working to eradicate poverty and ensuring that all people can fully participate in development processes and activities regardless of age, gender, disability, state of health, ethnic origin or any other characteristic.

## Human rights framework

Today, the understanding and approach to disability is shifting away from simply removing the barriers for disabled children towards full recognition of the rights of disabled children like all children. The United Nations is working on a new Disability Convention<sup>3</sup> that will be a milestone on the path towards recognising our *obligation* to fulfil the rights of disabled children. The human rights approach already specifies that inclusion – rather than special

treatment – of disabled children is essential if their rights are to be protected and if the cycle of cause-and-effect of poverty for disabled children is to be undone. The recognition and application of these rights-based approaches is essential if we are to improve the visibility of, attitude towards and support for disabled children and their families in situations of stress and crisis such as during and after conflict.

The basic framework that covers the rights of disabled children in conflict situations is provided by the UN Disability Standard, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the forthcoming UN Disability Convention and a series of international human rights laws. This framework is essential to assess the current violation of rights, the lack of opportunity for disabled children to claim their rights and the requirements to improve the rights of disabled children and their families before, during and after war. These can be put into three clusters:

### 1. UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (UNSR)

The main purpose of the UNSR is to ensure that people with disabilities may exercise the same rights and obligations as others. The UNSR is based on the following key principles:

- **Prevention:** Aimed at preventing the occurrence of physical, sensory, intellectual, mental and/or social impairment (primary prevention) or at preventing these impairments from causing a permanent functional limitation or disability (secondary prevention).
- **Rehabilitation:** Aimed at enabling persons with disabilities to reach or maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, mental and/or social functional levels, thus providing them with tools for a higher level of self-reliance and independence.

- **Equalisation of opportunities:** Aimed at ensuring that the process through which the various systems of society and the environment, such as services, activities, information and documentation, are made equally available to all.

### 2. *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*

The importance of the CRC is that it recognises that all children have equal rights and therefore States have an obligation to ensure that these rights are fulfilled for disabled children like all children. The CRC has four major principles: non-discrimination (Article 2); best interests of the child (Art. 3); survival and development (Art. 6); and participation (Art. 12). With regard to disabled children in conflict, Article 23 – disabled children have the right to have their individual needs met – is specifically relevant.

### 3. *International human rights laws (IHLS) relating to conflict, violence and displacement*

The basic and conflict-related IHLS, including the Geneva Convention, provide the legal basis to improve the rights of disabled children like all people in conflict situations.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this tripartite framework we can assess the situation of disabled children in conflict situations on the basis of the following key issues:

#### **Disabled children as holders of rights**

Disabled children are individuals with the potential to shape their lives by their own means. They are holders of rights and not passive subjects of care and protection. On numerous occasions, disabled children have made it clear that the right to be consulted, to express and to share their views is crucial for all children. Disabled children have come up with many examples of how they have been bullied by adults who intend to speak on their behalf, and how in group situations adults have focused on the disability instead of personality of the child. Disabled children – like all children – can keep authorities to account.

However, in practice, disabled children often have no conceptualisation of rights. They have limited scope to express and claim their rights because of their dependency on carers, and there is a lack of opportunity for them to seek independent

information, advice and support. Without the knowledge, trust or skills to ask for their rights, and in the absence of, or lack of access to, independent child counselling, disabled children are vulnerable to bullying, neglect and abuse that can remain in the closet for a long time. Furthermore, conflict makes disabled children even more reliant on carers (or, if they are separated, on any person who takes pity on them) and so they are even further at risk.

#### **Disabled children have basic needs**

Disabled children have basic needs like all children, they have the same need for love, dignity, family life, protection and stimulation. Consultations with disabled children make it clear that if they are enabled to express themselves in their own words and through their own means, even very young children emphasise these needs<sup>5</sup>. However, the lack of attention paid to disabled children and their views, the low value placed on their life and the stigma attached to the fact that they lack something, puts disabled children at a disproportionately high risk of neglect, abuse and violation of their human rights (Lansdown 2001). During situations of unrest, the fact that family, cultural and state child protection mechanisms often collapse puts disabled children further at risk.

#### **Disabled children: taboo and exclusion**

Throughout the world, a disabled child is often perceived as a curse or a punishment visited upon the child, mother and family. Society will frequently pity the child, blame the mother and pour shame on the family. Although the parents love their child, medical professionals, relatives and neighbours will in many cases emphasise the burden on the family. As a result the family can feel pressurised to give up the child and to focus energy on the delivery of a new, non-disabled child to restore the status of the family. A disabled child thus creates tension in the family. There is worldwide anecdotal evidence that in many cases it is the fathers who cannot stand this 'devil's dilemma' and they in turn pressurise the mothers to either abandon the child or accept divorce. The effect is that many mothers are left on their own to run the household and care for a disabled child, which reinforces the threat of poverty and isolation. The conditions for these female-headed families in conflict situations<sup>6</sup> are even more difficult.

### Disabled children and families

All children need to be seen as part of a family living in a particular community (UNHCR 1999). If you include the family of a disabled person, 25% of the world's population is disabled (UN 2002). The family is included in this figure because caring for a disabled child lowers their status in the community and restricts the options of the carer to work or socialise outside the home. This has a negative impact on the household income and the ability to maintain a social network, which, in combination with the extra costs of healthcare, medicine and basic devices, deepens the poverty and isolation of the family.

Children's ability to cope with conflict depends largely on whether they have the security of a family and a structure to their life, like going to school. Disabled children by definition often have fewer coping mechanisms to start with. For example, children with hearing or visual impairments are unable to see warnings of attack, and children with mobility or learning difficulties are easily separated from their families and less able to escape (IDDC 2000). If they are displaced following war, disabled children and their families may lose their natural support network and therefore have even more difficulty in coping with the situation. The story of Shafqat in Afghanistan is an example: "I was hit by a shell and felt my legs becoming limp. In the midst of the chaos, my parents died and my brother carried me all the way over the mountains to Pakistan to seek assistance. I was 8 years old."<sup>7</sup>

### Disabled children as victims of conflict and small armaments

It is estimated that one-third of all countries have experienced conflict in the 1990s. Nearly 90% of those killed or injured were civilians, and one-third of those were children. As a result, more than 2 million children died and 6 million were permanently disabled or seriously injured (Machel 2001).

During conflict, children are more at risk of injury and impairment than adults. The types of activities that children like to undertake, such as herding, collecting water and firewood, and playing, are those that carry the greatest risk of injury from landmines. Landmines often look like toys and can attract young children. Even if there are warning

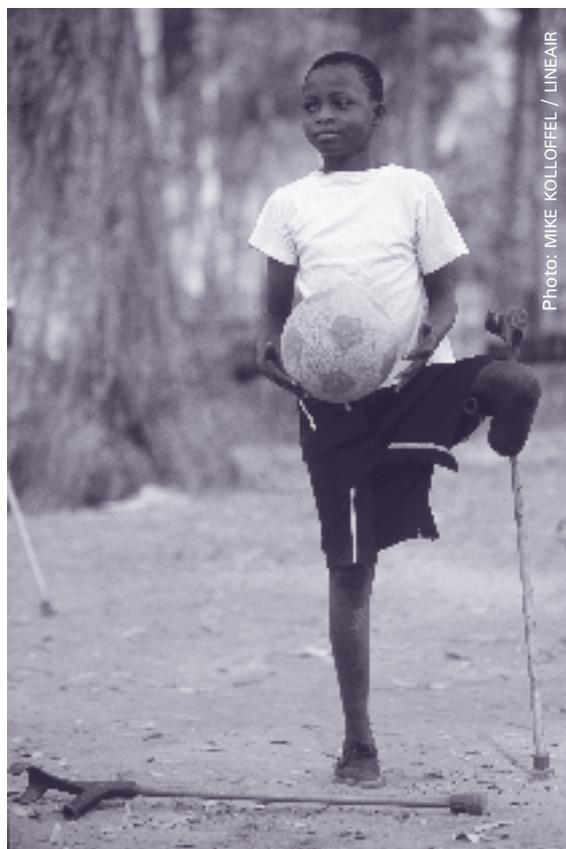


Photo: MIKE KOLLOFFEL / LINEAIR

Disabled children are individuals with the potential to shape their lives by their own means

signs, young children will often not take them in (Deverson 2002).

In many cases, conflict relief and CACD operations focus on the number of people killed, made homeless or deprived of their source of income, ignoring the number of people with serious injuries or who have become disabled. If there are first aid or rehabilitation services available during or immediately after conflict they are usually focused on adults, particularly soldiers who have become disabled as a result of the conflict. The services on offer primarily concentrate on 'medical rehabilitation' by providing mobility devices for individuals. These aids are often not set up for children who were already disabled or who have become disabled, and the long-term priorities of the child and the family at home and in the community are not considered.

### **Primary and secondary causes of disability for children in conflict**

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that worldwide 16% of disabilities are the result of accidents and war (DFID 2000). During a conflict, basic services like health and education facilities deteriorate or are intentionally targeted by the opposition. First-aid medical services, essential to reduce the disabling effect of war-related injuries, are hard to come by. In addition, the collapse of basic services has a secondary disabling effect on disabled children as they are more at risk of malnutrition, disease and trauma. Such a lack of basic services further disrupts their play, schooling and other daily activities they may engage in with other children. This deprives them not only of the opportunities to share and develop but also of the positive benefits these activities provide that allow a child to deal with the experience of violence and conflict (SC Alliance 1997).

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### **Disabled children, development and poverty**

One in five of the world's poorest are disabled and 50% of the population in low- and middle-income countries is affected by disability. Around 80% of all disabled people live in rural areas where basic services are scarce and often fail to identify disabilities early enough to help prevent them (UN, 1982). During and after conflict, the collapse in basic services worsens the situation, and more people become permanently disabled. As countries experiencing trouble often have a high birth rate and a young population, this increases the chances – and the problems – of disability in early childhood, and highlights the circular cause-and-effect of poverty and disability. Structural development is not possible unless

disability and disabled people are addressed in general development planning in an effective way. Inclusive development not only benefits individual children and families but the potential of the whole of society.

### **Disabling children as a tool and target of conflict**

It is not unusual for children to be targeted in a conflict; it creates fear and instability and it 'dishonours' families for not protecting their children, thereby guaranteeing obedience to the ruling parties. Children are often attacked, forced to witness or commit violence, kidnapped to be soldiers or slaves, consciously maimed using physical, mental or sexual violence and tortured. For example, there is the story of Bintu Koroma in Sierra Leone: "The rebels grabbed my left hand, put it on the root of the tree and chopped it off. I was 4 years old." (Lansdown 2001). Ruling parties have also purposely used maiming a tool to dishonour children and their families. For example, here is Sohail from Afghanistan: "The fighters chopped of my nose, they did it purposely to dishonour my manhood. I was 6 years old." There is an increasing amount of first-hand evidence from disabled children that they are targeted on the basis of their inability to witness, complain or flee. Deaf children have been used as frontrunners, blind and mentally retarded children have been collectively raped, and physically disabled children have had their mobility aids taken away and destroyed. One example comes from the story of a blind girl in Sierra Leone: "The rebels entered our school for the blind where the staff was no longer able to protect us. They repeatedly raped us and just walked out, as we had no way to identify them as the perpetrators" (Cordaid 2004). Disabled children are easy prey for attackers, and the experience creates an emotional scar or has lifelong effects for the child that go far beyond the direct experience of violence. Furthermore, the families and/or caregivers have to live with the humiliating experience that they were not able to protect their child against the aggressors.

### **Conclusion**

Issues relating to children and conflict are multiplied when it comes to disabled children. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the fate of disabled children in situations of conflict and there is a real need for further research to highlight their circumstances and protect the rights of all children before, during and after war. It is important that

human rights watchers and decision-makers from CACD programmes fully understand the negative implications of conflict for disabled children and their families. Further research, monitoring of the violation of rights, and development of practical tools for conflict situations is necessary. At the moment, it is as though disabled children are invisible: they are not consulted in programme development and are not considered in CACD and post-conflict development programmes. As a result the cycle of poverty and exclusion deepens for disabled children and their families.

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### Notes

- 1 Conflict in this article is defined as armed battle and political violence in the public sphere, it does not relate to domestic conflict. It covers acute conflict and the situations immediately before and after war, including internal displacement and refugee situations.
- 2 Disability in this article is based on the definition of Disabled People International (DPI): ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.’ An additional note from the author: impairments relate to the full scope of visual, hearing, motor, learning and/or psychological conditions including conflict-related psychosocial trauma.
- 3 The working definition is “the comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities” <[www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights)>.
- 4 IHLs relating to disabled children in conflict: (1948) UN Declaration of Human Rights; (1949) UN Geneva Convention; (1951) UN Convention on the Status of Refugees; (1966) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; (1984) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment or Punishment; (1997) Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction.
- 5 Based on experiences of the author in various countries in Asia, Africa and Europe.
- 6 It is often assumed that families leave their disabled children behind during displacement, but research has proven that families usually carry all their children to safety (Leach, 1990).
- 7 Story of Shafqat, told to the author when he arrived in 1987 in Bait ul Tabassum a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) project for disabled children in Karachi, Pakistan.
- 8 Story of Sohail from a Pathan family, told to the author in 1988 at Bait ul Tabassum, a CBR project for disabled children in Karachi, Pakistan.