

# 1. FORMS OF SEPARATION: LIVING WITH WAR

## **SUMMARY:**

*In this unit we examine how young people see their world changing as a result of the impact of war. It is divided into four parts, in keeping with the categories they used in their discussions.*

*This includes the natural environment, cultural/social identity, intellectual development and emotional well-being. Family is so important that it is integrated into all aspects of their lives.*



*Girl from Colombia*

## **THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

Journalists often marvel that children will play anywhere. Pictures of youngsters running through bombed out buildings are common in war reports. And, yes, there they are – playing alongside mounds of garbage, crumbling walls and pockmarked buildings. This is the world they have been given; this is the world they function inside. But it doesn't mean they like it. Children in these situations often describe how “awful” war is. A young displaced Colombian boy complained that his eyes hurt from looking at so much ugliness. In Angola one of MOJUP's first activities was a cleanup campaign.

It is also important to remember that it is the journalist, not the child, who framed these pictures. If children are given a choice where their photos are taken, they usually select a place with trees or flowers. Despite the difficulties of finding a clean and pretty setting they will persist, saying that want to stand near “something beautiful”. In a photo session with displaced children in Colombia they disappeared for about 30 minutes, returning triumphant with a small flower which each child held as her picture was taken.

This connection to place and the natural environment extends beyond an appreciation for physical beauty. In many cultures children's first formal roles are the care of small animals or the cultivation of gardens. These responsibilities provide a status and connection to their world. So it is no surprise that children will describe war in terms of how it affects animals. One eight year old seriously explained:

*“You have to understand. In bombing not even animals live. Because in our place everything was destroyed. Because not even a chicken survived. Because they even kill chickens.”*

These refugee children included small pictures of chickens all over their pictures. When describing his life in the camp, a boy said:

*“Here we live all cooped up together. Like a hen house really. We are all on top of each other, everyone sad.”*

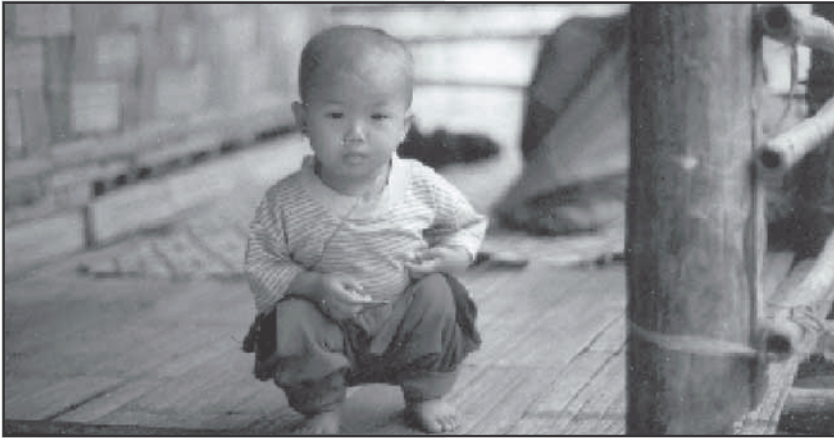
A sense of place also defines a person's way of being in the world. Displaced younger children in Colombia describe how war removes them from an environment that makes them feel good inside themselves and with others. As these children understand it, they did not move away from their homes – the war took their homes away from them.

At a workshop in Usme, a resettlement area outside Bogotá, participants made pictures of their homes. Most produced idyllic drawings with flowers, birds and small brooks. They were not interested in making drawings of their current homes.

One of the girls explained why she did her picture this way:

*“When I think about my neighbourhood, where I am now, I think of how I would like it to be, not how it is. Our old place, San Pedro, is not contaminated. Here it is and it is grey and cold. There is nothing to see. It is very violent and ugly.”*

Social identities are based inside a cultural framework and the priorities established by that group. For each culture the physical environment plays a particular role. For ethnic groups from Burma, the physical environment is the foundation on which their ethnic identity is based:



*Karen child in refugee camp, Thailand*

*“Where we live is important. For example, the Karen people like to be in the mountains and very high places.*

*For other groups it is important to be near the river – they feel a connection to the water. So the geography or landscape where we have lived has determined who we are as a people.*

*This is different for each different ethnic group.”*

They worry that “if we are too far from the physical environment on which our culture is based everything will become destroyed.”

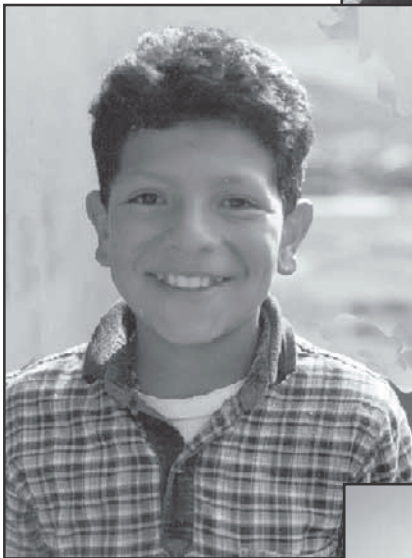
With Bosnian youth the physical world connects them to their family history and ancestry:

*“Our family treasure is our holiday house which we built at the exact same place where our great-granddads house was. That’s where my sister and I spent our childhood and learned lots of things. That’s where my grandpa and dad were born and so that place is very important for us. I will never forget it. During the war I thought about it a lot. Now, after the war, we are trying to get it back so we can be happy again.”*

Physical place also structures social habits. In rural Colombia residents spend a lot of their time outside, mixing with others. Displaced adolescents encounter many problems when they repeat these habits in the cities. They feel rejected by city people and the police who look down on their country ways.

Against security concerns, these issues can seem insignificant. However, if we are to step inside a young person’s world, they are much more important. The ugliness of war replaces the small beauties of the natural world – there is nothing to attach to, nothing with which to form a connection. Instead they are presented with an environment that rejects their abilities and knowledge. At best this breeds passivity and feelings of insecurity. At worst it instils strong feelings of resentment and anger.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH DISPLACED BY WAR, COLOMBIA



*“In the villages you spend a lot of time in the street. There is more freedom in the village because everybody knows everybody. And they arrive here, in the cities, and they are nobody.*

*They come to the city, they lose their space and they don't know what to do. For them this is even worse because their houses here are so small and ugly. They are very poor and there is so much violence in the family. Many times they don't even have a chair to sit on, less where to be quiet studying or whatever.*

*So they don't feel like staying at home. They go out to the street to find friends. But the street is dangerous, especially for drug addiction. Prostitution is common. The police treat them badly, very badly.*

*Every day some are killed – they call it social cleaning.”*

### **What are the implications for programming?**

Young people are realists. They know it is impossible to eliminate war from their lives. But small oases of peace removed from the ugly destructiveness of war could be created, particularly in displaced people's resettlement zones or refugee camps. It is a small thing to create a children's garden or a place to care for animals. It requires energy, not funding, to care for the natural environment.

## **CULTURAL IDENTITY AND WAYS OF BEING**

A dictionary meaning of culture is "a people's way of life created through their history, environment, language, and living patterns and represented by myths, folklore, arts, literature, songs, proverbs, and dances." Cultural identity forms a person's understanding of the world, sense of social justice and ways of interacting with others. It is the lynch pin that anchors a child inside a particular environment and helps her make sense of that world.

People often refer to a "culture of war" as opposed to a "culture of peace". If we return to our definition of culture, this doesn't make sense. War is destructive, not creative. Most artistic works of war are about the misery it causes, the vacuum it creates. Folklore, arts, literature and dance have no place inside its violent nothingness. It is only after peace is achieved that people try to re-establish links with their culture's ways of being.

Today's civil wars undermine this process. Partly this is because many conflicts continue for decades. People forget their dances, traditional rituals and stories. Ethnic conflicts usually include the wilful destruction of all aspects of the opposing culture. For instance, in the war in Bosnia a centuries' old Muslim mosque was bombed and the rubble secretly buried to deny any connection to that built heritage.

In CAP workshops we were surprised to find that young people identified the loss of these connections as an important effect of war. They spoke with pride about their culture while regretting that it was largely missing in their lives. For youth leaders this was a major concern for human rights or peace education. In the absence of this cultural backdrop they found these ideas became abstractions with little concrete connections to young people's lives.

At a workshop in rural Cambodia, the participants (aged 8 – 13) were asked to categorize their needs. We expected they would identify schools, food security and landmine clearance. These issues were included but in two of three groups the restoration of the local pagoda (Buddhist temple) was given a higher priority. When asked to explain their choice, they said that if the pagoda were restored it would make them feel safe and calm.

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### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE KAREN?**

*“First I should say that it is just who you are – like your name or the fact that you are male or female. When somebody asks me who I am the first thing that I say is that I am Karen. I feel very proud about this. I am proud because that is why am, that is who I am. I have my history.*

*And when my grandmother and grandfather talk about our history it is so nice for me. It is like we’re dreaming the reality of who we are - the most beautiful dream. We’re dreaming being Karen. And we have to keep that - our last generation kept that, so we have to do it.”*



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In Northern Uganda, young people say that Alcholi rituals are rarely practised because older people are too depressed. The organization of the displaced camps is totally different than traditional domestic arrangements. Colombian indigenous groups worry about how they can effectively pass on their way of life to the next generation with the FARC endlessly invading their territories. Teens from Bosnia regret that cultural traditions were lost during the war and have not been revived in post-conflict times.

In Cambodia young people describe how the “survivor culture” of the Pol Pot regime currently dominates their country. They see their world being defined by selfish interests rather than the strong sense of collective responsibility that was a cornerstone of their culture. This has big consequences for children’s upbringing.

For Burma’s ethnic peoples the maintenance of their identity is highly valued. It is an important part of formal and informal education in the refugee camps. In talking to children in these camps they will quickly and proudly tell you which group they belong to. This is also seen with the Afro and indigenous Colombian groups where cultural identity is actively promoted.

Young people who do not have a strong sense of belonging to their community or culture are apt to define themselves in terms of categories of war: displaced, child soldier, refugee, rape victim, war orphan.

**What are the implications for programming?**

Many programs identify the need for peace education for war affected young people. We agree but stress that the content of this education should be based on the values of the local culture.

It is not necessary to create notions of peace and peace education from the outside world. Most cultures have their own traditions for doing this, ones that have meaning for children who have grown up inside that world. For example, in Angola a project on traditional proverbs has been identified as an effective way to promote messages of peace. These are the best foundations on which to establish a sense of justice and positive codes of behaviour.

Unfortunately, many of these traditions are being lost because of the wars. We believe that young people could play an important role in the retrieval, examination and restoration of their culture’s traditions. In this way they would be making a contribution to their communities while reestablishing their sense of belonging and connection to their world.



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***In a war zone, every child who walks to school is performing an act of resistance. She is rejecting the use of young people as weapons of war and asserting her belief in a different future***

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## **EDUCATION**

Schools belong to young people. Even those who can't attend school will talk about it as a main component of their lives. Children living in conflict areas quickly provide visitors with a status report on the local schools' situation. They deeply resent the infringement of armed groups on their territory.

The biggest disconnection between young people and their education is obvious – schools are closed or dysfunctional in wartime. Almost all children living inside conflicts have their schooling disrupted. Rebel armies bomb schools or convert them into military headquarters. Guerrilla groups use schools as bargaining chips to secure loyalty from local communities. Both rebel and government armies can treat schools as recruitment centres.

In war times the quality of education suffers as teachers are badly equipped and paid meagre salaries, if at all. Children describe how teachers will create private classes that they must attend if they hope to pass the exam. Displaced children frequently do not have the correct papers to gain entrance into new schools. The list is endless.

These institutional problems are compounded by social and security difficulties. Parents fearing for the safety of their children will not let them go to school. Discipline is often a problem and teachers describe how they have been threatened by emotionally disturbed students.

Many students fall behind their expected grade level. Youth will quit rather than attend classes with smaller children. Rural children displaced to large centres resent the condescending attitude of city students. They have trouble adjusting to new curricula. Former boy soldiers describe strong feelings of isolation as other students shun them.

These are some of the problems that young people identified in the CAP workshops. Just reading this list is daunting. But still they trudge on to school, feeling very lucky if they achieve another grade level. Young Angolans hope that peace will mean that schools will reopen. Karenni refugees confess happiness at coming to the camp because there is a school. When child soldiers from Northern Uganda often begin their descriptions of their abduction with stories of how they were on their way to school: "See, there I am with my schoolbag."

In war zones young people's informal education is also limited. Youth cannot understand ideas of citizenship or concepts of human rights in the absence of education on these matters. Neither can they be expected to feel a commitment to these ideals. During peace times this civic education is nurtured through youth clubs, informal contact with elders, participation in community activities and the gradual assumption of responsibilities. In most wars these activities occur sporadically if at all. As well, civic structures are so dismantled that it is difficult for even a sophisticated political analyst to understand how the society is functioning.



Youth in refugee camp leading a class

But these are important bonds that tie young people, particularly youth, to their community. Many young people describe feelings of isolation, that no one really cares or looks out for them, that they are just “parcels” whose only value is as bodies for fighting. This state was described by a young man from Colombia:

*“[It is] an unbalanced life with no border. So you get fragile in your thoughts and your feelings, you can lose your head, maybe do something that wouldn’t be right and that’s not good for you. You get to a stage when you see everybody like an enemy because they compel you to live what you are living. You get to a new society where you don’t know if to fight with them, be friends, or be indifferent.”*

#### **What are the implications for programming?**

In a war zone every child who walks to school is performing an act of resistance. She is rejecting the use of young people as weapons of war and asserting her belief in a different future.

In the CAP workshops young people repeatedly identified the importance of education. They also stressed the need for special measures to support this work. The list of their recommendations is provided in the section on programming ideas.

A large part of CAP’s work has focussed on participation issues and youth’s right to participate in peacebuilding. In many cases this is a form of civic education as young people learn how to contribute in an effective way to the rebuilding of their society, whether this is through human rights training, public education activities or efforts to restore their community’s environment. This is exciting work with benefits for both youth and their societies. A detailed description of this work is provided in CAP’s Youth Peacebuilding Manual.

### **EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING**

In an art workshop in Nyamata, Rwanda participants were asked to create collective poems about the genocide. They were given paint and water to do a backdrop “wash” of colour. All four groups used the same colour codes – black at the top of the poem that gradually gave way to bright red. They said no other colours were possible, that red and black best represented how war “worked”.

This was their explanation: War begins as a darkness that envelopes people so they become crazy and isolated from each other. In fact, this darkness is so strong that they become blinded to others – they no longer see them as human beings. In fear and craziness they lash out and viciously assault others. With this comes the red, the blood of war. But all agreed: “first comes the darkness”.

On the next page are self portraits by two boys – one from Cambodia, the other from Rwanda. Both show confused feelings, hope mixed with pain, an eagerness for peace hedged by the fear of war. The portrait by the Rwandan boy shows his active attempt to push away the “darkness of war”. He explained this as his connection to peace and hope.



### **THE COLOURS OF MY SELF PORTRAIT**

*“The black all around me is the darkness of war. The red inside my head is the blood of my family, because my family were killed in the genocide. The green on my face is for peace. The white is the space between me and the darkness. It is for hope. Because still the darkness surrounds me.”*

Youth from Rwanda



### **THE COLOURS OF MY SELF PORTRAIT**

*“The grey – I mixed black and white together to show that I have a mixture of feelings. I have feelings of sadness and feelings of happiness. Because when I go out sometimes I think about having fun and then I think of all the dangers around me. The white is for how things are getting better. Like now our family has food to eat and something to use for living. The black is for my fears. I fear that the wars of the past will come to the present. I am afraid of war. I am afraid of landmines. I am afraid of the wild life that comes to our village when there is a war.”*

Youth from Cambodia

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**Because so many of the bonds that link young people to their world are severed, they feel left to their own devices, without the support that would help them recover from loss or be resilient inside the daily indignities, humiliations and pain of war.**

**These disconnections must be mended if young people are to reduce the long and short impact of war on their lives.**

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Many war affected young people are planning and hoping for peace in their lives. They look to the future, knowing that the present reality offers little sustenance. Most live with pain and deprivation; many suffer the loss of family members. The anguish experienced by a child at the death or disappearance of a parent is a hurt that never disappears. Just because it is common does not diminish a son or daughter's grief.

At the beginning of this section we spoke of young people's feelings of separation. In terms of their emotional well-being this is best expressed by their sense that they are left on their own. A child from Rwanda expressed it this way:

*"I was all by myself inside the hurt. It was only me, just me by myself."*

Former child soldiers understand that they are not allowed to show their feelings. In Burma refugee camps, orphans describe how they are different from others, that they are denied the status granted refugee children with families. Child landmine victims speak of how others will not play with them, that they are rejected because of their injuries. They find this hurtful and makes them "so lonely".

Inside war situations people can close up as a form of self-protection. This habit can continue. Children of parents who lived through the Cambodian genocide describe the emotional separation between the two generations:

*"During the Pol Pot regime young people were often abused. They never got any care or affection. They were forced to work hard; they were forced to do things they didn't want to do. Children were not with their parents."*

*People learned to keep their feelings inside themselves. So how can they suddenly change and be warm and affectionate with their children? And sometimes they transfer the same experience that they had to their kids, without knowing it. I think that is one of the reasons why we have so many domestic violations in our society."*

For many young people war is, as described earlier, "an unbalanced life with no border". No borders, no connections. Because so many of the bonds that link young people to their world are severed they feel left to their own devices, without the support that would help them recover from loss or be resilient inside the daily indignities, humiliations and pain of war. These disconnections must be mended if young people are to reduce the long and short impact of war on their lives.

#### **What are the implications for programming?**

The restoration of a child's well-being and connection to her world is one of the main priorities for most child rights agencies. It is a tall order with many obstacles. There is no one blueprint as every situation has its particular demands. In the section on programming there are descriptions of strategies that have been effective in various situations.