Unmapped Potential: Exploring Youth Participatory Action Research in Post-Conflict Humanitarian Response

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INTRODUCTION

Armed groups in humanitarian emergencies have long acknowledged the agency, strengths, and leadership of youth (Sommers, 2007: 102). Humanitarian research in post-conflict settings, by contrast, has only recently begun to recognise youth's capabilities and potential through the implementation of participatory, youth-focused research. This methodological shift has been perhaps best illustrated by research conducted by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) from 1999 to 2002 regarding the concerns of adolescents and youth in Kosovo, northern Uganda and Sierra Leone. These studies were unique for their explicit focus on adolescent youth and for the extent to which the over 150 adolescent researchers designed and delivered the research conducted in these three countries. These studies have the potential to signify an important evolution in humanitarian research if the WCRWC's approach to youth engagement is adapted by other research initiatives.

This research explores one particularly effective model of youth engagement in humanitarian research, as practiced during three separate projects facilitated by the WCRWC in Yugoslavia, Northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone. In reviewing these three WCRWC studies, this paper highlights several promising practices employed by this organisation and assesses the extent to which these same principles and processes can be applied in other research. The WCRWC's approach to youth research can be distinguished for its emphasis on diversity within its youth research teams, its

partnerships with a wide range of local stakeholders, and its focus on addressing systemic barriers to youth participation in society more broadly. While other research initiatives may lack the contacts and resources available to the WCRWC, this paper suggests that they likewise share an obligation to their youth participants in extending opportunities for empowerment beyond the short-term timelines of any single research project.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WITHIN HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

The near universal ratification[1] in 1989 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol has ushered in a new era of youth engagement among governmental, nongovernmental, and UN agencies. In particular, Article 12 has helped reshape the design and spirit of research with youth by enshrining the rights of children to participate in all matters affecting them:

> The child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard
> in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child,
> either directly, or through a representative or appropriate body,
> in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.
> (UNGA, 1989: 4)

This portrayal of youth as agents of change rather than as passive recipients of relief has been complemented by research that emphasises youth resilience rather than youth trauma or deficiencies. The focus of an increasing amount of research, then, has been on youth coping mechanisms, survival strategies, and knowledge about managing adversity (Boyden and Mann, 2005: 6). Moreover, such research has challenged the legitimacy of previous forms of youth studies in post-conflict settings that work on behalf of, rather than with, local youth (Newman, 2005: 5).

Despite these advances towards participatory research, proponents of this approach contend that a considerable degree of humanitarian programming has remained mired in bio-medical approaches in which youth are portrayed as traumatised and vulnerable (Eyber and Ager, 2004: 315; Newman, 2005: 23). Moreover, while new opportunities and approaches to engaging youth in humanitarian emergencies have emerged, it should be noted that adolescent youth's distinct needs and strengths have oftentimes been de-prioritised in favour of programming directed towards children (Lowicki, 2005: 9; Newman, 2005: 12). Indeed, UN agencies, donor

1. The United States and Somalia are the only remaining to have not ratified this convention since its adoption in 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly (Laraque, 2009).

governments, and nongovernmental actors often categorise adolescents as part of the broader adult population and rarely collect data on youth as a specific, analytical category within emergencies (WCRWC, 2000: 3). Furthermore, when efforts have been made to collect such data, the process has oftentimes been complicated by the lack of agreement regarding the definition of youth across cultures and agencies[2].

Initial Motivations and Manifestations of Youth Engagement in Humanitarian Response

Much of the growing support for youth-targeted programming in post-conflict settings has originated with the growing recognition of the significant risks created when the needs of adolescent youth in humanitarian emergencies are not addressed. Because of their position between childhood and adulthood, youth appear to experience a unique blend of vulnerabilities and risks that merit attention. While adolescents are typically less vulnerable to disease and death in humanitarian emergencies than either the children or the adults they are often clumped in with, their health often works to render this sector of the population more vulnerable to other risks. For example, adolescent youth are typically more physically developed in terms of both strength and reproductive functions than younger children. Consequently, adolescents are typically at risk of greater amounts of sexual violence, forced recruitment into armed forces, and exploitative forms of labour (Machel, 1996: 23; Newman, 2004: 7; WCRWC, 2000: 17).

These risks are exasperated by the fact that young people lack access to protective societal structures that are associated with adulthood, such as gainful employment or marriage (Newman, 2004: 20). For example, with the breakdown of traditional family networks and social infrastructure during complex emergencies, youth are consequently deprived of both the formal and informal learning opportunities that they would typically avail of in order to gain meaningful employment (Lowicki, 2005: 9).

The growth of youth-specific programming appears to also have been motivated by concerns that disengaged youth might perpetuate social disorder during humanitarian crises. Given the dramatic growth of young populations and the decline in legal opportunities available for social mobility, young people in humanitarian

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2. For example, adolescents are defined as people in the "second decade of life" by the United Nations Children Fund and the World Health Organization (UNICEF, 2011: 78). The UNHCR, in contrast, categorises youth as those between the ages of 0-4 and 5-17, with older youth being considered members of the adult population (Lowicki, 2005: 9).

emergencies may face increased pressures to enter armed conflict, join gangs, or engage in other illegal activities (Goldstone, 2002: 10; Hendrixson, 2003: 45-48; Urdal, 2004: 11; World Bank, 2005: 1). In doing so, this research posits youth not only as victims, but as potential perpetrators of violence and instability. Increasingly, however, researchers have recognised that youth's ability to perpetuate regional insecurity and violence can also be channelled into efforts to promote peace and stability. While youth may be rendered more vulnerable by the inaccessibility of employment and marriage opportunities, many of these youth will also experience greater power or responsibility following the breakdown of these traditional societal structures. Indeed, in many cases, the mere ability of youth to remain alive can be attributed to their agency, their strategic decisions and their stamina, rather than to mere luck or good health (Newman, 2005: 6).

Given that traditional power structures tend to be altered in humanitarian emergencies, then, it would seem increasingly important that research methods be adapted in response to youth's evolving social roles. For example, Hart's analyses of participatory programming in Sri Lanka and Palestine found that the traditional roles of youth in society had been dramatically altered as a result of recent conflict. While it would traditionally seem inappropriate for research to engage youth rather than older members of these societies, participatory, youth-driven research was rendered acceptable as a result of youth's transformed social roles during and following conflict (Hart, 2002a: 22; Hart, 2002b: 14-16).

Perhaps the most dramatic and complex examples of youth agency within contemporary humanitarian crises has been the case of youth combatants. While many have been demobilised, most young soldiers have undergone severe psychological trauma as a result of their experience, yet it is also common for these youth to emerge with a range of leadership skills, courage, and confidence stemming directly from these experiences (Sommers, 2007: 111). The challenge for researchers and humanitarian organisations, then, lies in ensuring that these youth are able to transfer these leadership skills into positive endeavours and initiatives.

Engaging youth through humanitarian research has also been shown to provide unique insights that may enhance the accuracy of a research project's findings. Mann and Tolfree (2010: 9), for example, found that youth confided more openly and fully with individuals in their own age range, leading to more accurate disclosures of

youth experiences, insights, and desires. Furthermore, the agenda of adult-driven consultations with youth can oftentimes be framed by inaccurate assumptions of youth priorities and interests. For example, while most humanitarian organisations presume that health interventions and psychological counselling are priorities for young people, youth-driven consultations in several refugee camps have suggested that education and vocational training are oftentimes considered of equal, if not greater, value than health services by youth in these contexts (Lowicki, 2005: 26).

WCRWC YOUTH SPEAK OUT: A FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH YOUTH

This next section will provide an overview of several insights and strategies that have emerged through youth-focused research with the WCRWC. To do so, this overview draws from secondary data analysis of WCRWC reports and several independent publications by the chief researcher of these three studies, Jane Lowicki. The reports and articles published regarding this research present significant findings that have the potential to be applied in a range of other humanitarian programs. This section will specifically address how the WCRWC's studies facilitated multi-dimensional, long-term opportunities for youth engagement and leadership.

Designing research with youth: the case of the WCRWC's youth studies

The WCRWC's research in Yugoslavia, northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone differed according to the security concerns, youth cultures, and NGOs represented in these different contexts. Nonetheless, several key trends can be noted regarding the selection of researchers and the design of the research. By working closely with pre-existing youth institutions, the WCRWC appears to have been successful in building youth capacity to contribute to relevant research as well as to their communities' well-being more broadly.

In all three WCRWC research projects, youth researchers were recruited through participatory methods that reflected a diversity of experiences and engaged pre-existing youth organizations. Promoting diversity within the youth research teams was reportedly perceived as critical to the WCRWC in order to enhance the representativeness and accuracy of their research findings (Lowicki, 2005: 59). Through interviews with the WCRWC, community self-selection, and consultations with local and international NGOs, these research initiatives proved successful in ensuring that a range of fixed traits and lived experiences were represented in the research teams (see, for example, Figure 1).

The WCRWC studies, then, provide a powerful precedent of how future research can represent the complexity and variability of youth's experiences during and following armed conflict. Yet while this array of youth experiences is likely to have increased the representativeness and accuracy of the WCRWC findings, it should also be noted that youth interpret these roles in distinct ways. Research with child combatants, for example, has illustrated that individual youth experience the reality of armed combat quite differently; while many youth will voluntarily demobilise when offered the opportunity, others are reticent to leave an armed group, given that these groups may have provided a means of securing self-esteem, protection, wealth, power, and camaraderie (Newman, 2005: 28; Utas, 2004: 379; West, 2004: 188-193). Ensuring that a range of youth experiences are incorporated into a research team is thus essential yet insufficient, in ensuring that research is representative of the diversity and complexity of youth experiences.

FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF WCRWC YOUTH RESEARCHERS IN SIERRA LEONE, NORTHERN UGANDA

Research Region[3]	Sierra Leone	Northern Uganda
Age of youth researchers	14-22	10-20
Lived experiences of youth researchers	• child mothers • youth formerly with the RUF • youth formerly with the CDF internally displaced youth • former refugees • former commercial sex workers adolescents living in or out of camps adolescents living in town or in villages • youth orphaned by war • students • out-of-school youth • working youth • adolescents with disabilities • a young tribal chief • youth activists	• returned abductees • internally displaced Ugandans • Sudanese refugees • adolescents living in and out of • camps • youth orphaned by war and by HIV/AIDS • students • out-of-school youth • working youth • adolescents with disabilities • youth activists • adolescent heads of household.

Sources: WCRWC, 2001a: 57; WCRWC, 2002: 84

3. The WCRWC research project in Yugoslavia involved three separate research teams and a strong emphasis on ethnic representation, owing to the racial dimensions of conflict in this region. While these youth researchers likely represented a range of lived experiences, no formal description of the research team's personal backgrounds were provided (WCRWC, 2001b: 5-12). Hence the Yugoslavian case stud y was omitted from Figure 1.

An additional strength of the WCRWC research studies relates to the high degree of consultation and coordination with local and international NGOs in designing the research. Research teams in Sierra Leone were formed through consultation and collaboration with seven local NGOs, while Uganda's teams were supported by the International Rescue Committee as well as World Vision. Finally, Yugoslavia's three research teams were developed through the support of youth-driven NGOs, international NGOs, and UN agencies (WCRWC, 2001b: 1; WCRWC, 2002: 1; WCRWC, 2001a: 52). In collaborating with this range of pre-existing organisations, the Women's Commission was able to reinforce youth institutions that were already in existence. Such an approach was not only effective in assembling representative research teams within a short timeline, but also likely enhanced the sustainability of youth empowerment following the research, as will be addressed in the discussion of the benefits and limitations of these studies.

In addition to the participatory and representative nature of the selection process, the WCRWC studies are also noteworthy for the extent to which youth were engaged in the design of the research studies. The first project in this research series took place in Yugoslavia and engaged youth in testing and adapting questions designed for focus groups, written questionnaires, and individual interviews. These youth research teams then organized 35 sessions with over 260 youth (WCRWC, 2001b: 28). The original research design and the majority of the research data analysis, however, appear to have been completed by professional researchers rather than the youth themselves. The methods used by the WCRWC in Uganda and Sierra Leone reflected an even higher degree of youth participation, as the youth themselves determined which research methods to employ, and, in the case of Uganda, independently designed the research instruments – consisting of interview schedules, surveys and focus group questions (WCRWC, 2001a: 57; WCRWC, 2002: 81).

Impacts and benefits of wcrwc research

The WCRWC studies produced a unique range of positive outcomes in which youth were provided with additional opportunities to participate in decision-making procedures and to advocate for their specific needs in post-conflict settings. The empowerment of youth researchers through the WCRWC studies is perhaps most evidently, if abstractly, manifested through the adoption of the researchers' recommendations by a variety of stakeholders. For example, the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1460 (on Children and Armed Conflict) incorporated

some of the recommendations put forward by Sierra Leonean youth, while the success of the Kosovar research initiative generated an additional $1 million for future youth civic engagement projects in the region. The Ugandan research team, in turn, has seen the enactment of their recommendations regarding education through the Danish-funded Acholi Education Initiative and a $3 million commitment from the US Department of Labor to launch an education program regarding harmful child and youth labour practices (Lowicki, 2005: 31).

In addition to the systemic changes that were enacted following this research, the youth researchers themselves reported significant personal benefits resulting from their participation in WCRWC research. In particular, most youth researchers appeared to have connected their research experience with a heightened sense of identity and self-esteem, better communication and social skills, and an enhanced understanding of how best to influence and engage adults (Lowicki, 2005: 29). Furthermore, many of the young researchers went on to apply these newfound skills in their own communities by training other young people, forming youth groups, conducting advocacy work, and initiating a range of community projects (Lowicki, 2010: 35).

While these initiatives had not been an intentional result of the WRCWC research, such opportunities appear to have been facilitated by the legitimisation of youth participation and access to community adults, donors, and policy-makers following their experience as researchers with the WCRWC.

The WCRWC research studies thus appear to have had significant and lasting impacts for the individual youth researchers, the communities in which the research took place, and in the broader international community of donors, UN agencies, and other international NGOs. Whether the WCRWC's results can be replicated by other projects depends on the research community's ability and willingness to implement similarly representative, community-based models of youth research, as will be discussed in the following section.

APPLYING THE WCRWC METHODOLOGY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, IMPERATIVES

The three WCRWC studies discussed above illustrate that participatory research in post-conflict settings can build youth leadership skills, provide meaningful

alternatives to social delinquency, and can positively benefit the broader community as a result. Moreover, these studies have allowed youth to directly influence the field of humanitarian relief, as stakeholders such as the UN Security Council, donors, and regional governments have integrated some of the recommendations made by these youth research teams. Ensuring that youth engagement extends beyond the scope of a single research project to include new opportunities within government and civil society thus assured the longer-term viability of youth empowerment following these humanitarian interventions. This section seeks to evaluate the extent to which the WCRWC's success in achieving these multi-layered forms of engagement can be replicated in other humanitarian research programs.

Opportunities for youth engagement and societal participation following a humanitarian crisis are often restricted by troubled labour markets, unresponsive political systems, and restrictive cultural norms regarding the role of youth in society. Participatory action research with youth, then, can run the risk of providing short-term opportunities for youth who must then re-enter a society in which their voices are neglected (Cooper, 2005: 475; Hinton, 2008: 287; Wessells and Monteiro, 2000: 180). In order for this cycle of short-term solutions to be broken, research must seek to engage with the cultural values, political institutions, and underlying structures that limit youth access to participation in the economic, civil, and political dimensions of their society.

The WCRWC studies appear to have been fairly successful in promoting the long-term viability of youth engagement in numerous institutions and regional contexts. In contrast, a majority of humanitarian research programs do not appear to address the inadequate economic and political prospects facing youth in humanitarian crises. This attitude, for example, is reflected in the majority of reports and reviews of youth participatory frameworks, whose focus rests with micro-level recommendations related to altering staff attitudes, providing multi-dimensional, holistic programming, and ensuring that cultural beliefs are well-integrated into humanitarian programming (for example, Hart, 2002a: 33; Hart, 2002b: 36; Newman, 2005: 1; Mann and Tolfree, 2003: 23).

While the WCRWC illustrated the potential for research to connect youth with important stakeholders in the international community and in local contexts, it is likely that their success in doing so was at least partially linked to the commission's

reputation and extensive networks within the international community. Other humanitarian research projects may not have access to the same funding or international recognition that was available to the WCRWC; however, researchers can enact similar efforts to promote consultative, community-based research. If humanitarian agencies seek to truly empower youth through their programming, it is essential that these community allies and institutions are sought out and engaged from the beginning of a research project's design. If not, these agencies risk repeating the frustrating and all-too-common cycle found within refugee camps in which short-term solutions are presented to systemic challenges.

Williams' research with five South Asian programs for youth refugees further illustrates how collaboration can occur with pre-existing institutions that serve youth even when researchers may lack the support of key youth-serving institutions. While this researcher reported that national governmental institutions were oftentimes unresponsive to the needs of youth, Williams (2004: 1-4) found that regional youth organizations in these regions were effective in providing services and training opportunities for youth.

Ensuring that youth engagement extends beyond humanitarian response to include greater access to opportunities within the labour market, government, and civil society is thus a critical factor in assuring the long-term viability of youth's empowerment during humanitarian interventions. While researchers may lack the resources, affiliations, and profile that helped to facilitate the WCRWC research, it is essential that these researchers identify opportunities for youth participation to be extended beyond the timelines of a single research program. Otherwise, such research is limited in its participatory potential and could be accused of presenting a hollow approach to youth empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The past decade has been marked by a rising interest in participatory youth programming and a corresponding increase in both the breadth and scope of humanitarian programs purporting to engage young people. Studies such as those conducted through the WCRWC have provided youth with channels for engaging with relevant research, policy, and/or funding institutions while also enhancing these youth's abilities to contribute to their local societies following the research projects. This organisation's effectiveness in promoting youth engagement is linked

to several key research design practices which humanitarian research projects would be well advised to adopt. First, the scope and recruitment strategies developed by researchers should be determined in collaboration with a range of local stakeholders and other youth-serving agencies in the region of study. Engaging with a range of stakeholders is likely to provide valuable insight regarding local strengths, challenges, and distinctions. Perhaps more importantly, however, this process can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of participatory research by building upon pre-existing capacities in local communities. In seeking to create sustainable avenues for youth engagement, researchers should also strive to ensure that a wide variety of youth are engaged as researchers. In promoting a diverse research team, researchers should seek to engage youth with differing fixed characteristics (such as race, religion, or gender) as well as differing lived experiences.

Secondly, participatory research with youth in humanitarian emergencies must strive to ensure that youth gain access to further opportunities for participation and leadership following the end of the research project. This objective may be partially addressed in engaging multiple stakeholders early in the research design, as discussed in the previous recommendation. Furthermore, research can focus on developing the leadership skills and local recognition of youth, as such endeavours can prove fruitful in helping youth initiate or participate in future community-based initiatives. Finally, research projects can themselves address some of the systemic barriers to youth participation by directing research towards advocacy initiatives at a local, national, or international level.

Research in post-conflict settings, then, must seek to represent the diversity of youth experiences following a humanitarian crisis through careful selection and must help forge broader opportunities for youth within a region's economic, civil, and political structure. These goals, in turn, must be supplemented by a richer and more critical body of research in which the limitations of youth engagement as well as its benefits are explored and contrasted through comparative work. While these recommendations do imply a significant amount of reforms in the design, intention, and practice of humanitarian research, the rapid evolution of youth engagement in the past decade provides an excellent precedent of refinement and evolution on which to build further reforms.

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