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Protecting Palestinian children from political violence

About this research

Violence has shaped the setting in which successive generations of children living in the occupied territories of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, have grown up. Although numerous UN and international non-governmental agencies have worked for many years with the aim of protecting children from this violence and realising their basic human rights, the limits of their capacity to achieve this aim have been all too apparent. Research conducted by Dr Jason Hart (University of Bath) and Claudia Lo Forte (Independent Researcher), has explored and identified the reasons for the failures of these organisations. They argue that international agencies and their donors have been constrained in their ability to properly protect Palestinian children because of serious flaws in their understanding of and willingness to address the political situation in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). As a result of the tendency to deal with the effects rather than the causes of the suffering of children, efforts remain technocratic and ameliorative (aimed at increasing the capacity of Palestinian families to cope better and longer with Israeli violations), rather than principled and preventative. The research recommends that international agencies and their donors engage in, and are judged against, a concerted and multi-level solution rooted in the realisation of human rights and child protection principles.

Research findings in context: accounting for the failings of international agencies and donors in protecting Palestinian children

The presence of UN and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working for the protection of children in the oPt, is long-standing and considerable in scope. Yet, the lives of Palestinian children remain as difficult and dangerous as ever. The wide disparity between the consistent efforts made by representatives of the international community to promote the safety and wellbeing of Palestinian children, and the actual results, provided the starting point for this research. The research involved extensive analysis of agency publications, reports of Human Rights organisations and national and international policy documents, and around 120 interviews and focus groups with donor agency staff, Palestinian Authority officials, UN/INGO and NGO staff, teachers, parents, and children. It finds that the international community has been unable to properly protect Palestinian children because of serious flaws in the conceptual, institutional and, most importantly, political understanding of the situation in the oPt.

The efforts of international agencies and donor organisations to prevent harm to Palestinian children are, in the first instance, restricted because they operate with a flawed definition of the situation. In keeping with Western governments, they view the oPt as a humanitarian crisis, arising from conflict between two more or less equivalent parties. Such a characterisation of the setting does not reflect the reality of Palestinian children experiencing occupation related violence, and the systematic appropriation of Palestinian land and resources by Israel. The research argues that it would be more accurate to conceptualise the situation in the oPt as a chronic and long-term human rights and protection crisis; a situation that requires efforts to deliver aid to be coupled with efforts to produce change at the political and structural level. Adopting this holistic approach to support would also require agencies to step back from their standardised understanding and technocratic approach to child protection (based on an assumed universal and apolitical set of children's needs at an individual level), and bring political, cultural and socio-economic factors relating to the setting back into the design and delivery of protection strategies.

In addition to problems regarding how the situation is defined, there are also problems with the institutionalised relations between child protection agencies in the oPt. Hierarchical arrangements between UN agencies, international non-governmental organisation (INGOs)

Key findings

The research found that:

- Palestinian children, their parents and teachers have to cope with occupation-related violence on a daily basis. Children are subject to attack by Israeli settlers on their way to and from school, arbitrary arrest, detention and severe constraints on their free movement. Material, social and educational deprivation has become part of the everyday experience of many.
- International agencies and donors define the situation in the oPt as a humanitarian crisis arising from conflict between two more or less equivalent parties. This characterisation of the setting does not reflect the lived experience of Palestinian children. The situation should be more accurately understood as a human rights and protection crisis, requiring efforts to produce political change.
- The approach to child protection adopted by international agencies assumes that children, at an individual level, have a universal and apolitical set of needs. The problem with this assumption is that it fails to take account of the political context in which families live, and that determines and systemically reproduces the suffering that children face.
- Institutionalised hierarchical relations between UN agencies, international NGOs, and local NGO partners, renders local and contextual knowledge subordinate to global definitions and technocratic practices of child protection.
- Most significantly, the capacity of international agencies and donors to develop effective child protection strategies is constrained by the lack of political will to challenge and address Israel's violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL).

and local non-governmental organisations (NGO), have rendered local/contextual knowledge about the requirements for child protection subordinate to global perspectives and practices.

Issues regarding both how the setting of the oPt is understood and how the institutions involved in child protection are arranged, allude to the ultimate constraint upon the capacity of the international community to pursue a principled approach to the proper protection of Palestinian children. That is the lack of political will to address Israel's violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In direct contrast to the philosophy that underpins child protection – that the protection of children should transcend all considerations based on national self-interest, and action should address the causes not just the effects of harm - the research shows that Western donor governments, and as a result the agencies they fund, choose not to challenge Israel on practices that clearly put the lives of Palestinian children at risk. As a consequence, both donors and agencies can offer only limited support for ad hoc efforts that insufficiently mitigate the effects of these practices, and merely equip families to cope better, and for longer, with intolerable conditions.

Implications for policy and practice in child protection

The implications of failing to acknowledge the nature of the crisis, prioritise global over local knowledge about child protection, and deal with the individual effects rather than the political causes of the suffering of children, are that efforts remain technocratic and ameliorative, rather than principled and preventative. The research makes clear that the protection of Palestinian children cannot be achieved without political action to counter mass and systemic violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

To lessen the disparity between the stated aims of protecting Palestinian children from violence and realising their basic human rights and what is actually achieved, the research makes a number of recommendations for both international aid agencies and donors:

UN agencies and INGOs should:

- Develop an understanding of child protection that focusses on prevention and is aligned with IHL and IHRL.
- Draw on a wider array of expertise in the analysis and development of child protection measures. In particular, expertise in the Palestinian context from international relations, anthropology and political-economy perspectives should be utilised.
- Engage with Palestinian children and their families/ caregivers about their experiences of, and aspirations for, child protection measures by international and UN organisations.
- Pursue advocacy and awareness-raising measures in a more concerted way, to influence public opinion and build the political will for donor governments to take a principled approach to child protection in the oPt.
- Review funding sources from the perspective of ensuring maximum potential to pursue a principled approach to child protection. Organisations that seek to be identified as part of civil society should consider carefully the implications of accepting large funds from highly restrictive bi-lateral or multi-lateral donors.



Donors should:

- Define the situation in the oPt as a long-term human rights and protection crisis, requiring a principled approach to engagement in political action - ensuring adherence to international norms and laws – to secure a focus on root causes rather than effects.
- Support and encourage efforts to monitor Israeli institutions in which Palestinian children’s rights are regularly violated.
- Address the rights of children as members of a national community with collective aspirations.
- Evaluate requests for funds in terms of their applicants’ ability to implement a principled approach to child protection focussed on prevention of harm.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the research recommends that international agencies and their donors should be evaluated and judged by civil society institutions locally and globally on the impact of their efforts to prevent harm to Palestinian children arising from political violence, especially occupation-related violence. Unwillingness to go beyond ameliorative measures – i.e. individual coping mechanism interventions - should become the focus of critical discussion.

Methodology

The research began in February 2009 by bringing together a roundtable of child protection experts, and ended with several of the experts and others reviewing and giving feedback on findings and conclusions in August 2010. The research involved both analysis of secondary sources (agency publications, reports of Human Rights organisations, and national and international policy documents), and conducting interviews and focus groups during 7 months of fieldwork in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In total around 120 interviews and focus groups were conducted with individuals and groups

that ranged from bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor agency staff; Israeli, Palestinian and international Human Rights activists; Palestinian Authority officials; UN agencies, such as UNICEF; INGOs, such as Save the Children; local NGO staff; teachers; parents; and children.

Contact the researcher:

Dr Jason Hart

Department of Social and Policy Sciences,
University of Bath

j.hart2@bath.ac.uk

www.bath.ac.uk/sps/staff/jason-hart

More on this research:

The full report – Protecting Palestinian children from political violence: the role of the international community can be accessed from:

<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/policy-briefings/RSCPb5-ProtectingPalestinianChildren.pdf>



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