

# WAR IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES



*Youth from Uganda*

In most civil wars there is little or no respect for the sanctity of childhood. The opposite is true – young people are used in the most callous ways possible and their rights are routinely ignored. They function inside worlds where connections are broken and doors are shut against them.

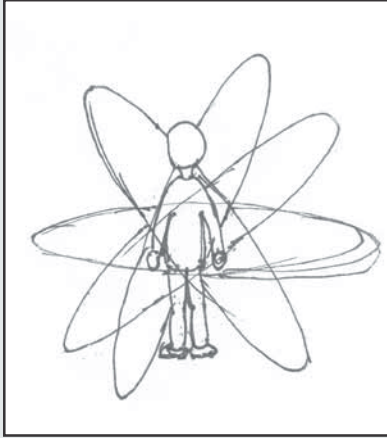
Many thoughtful reports have been written on the impact of war on children's lives. We hope to contribute to these studies through an approach that is largely reflected through young people's views. This does not mean that our views lack analysis, rather that the prism for collecting and analyzing information is distinct. This material includes artwork, group discussions, individual interviews and writing. In keeping with the priorities identified by young people certain things are highlighted and others excluded.

Through our analysis one main theme has emerged: feelings of separation and disconnection with the world. Young people often speak of their fear of "being separated". This is not explained in terms of people or things but more as a state of being. Children as separated human beings. What does this mean?

On the most practical level, it refers to worries that they will lose their parents or family, a main source of identity and security for all young people. But it has many other dimensions, from the harsh severing experienced by child soldiers or rape victims to wistful comments about lost friendships or community habits no longer practised. Their artwork and discussions give an impression of a web of relationships hacked through by the violence of war. These breaks in connection include links with the natural world, cultural life, community relationships and friendships – the structures and fabric of a child's life.

In the following pages we will examine the meaning of "being separated" from young people's perspective. Our study is divided into four sections as outlined below. This written analysis is juxtaposed to personal accounts as represented through reproductions of young people's drawings, paintings, photographs and writings. This section ends with an interpretation of the messages in young people's art, an important part of CAP's research base.

Like all analyses, this one creates divisions that seem artificial against children's lives where everything is movement and change, of discovery and creation of the world. This can best be compared to a series of intertwining spirals that are continually being reconfigured, a process that builds with each new contact. Of course, this dynamism is reduced every time connections are lost or separations made, thus limiting a child's capacity to act and interact inside her environment.



*Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, is famous for his theories on child development. Piaget maintained that children understand the world in terms of their interaction with their environment, an exchange that is conditioned or structured by the skills young people possess as well as former contacts with their world.*

*In his view each encounter offers possibilities for new insights and the development of new skills, a spiralling process that endlessly transforms itself.*

The findings in this section are based on workshops and discussions held with young people from Angola, Bosnia, Burma-Thailand, Cambodia, Colombia, El Salvador, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Uganda. The participants, aged 8 to 22 years, came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences of war. Some had been directly involved in political movements or armed fighting while others had a hazy idea of the reasons for the violence. In these workshops, no one expected sympathy. Instead there was a feeling of camaraderie, as they understood their situation to be part of a collective experience, one shared in some way by all young people living with war.

The discussion is divided into the following units:

### **1. FORMS OF SEPARATION: LIVING WITH WAR**

This unit examines the impact of war on young people's lives through an analysis of the ways that it undermines their connection to the natural environment, their cultural identity, education and emotional well-being.

### **2. A DIFFERENT REALITY: A CHILD SOLDIER'S WORLD**

This unit provides a portrait of the experiences of child soldiers abducted by the Lords Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. It provides a case study of the severe forms of disconnection between a child's normal life and the life he/she inhabits once abducted or recruited into an armed group. It concludes with an identification of some of the issues children face in their difficult journey back home.

### **3. WAR AND GENDER ROLES FOR GIRLS**

This unit explores some of the ways that war separates girls and young women from their confidence, skills and capacity to interact with others. It also points to possibilities for change as young female peacebuilders are advocating for social justice.

### **4. THE OVERALL CONTEXT**

Certain structural factors strongly affect young people's situations and our capacity to uphold their rights. In this unit we describe some of these including: 1) The Long -Term Effect of Long Term Wars, 2) Small Arms: Big Business, 3) Ethnic & Civil Conflicts, 4) The Demographics of War Plagued Countries and 5) The Use and Trafficking of Drugs.

### **5. THE INTERPRETATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S ART**

This section provides an illustrated interpretation of the messages in children's art.