

## 4. THE OVERALL CONTEXT

### **SUMMARY:**

*This unit describes some of the characteristics of today's civil wars which have direct consequences for young people's lives: This study includes five topics:*

- a) *War: A Way of Life*
- b) *Small Arms: Big Business*
- c) *Ethnic & Civil Conflicts*
- d) *Demographics*
- e) *Drugs*



*“Where I Hurt”*

### **WAR: A WAY OF LIFE**

In many countries armed conflict has continued over several decades. Long periods of violence are punctuated by ceasefires that never seem to hold. People describe their incredible weariness with war but have all but given up hoping for peace. Often the original reasons for the conflict have degenerated into vicious power struggles.

#### ***What are the consequences for young people?***

Of all the horrors that long-term war inflicts on young people perhaps the worst is the fact that it becomes a way of life, one that conditions and shadows all aspects of their upbringing. Youth express bitterness at the loss of their childhood and the destruction of their hopes for the future. A violent way of being and the constant disruption of war are accepted parts of daily life. This is a world of limited dreams.

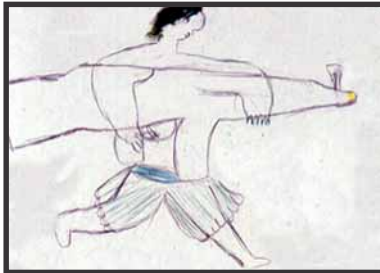
Young people grow to understand that their lives, and those of their family, are vulnerable to external factors over which they have little or no control. While hardships are a part of all wars, the difference is that this is a constant, for many children things have never been any different.

A boy calmly explains that it is better to leave his village so they won't have to lie down on the floor to dodge bullets. Children label a nearby field “the landmine plantation”. While they express outrage at soldiers who steal their family's animals and crops, they almost expect that this will happen. They tell how soldiers invade homes with no respect for family privacy. They see these groups as selfish, that they take everything for themselves with no regard for others' welfare.

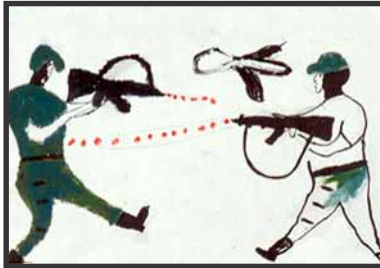
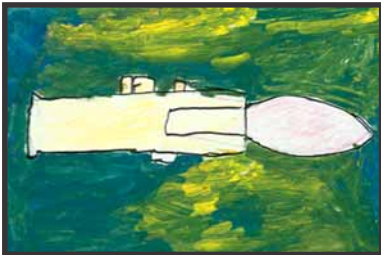
With sadness and regret young people acknowledge how war has fractured their home life. Domestic violence is common. A daughter describes how her father is “no longer himself”; a son explains that his father only drinks because he is so unhappy. Displaced children yearn for their parents and their loss of dignity. They whisper that the changes in their family “disappoint” them. These changes include sudden bursts of anger, impatience or a withdrawal from family life. One girl described this as “an ache in my heart”. Many children suffer this pain.



*" I was eleven when they took me. I was in the bush three years with the rebels.*



*After I was trained to become a soldier, I was given a gun. I was taken for*



*fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting. And many people died, many people died."*



**Drawings by former boy soldiers, Uganda**

## **SMALL ARMS: BIG BUSINESS**

According to Project Ploughshares there are approximately 500 million small arms or light weapons currently in circulation. These weapons are cheap and available. Their size and weight means that they can be carried and used by a 10 year old.

Though it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate statistics, conservative estimates attribute 300,000 deaths per year in wars and armed conflicts from use of these weapons. (Reference: *Small Arms and Light Weapons*, Project Ploughshares working paper 01-4).

### **What are the consequences for young people?**

No one can claim that small arms have created child soldiers. Young people have been used in wars for centuries. However, their appeal to armed groups has increased dramatically with the emergence of AK-47s and other lightweight, cheap rifles. With gun harnesses wrapped round their necks, youngsters are seen in village raids, on guard duty and running into the front lines of battles throughout the world.

Three factors have contributed to the creation of this situation: 1) the high percentage of young people versus adults in most war countries, 2) the availability of lightweight weapons and 3) the “demilitarization of war”, a phrase Ernie Regehr of Project Ploughshares defines this way:

*“...Many current wars involve large numbers of armed forces that are neither trained nor managed by military institutions or discipline... Civilians are now the primary victims of war in part because they have also become the principal combatants ...small arms and light weapons have transformed armed combat from the “profession of war,” carried out by professional military organizations and soldiers, or even volunteer soldiers trained and commanded by professionals, to the terror of civil chaos fanned by armed civilians, some supporting governments as civilian militias, some attacking governments, and some engaged in inter-communal strife with little reference to national governments.*

*Most consider themselves without political alternatives or, in the absence of credible state protection and of any economic opportunities, feel compelled to take advantage of available weapons to pursue personal goals that in any other context would be more criminal than political. In other words, in many wars today non-military but armed civilians do most of the fighting and civilians do most of the dying.”*  
(p. 1 - 2, Project Ploughshares working paper 01-4)

The consequences of this “civil chaos” are rippling through children’s lives. General Romeo Dallaire notes that the operations of Brazilian street gangs bear a striking similarity to those of rebel armies. Former child soldiers who have lived with the power of the gun are inclined to bark orders at schoolteachers, elders and younger children.

---

**The consequences of this “civil chaos” are rippling through children’s lives. General Romeo Dallaire notes that the operations of Brazilian street gangs bear a striking similarity to those of rebel armies.**

---



As the domestic world is now included in the battlefield, its tools become part of the arsenal. This reflects the horrible two way street of the demilitarization of war. Just as anyone can become a combatant, any object can be turned into a weapon as the lines between military and civilian life break down. If a gun is not ready to hand, than anything else can and will be used in a world where the codes of what is proper military equipment and professional military activity no longer exist. In practise this means that every aspect of a child's life has potential for violence.

Most adults hate to speak of “children” and “guns” in the same sentence. We shudder when presented with photographs of 10 year olds carrying rifles. Young people don't feel this reluctance. Guns are a part of the landscape – their presence is so common as to be something barely worth noticing. This is not to say that they are ignorant of its power.

Former child soldiers acknowledge the ‘respect’ they received with a weapon in their hands. They can take pride in their capacity to assemble, disassemble and use these machines rapidly. They understand that this ability sets them apart from the rest of the population. Some speak of the excitement of battles and how their expertise with a gun makes them effective fighters. What they are less ready to admit is the number of people they have killed with these weapons.

As organizations like Project Ploughshares reluctantly acknowledge, it is probably impossible to create a landmines-type ban on small weapons. Their hope is for some form of regulation. The difficulty is how to begin this work: at the supply or market end? Of course, both need to be tackled but both sides exert formidable resistance.

For arms manufacturers this is a big, profitable business. Guns are deemed a necessity by individuals living in communities where the boundaries between civilian and military life have dissolved. None of this is right but the harshest wrong is that the hands holding these guns are often those of a 10 or 12-year-old child.



*Drawing by Rwandan youth*

### **Memories of the Genocide**

*It began on April, 1994.  
Burning houses,  
Killing Tutsis, Tutsis,  
From every place and everywhere.*

*Blood spreading over the hills.  
People fleeing:  
In the hills, in the valleys, in the  
churches.*

*And they were shouting:  
"Kill more, kill more"  
"Kill the cockroaches."*

*Machetes, spears, knives, clubs with  
nails, anything.  
People killed in the wildest way.  
Children, parents, old people.*

*And the world was just looking.*

*They urged the killers, saying,  
"Don't worry. It is only a Tutsi  
Their God has deserted them.  
Their God is dead."*

### **Youth Collective Poem, Nyamata, Rwanda**

## **ETHNIC & CIVIL CONFLICTS**

Civil conflicts and ethnic wars create new definitions of the word enemy, as former neighbours become the most detested of opponents. Warring groups demand ultimate loyalty and are quick to punish the smallest of infractions or gestures of goodwill to the other side.

### **What are the consequences for children?**

In these wars young people are stripped of the protections formally provided by international agreements. Geneva Conventions make little impact on commanders who instruct their troops to "kill the little rats".

In ethnic wars children can be particularly despised and singled out for killing. In civil wars young people are also seen as enemies by armed groups determined to eliminate all sources of resistance. This strategy was explained by Carlos, whose family members were killed by the FARC and who now lives in fear for his security:

*"If somebody is a handcraft man and dies, somebody else [in his family] will continue his work. That's what the armed group see. So this means that if in a family there are community leaders, it is not enough to kill the leader, they want to get all the family, so nobody is going to go on with this job."*

The idea of children as "zones of peace" is a wonderful idea that is rarely practised by today's warring groups. All this is old news to young people living inside war zones. They talk about how the soldiers "hate us" or that "they don't think about us at all". They understand that they are not accidental victims but the deliberate targets in these civil conflicts.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION STRUCTURES**

In most war plagued countries the majority of the population is under the age of 30. In all CAP program countries, the population charts have the pyramid shape that is characteristic of countries at war or in the early stages of recovery from a war.

### **What are the consequences for young people?**

One of the most obvious problems is the large number of young people needing education and health services. As Angela McIntyre, Institute for Strategic Studies, South Africa, has noted, even strong western countries would buckle under these demands.

When asked to identify their biggest priorities most war affected young people quickly answer "schools" and "education". How this dream can be achieved inside countries with huge debt loads, fledgling social systems and limited numbers of trained teachers is a big question.

Most parents would wholeheartedly agree, "It takes a village to raise a child". Children thrive inside situations where they have a variety of contacts with peers, family and elders. These are absent in the life of young person living in a conflict. Skewed population structures coupled with the effects of war narrow young people's lives and deny them the crucial support they need to be resilient against war's impact.

## OUR THOUGHTS AND WISHES: KAREN REFUGEES



*The thing that makes me smile is when my friend gives me food and we eat together.*

*The most important thing for me is health.*

*The thing I am most scared about is that I will lose my country.*

*I worry that our culture will lose itself away from our homeland.*

*I am scared for the drugs.*

*I worry that I will not pass the test in school.*

*If I made a friend I would smile always.*

*The most important thing for me is education.*

*If I had a little money I would buy the Karen traditional dress.*

*When my parents tell a joke, then I smile.*

*I am scared of the gun and I worry for my parents.*

*I worry that the military will come here and kill us and maybe burn our house again.*

*If I saw a foreigner I would smile all the time.*

## **THE USE AND TRAFFICKING OF DRUGS**

The illicit use of drugs is becoming a depressingly common feature in many of today's civil conflicts. For example, in Colombia the struggle for control over the coca crops and drug trade is an important factor in the conflict. Inside any war situation drugs are usually readily available, particularly for combatants.

### ***What are the consequences for young people?***

Because it is difficult to obtain solid information on these issues, it is impossible to make absolute statements on how young people are implicated in the growing, manufacturing or use of drugs. The following quotes from CAP meetings represent the different ways that drugs are present in young people's lives:

*"In our area the conflict is associated with cocaine. Because it is a big cocaine area there is a lot of consumption of cocaine – some children working in the fields are paid with coca."*

Colombia

*"Now we have the problem of drugs in the camps. Drugs are very cheap to buy and easy to get. It is a new thing – I am 20 and it didn't exist when I was a student. We also worry that it is something that is being promoted by Burma... The Thai laws against drugs are very strong. By still there is a lot of drug use, mostly amphetamines. "*

Burma-Thailand

*"Children [soldiers] use drugs because when they take it they gain the courage they need to do evil things."* Angola

The fact that young people are beginning to identify this issue is a major concern and one that requires further research.