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**Beyond Child Participation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: The Case for 'Protective Solidarity'**

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically explores the roles children play in humanitarian crisis, drawing on child-led research conducted in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT). It argues that as adults, we cannot afford to engage with children using a ‘universal notion of childhood’, but must recognise that, particularly during crises, children may already be decision-makers with large responsibilities. The article describes the violent context in which children grow up in OPT, and how this affects inter-generational dynamics in a milieu of a fragile social fabric. It highlights some of the political, economic and social roles that children play within this particular crisis, the challenges inherent in children’s ability to be heard and the impact this can have on their self-protection. The findings suggest that NGO responses need to move from a premise which sees children participating in NGO projects, to one where NGOs act in ‘protective solidarity’ with children, affording children - together with their communities - the space to explore their issues and to make their own choices regarding taking action to manage the crisis. Such a shift in the discourse allows ‘child participation’ thinking to depart from its current crossroads, by discrediting the attitude that children are ‘activated’ to participate by NGO interventions, and re-politicising the concept by placing children, together with their support networks, as the protagonists in defining and acting upon their own priorities through relevant resilience mechanisms within a given community context.

### KEYWORDS

Child Participation, Decision-makers, Childhood, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Child Rights, Child Protection, Action Research, Protective Solidarity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Children's voices are systematically excluded from the world in which we live. Adults shape their and children's realities, with a mindset constructed solely from an adult's perspective (Punch, 2002). The gulf between adults' understanding of children and children's own reality is often vast, affecting the social fabric of communities across the globe (Newman, 2005). Brocklehurst argues that 'children have been typically defined from the standpoint of adults and therefore perceived as their opposite, a conception that both privileges adults' qualities and separates children from them' (Brocklehurst, 2005:122). However, in contexts of humanitarian crisis, many children take on responsibilities and roles normally considered the domain of adults – becoming primary breadwinners, heads of households, carers of young or sick family members, and even combatants. In such situations, children's ability to make decisions and to voice concerns may be crucial for their survival and protection against further risks, where the usual protective environment within their community has broken down.

There is a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of understanding children's realities from their own perspectives (Alderson, 1999; O'Kane, 1999), and in humanitarian responses there is a growing appreciation of the value of children's participation within and beyond their own decision-making structures (Newman, 2005). Much of the literature highlights the importance of including child participation in NGO programming for children's empowerment.

### 1.1 CHILD PARTICIPATION IS A RIGHT

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) established the legal imperative for the involvement of children in decision-making. It defines children as all persons under the age of 18 ([www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)). Twenty years since its adoption in 1989, the CRC has been universally ratified with the exception of the United States and Somalia (Laraque, 2009). The CRC recognises children as 'subjects of rights rather than merely recipients of adult protection' (Lansdown, 2001: 1). Article 12 is the central pillar in a raft of 'participation rights' within the convention, on which child-focused NGOs such as Save the Children and Plan International base their programmes (figure 1).

#### **Figure 1: Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

1. State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose 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.

**Source:** [www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)

Article 12 places the obligation on adults to promote and support children's contributions to issues affecting them (Lansdown, 2001). Whilst the article encourages children to become the agents of their own change, Hart (2002) argues that any profound, radical changes put forward by children are unlikely to find support from most international agencies. Arguably,

this highlights the contradiction between many NGO's visions of empowerment and transformation, while their field-level strategies are remarkably un-radical (Cooke, 2004).

Save the Children Alliance has created a Child Rights Programming Handbook (Save the Children Sweden, 2005), a child-focused version of the Rights-Based Approach, which attempts to turn the rights enshrined in the CRC into practical field-level strategies and is now the guiding framework for Save the Children's work. Child Rights Programming 'indicates key standards that SC needs to meet in order to fulfil its obligations as a rights-based agency, e.g. involving children and their communities in its work.... it reflects... a framework firmly founded in shared human values and international law' (ibid, p55). However, it is still unclear whether Child Rights Programming has the capacity to build process-driven lasting change to children's lives, or whether it will simply serve to strengthen the concept of child participation as an NGO management tool. Furthermore, questions still remain regarding a universal understanding of what the right to child participation actually means, which links into wider debates regarding community participation and the recent discourse that has challenged its worth in humanitarian action today (Hickey & Mohan, 2004).

## 1.2 PARTICIPATION UNDER QUESTION

Paolo Freire (1972) and Chambers (1997) are the most well-known advocates of grassroots community participation. In order to 'put the last first', Chambers argues that external actors must shed their top-down approaches and become facilitators in an exchange of learning, ideas, and cooperative support for local initiatives (ibid). However there is still little consensus among NGOs as to how one should 'do' participation (Hart et al, 2004). Roger Hart's definition – used by UN agencies in the past and characterised by a 'ladder' of increasing levels of participation – defines it as 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives' (Hart, 1992: 5). According to Save the Children 'the principle of participation makes it necessary to let go of our adult perspective and take on the challenge to open a dialogue with children in their languages, and from their perspective' (Save the Children Sweden, 2005: 32).

Some development workers take the concept further, describing it as 'a mindset, an ideology, a value, a life philosophy that applies to everything you do' (cited in Hart et al, 2004:59). Left to the interpretation of individuals, the concept of child participation runs the risk of losing any meaning whatsoever (Chambers, 2004). Hart argues that defining a 'common language' and understanding one's own 'definition' is essential when working for the meaningful participation of children (Save the Children Sweden, 2005; Hart J, 2007).

Arguments against the use of participatory approaches link to deeper questions about development. Hickey and Mohan (2004) have argued that the NGO sector often treats what should be a process of long-term transformation as a series of time-bound activities, de-politicising a means of social and political change into a technical tool. Cooke and Kothari's book *Participation: the New Tyranny?* has brought development thinking to a crossroads with a scathing attack on participation as 'a hegemonic device to secure compliance to, and control by, existing power structures' (Cooke & Kothari 2001:136-7). Not surprisingly, the authors – who advocate for 'shutting down' the practice of participatory development – do not include participant's own voices. However, they expose the role that international agencies play in constricting, manipulating, co-opting, or disempowering local people's abilities to affect their own change.

The participation defenders view this critique as a new point of departure for participation's rebirth. Hickey and Mohan (2004) advocate for 're-politicising' participatory practice through greater emphasis on citizenship and a Rights-Based Approach. They argue that this will force agencies to switch from using moral obligation as their basis for involving local communities, to one of political rights: 'the significance of a rights-based approach for NGOs lies in its capacity to locate NGO challenges to exclusion and poverty within a political response, which therefore holds the promise of empowerment' (Hickey & Mohan, 2004:164).

This argument recognises that NGOs do not operate within a political and social vacuum and need to engage with international legal frameworks to build their own legitimacy as well as the civil and political rights of affected populations in order to hold political structures to account. However, some operational organisations such as Médecins sans Frontières would argue that using a human rights framework for participatory practice and humanitarian action in general can create a conflict of interest and can lead to being confused with human rights organisations and legal bodies, which can in fact hamper access to affected populations (Dachy, 2004).

When placed within the wider debates about community participation, child participation discourses add an extra layer of complexity to an already-contentious debate. Hart (2007) argues that child participation initiatives organised by NGOs frequently succeed in involving children in specific projects (child participation as an end in itself) but the impact of the child's involvement very rarely extends beyond the 'virtual box' of that project and into the lives and community processes of the child. Thus, agency initiatives seldom manage to involve children as a means to achieving far-reaching changes in children's lives (Hart & Tyrer, 2006).

NGOs frequently argue that taking this more radical approach is unrealistic due to the lack of 'child-specialised' staff (Ackermann et al, 2003; citing Padmavathi) or because NGO staff are felt to be better placed than children to know what is in their best interests (Newman, 2005). In addition, local communities have their own parameters that limit children as decision-makers. This social code is frequently created from deep-set cultural, socio-economic, and political roots. If organisations promote child participation as a means to social and political change in children's lives, but are unwilling or unable to define what it means - and limit children's ability to make choices within project-defined rules indicative of a management tool rather than meaningful engagement - it begs the question whether participation can ever be more than a humanitarian buzzword, reinforcing the boundaries of where child participation ends.

### 1.3 A NEW DEPARTURE

This article argues that there is a need to go even further by recognising that in contexts of humanitarian crisis, children *are already* decision-makers, and by supporting child decision-making in a way that re-builds their protective environment within the community, whilst minimising the risks to the child. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), forty years of Israeli military occupation has had a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary Palestinians, of which children make up the majority of the population ([www.dci-pal.org](http://www.dci-pal.org)). Children are frequently deprived of the most basic rights such as education, healthcare, protection from violence, and the right to life itself (ibid). In this context, children's ability to negotiate these rights in order to survive and develop is influenced by their ability to be heard, to be taken seriously, and to make decisions for themselves.

Using data collected with and by children, this article tries to bridge the gap between the adult-centred ‘universal notion of childhood’ (Hart & Tyrer, 2006:7), and children’s actual experience in the OPT. Drawing on research done with three communities in the West Bank, the article highlights the violent context in which children grow up prematurely, and how this affects the power relations between adults and children in a milieu of strong cultural traditions and a broken social fabric. The case study highlights some of the political, economic and social roles that children play within this particular crisis, the challenges inherent in children’s ability to be heard and the impact this can have on their self-protection. The article concludes that until children are acknowledged as *actors*, as well as victims and survivors in humanitarian crises, humanitarian organisations will continue to obscure this reality and create interventions that fail to address the realities of both the conflict itself and child’s lives.

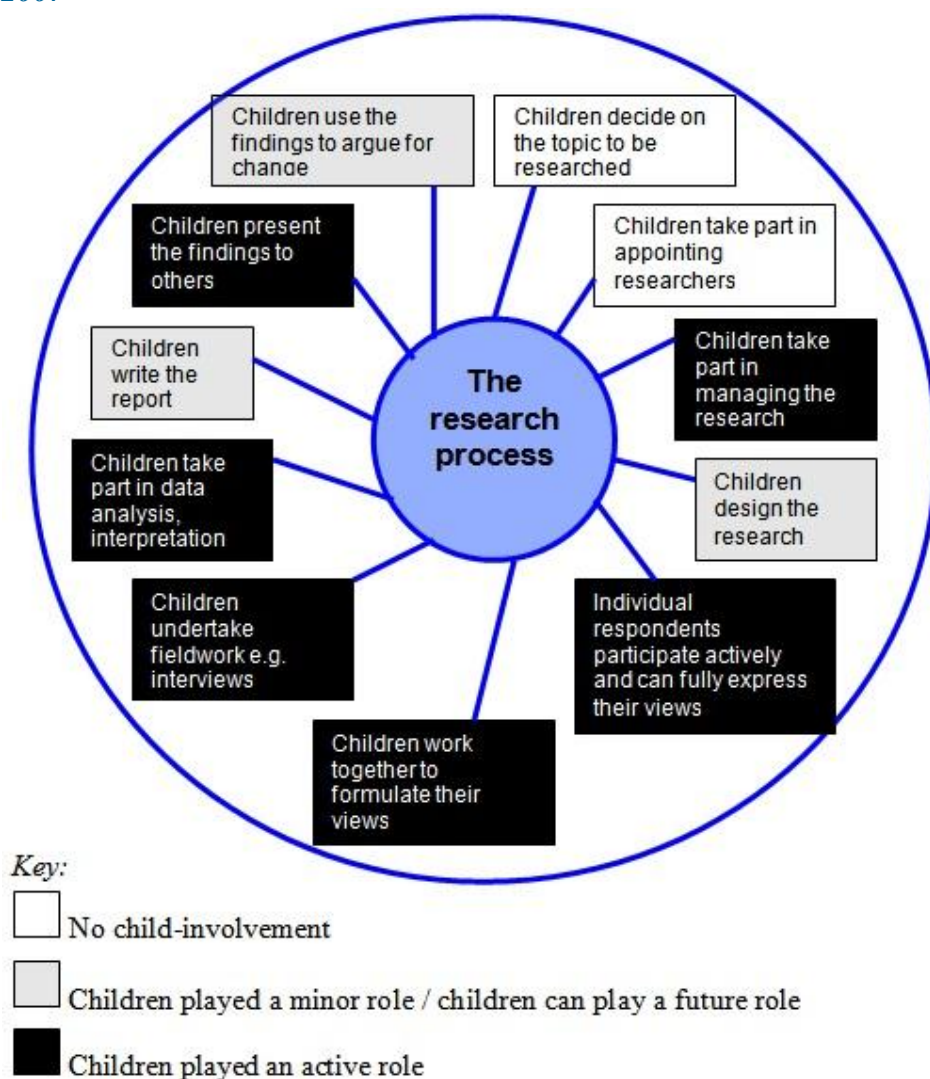
#### 1.4 METHODOLOGY

This study followed an action research methodology in which children take an active role in the research process, shedding new light on children’s own perspectives about their role in decision-making processes (Alderson, 1999; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Primary research was conducted focussing on Bethlehem, Beit Surik and Tulkarem in the West Bank – three diverse locations where Save the Children worked, as well as in Ramallah and Jerusalem where NGO offices were based. The study was conducted through local NGOs who were working in partnership with Save the Children on a project promoting the participation of Palestinian children to advocate for their own rights. Data was collected in OPT from children, NGO practitioners and policy makers, and Palestinian community members (CBOs and other interest groups, parents, and key individuals such as teachers and local government). A total of 53 children and 86 adults were involved in the study, including four NGOs and five community-based organisations. The study engaged five 13-17 year-olds as co-researchers. Their role included discussing the research design, designing workshops for other groups of children, facilitating workshops, analysing findings, and taking part in presenting the findings (see figure 2 below).

This research team used a range of methods for child workshops such as role play, group discussion, drawings, diaries, photo-taking and creative exercises to ‘allow age as a construct of children’s ability to be minimised’ (O’Kane, 1999:140). The facilitation of child workshops by children also minimised adult-child power relations inherent in adult-led data collection with children (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Data collection with adults was undertaken by the researcher using a mixture of semi-structured interviews, observation, focus group discussions (FGDs) and action workshops. Analysis, using the Child Rights Framework, was conducted with the child researchers and selected NGO staff. This was thematically examined and compiled by the adult researcher and translator, paying strong attention to preserving the integrity of children’s perspectives as they were presented. Findings have been referenced using a code system to ensure anonymity of participants.



*Figure 2: Wheel Illustrating Children's Participation in Field-based Research in OPT, 2007*



*Source: Adapted from Feinstein et al, 2004 p16*

## 2. RESULTS: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN OPT

*'When you call me a child, it reminds me of something I'm not.'* (Child workshop, w7, 2007).

### 2.1 NOWHERE IS SAFE, NOWHERE TO GO

Lack of protection in daily life is a common reality for children in crisis settings and OPT is no exception. Nowhere feels safe to children growing up in the West Bank (multiple child workshops, w3-6, 2007). As a fundamental human right enshrined in the CRC, the lack of safety and protection in a child's life impacts on other aspects of their well-being, development and ultimately survival (Save the Children Alliance, 2007). It follows that children will seek protection or attempt to protect themselves in whatever way they can. To understand their coping strategies, it is useful to understand the issues children face. During workshops, child participants described worries about demolition orders on their families' homes, that moving around required crossing the military checkpoints and that even getting to school was not a certainty. According to teachers, schools could be closed for weeks due to curfews or blocked access, and special home-based workbooks had been printed for these

eventualities. They described schools patrolled by the Israeli Defence Force, showed bullet-holes in school building walls, and one school master described arrests of children while they were in their classrooms (Interview, w4, 2007).

Children described their situation as a hemmed-in reality with nowhere to go. Many had never visited places such as Jerusalem, less than an hours' drive away, due to the localisation of their lives by the construction of the security barrier and an exclusive transport system that restricts people with a Palestinian ID to travel only in Palestinian-number-plated vehicles, and only on specific roads (multiple child workshops, w3-6, 2007). One NGO staff member explained that he – along with many other parents – was unwilling to travel with his children for fear of the humiliation faced at checkpoints which undermined his parental authority. This localised childhood has prevented children from meeting other children across the West Bank and beyond (NGO staff interview, w7, 2007). Such issues provide a backdrop for the conviction many children have to find answers to the problems they face.

## 2.2 THE COST OF LIVING BEHIND WALLS - CHILDREN'S ECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITIES

The Israeli Authorities' construction of the security barrier has had far-reaching consequences for children and adults living in the West Bank. Declared illegal by the International Court of Justice ([www.icj-cij.org](http://www.icj-cij.org)), but deemed a necessary security measure by Israel, the barrier is under various stages of completion across the West Bank, and in many areas is a concrete wall, 9-metres high. Some communities are entirely surrounded – as illustrated by certain children's drawings during workshops (figure 3 below).

**Figure 3: Drawing by two girls illustrating their experience of safety and risk in their village**



Source: Child workshop, w4, 2007



In Beit Surik, movement in or out of the village is through one checkpoint, effectively controlling all access to healthcare services, education, and any leisure activities. ‘In Beit Surik, 50,000 Palestinian’s lives depend on the decisions of 3 Israeli soldiers’ (NGO staff interview, w2, 2007).

The barrier’s construction has led to extreme levels of unemployment – according to UNDP 25.9% of West Bank was unemployed at the end of 2007 compared to 8.4% in Israel ([www.undp.ps](http://www.undp.ps)). Palestinians are effectively isolated from reaching their jobs and land, much of which has been confiscated by the Israeli Authorities or is inaccessible due to the security barrier (CFI and Ma’an project proposals, 2007). According to ICRC, ‘movement restrictions hinder access to work and have led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty’ (ICRC, 2007:8). Fast (2006) goes as far as to compare OPT’s economic collapse to the 1929 Wall Street crash. The frustrations due to such extreme unemployment have affected family relationships, deepening the cycle of violence, including domestic violence (ibid).

Children taking part in the study described adopting economic responsibilities in the family, even if it was often not recognised monetarily. Although this may appear to contradict ILO’s report that ‘over half of those in the 15-29 age group are neither in education nor in employment’ ([www.ilocarib.org](http://www.ilocarib.org)), in fact it is likely to demonstrate the informal and unrecognised nature of their involvement in generating family livelihood. Agricultural work involves a large percentage of unpaid family members ([www.undp.ps](http://www.undp.ps)), as does child-minding and caring for family members - a role acknowledged by many girls. Children selling chewing gum or kites at queues to the heavily armed checkpoints are also a common sight, and according to NGO staff, some children skip school to subsidise or provide income (NGO staff interview, w2, 2007).

### 2.3 FROM STICKS AND STONES TO PRISON - CHILDREN’S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Children take an active political role in OPT, which is likely to be linked to the way in which their lives are affected by the political crisis. The ‘political struggle’ has become an entrenched part of Palestinian society over the last 40 years and involvement in politics is perceived by children less an active choice than simply part of life. When asked whether he thought politics was boring, one boy replied ‘boring? Politics is our life’ (child workshop, w6 2007). However, in reality this political involvement can take various forms – from describing and ‘playing’ political realities, to non-violent engagement through political parties and youth groups, and ultimately to violent political activism.

The creative political voices of children in all three communities were visible in their drawings, theatre, photography, and political graffiti which covered many houses and walls – including the security barrier. Shrines and posters to ‘martyred’ children who had been killed are a common sight, and discussing politics is somewhat of a ritual activity for all generations. Smaller children play-fight occupier and occupied in the streets with sticks and plastic guns. This is often encouraged by adults in the community, perceived as educational and part of their identity. Photos of summer camp plays organised by a local community-based organisation showed children between ages 5 and 10 acting out scenes of political violence between Israelis and Palestinians, including humiliation, interrogation, and armed resistance. Described as ‘child participation’ it was promoted as child expression and education about the crisis (community member FGD, w5, 2007).

Other children – particularly teenagers – described being part of political parties and youth groups aligned to various political parties, where activities included regular demonstrations against the construction of the security barrier and planting olive trees on confiscated land where they had been uprooted or bulldozed as an act of defiance (various child workshops, w5-6, 2007). Children’s experience as ‘part of the solution’ in such activities was linked to various peer pressures and building of identities. It was also linked to an emotional need among many children to contribute to new hope for the future, which they felt such activism builds (ibid).

The familiar TV coverage of the West Bank shows images of Palestinian boys and teenagers hurling stones at Israeli tanks rumbling through Palestinian streets. The majority of teenagers involved in the study admitted having thrown stones and described it as an important way of voicing their anger in the face of occupation (ibid). While children may experience stone throwing as cathartic, it is clearly an impotent act in relation to the IDF or the broader political crisis. However the act itself, and implicitly the choice to do so, has become a symbol of resistance in itself. This ‘David and Goliath’ metaphor that children have created depicts ‘Palestine’ as the unarmed, angry child resisting against all odds, fighting a primitive war against one of the most powerful armed forces on the planet (see mural painting figure 4 below). Children acting alone is a theme that will return later in the article.

**Figure 4: Mural Depicting Child Throwing Stones at an Israeli Tank**



### Picture taken by Bridget Steffen, Bethlehem 2007

It remains to be understood how well-informed children are when they choose to throw stones, considering the devastating consequences it can have. According to Defence for Children International, the Israeli Authorities arrested some 700 children in the West Bank during 2006, the vast majority for throwing stones (Defence for Children International, 2006). With the most common sentence length being 1-3 years, imprisoned children spend some of their most formative years deprived of basic rights to human dignity and protection, with no access to their families or friends (ibid). Besides the emotional stress of incarceration, it affects children's relationships with their family, friends, school environment and community. Al Khadar has one of the highest percentages of child arrests in the West Bank (NGO staff interview, w4, 2007).

Boys in Al Khadar illustrated through discussion and theatre sketches that while there is pride for a released child's courage, many experienced isolation from friends and support networks out of fear of being implicated by association with the released child (theatre sketch, child workshop, w7, 2007). Imprisonment frequently jeopardises the child's education and families feel unable to reach out to their child, who may have experienced high levels of psychosocial distress (community member FGD, w5, 2007). They described how many children emerge from jail having shed their childhood in order to be able to deal with the experience. Here, premature adulthood acts as a defence mechanism but leads children to experience isolation from their communities who feel unable to handle this behaviour in a way that supports the child's needs (ibid). Children within the discussion groups appeared aware of the risks and consequences of stone-throwing and yet many continued to describe it as an important part of who they were.

Women, particularly mothers, were often against children's political activism because of the risks to the child, but felt powerless to affect their decisions:

My brother was imprisoned when he was 14 for being involved in a political demonstration which our parents didn't know about. It's out of our control [as parents], children don't ask our permission (Community member interview, w5, 2007).

However, women also acknowledged the integral part that political activism plays in the West bank, that in fact 'the family sometimes forces children to be part of political movements' (ibid). Indeed, the traditions surrounding the release of a political prisoner such as car processions, flags, gun-shots and jubilation, and the respect earned, all play into reinforcing a tradition which views the child as political from the cradle (personal observation, w5, 2007).

The political activism of children is not a new issue in OPT, but the involvement of children entails many risks and begs numerous questions about the responsibility of adults – whether community, NGO or government – to protect children from those risks. However, their desire to take an active role and their decisions to take a stand also need to be recognised. Arguably, child activism can provide the potential for new approaches and perspectives, particularly where their actions are supported by adults in ways that translate their frustrations into constructive expression that also minimises the risks to themselves. Such support may also help to dis-entrench some of the more 'typical' perspectives held by some Palestinian adults about the political stalemate and humanitarian crisis. The question for many humanitarian

actors will be how to support children in creative ways that constructively nurtures children's own approaches for moving beyond the crisis.

#### 2.4 THE AGE ABYSS - CHILDREN'S SOCIAL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Children need a protective environment within which to grow and develop in any context (Save the Children Alliance, 2007). Children perceived this protective environment to be tattered and worn in OPT in part due to being misunderstood. While opinions towards children varied considerably between women and men, CBO workers, intellectuals and government officials, this multiplicity of perspectives was not reflected in how children felt they were perceived and treated in reality. Communities are based on the patriarchal family unit. Children grow up at the bottom of a clear decision-making hierarchy with the father at its head. According to local NGOs, many men felt disempowered or helpless in their traditional role because they were unable to provide for and protect their family and felt the need to overcompensate with that which remained under their control (NGO staff interview, w2, 2007). From children's own perspectives, many believed that, to adults, 'a child means an un-responsible person' (Child workshop, w7, 2007) who needs controlling; causing them to feel misrepresented and misunderstood by their families and communities.

A key figure in Al Khadar described children as defined by their status as recipients 'the role of children is related to the kind of things offered to him by organisations' (community member interview, w3 2007), suggesting that 'children don't participate in activities that require them to think about their issues and the solutions to those issues' (Community member interview, w5, 2007). According to children, in the rare instances where they were invited to 'participate', it was tokenistic, such as serving food at local meetings (Child workshop, w4 2007).

The above would suggest that while children may often be decision-makers within the political and economic reality, they are rarely recognised for their contribution by their communities. Furthermore, they are not included within the conventional community decision-making structures. This may go some way to explain why there appears to be a rift between the generations. Decisions made on children's behalf without any discussion were described by some children as justification for overriding community or family decisions and taking issues into their own hands. (Child workshop, w6 2007). In fact, many children involved in the study did not perceive their communities to be a viable option for seeking support to deal with their issues (ibid). Furthermore, children believed that many communities were often:

more concerned about immediate needs like water, electricity and infrastructure – needs which themselves might not even be met...We decided as Palestinian children to solve our own problems after we realised that no-one in our village hears our concerns. (Co-Researchers Children's Speech, w7, 2007)

Local Palestinian leaders were quick to blame the perceived fragility of community cohesion and generational rifts on the occupation, perhaps at the expense of recognising their own roles in causing and resolving social problems. Such social problems were rarely a priority 'when external factors of human rights abuses due to the occupation seem greater' (NGO staff interview, w2 2007). Humanitarian actors working in OPT may be in a position to help address some of these issues, if there is adequate understanding of the way in which children experience their reality.

### 3. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION



The study found that children in the West Bank experience their roles and responsibilities differently to the way in which adult community members perceive children, and demonstrated how children in this context make decisions and adopt responsibilities typically seen to be the remit of adults. Taking Brocklehurst's (2005) argument that, defined from the standpoint of adults, children are perceived as their opposite, one can begin to understand why actions by children considered the remit of adults may not be adequately recognised by adults. For example, the political child in the OPT rings true with what the author says when she writes: 'contained' or un-political childhood, and its corollary – politics as a sphere which impacts on children but shares little with them – are ubiquitous, and arguably prevent significant political recognition of children's actual daily and low-profile interdependence with the political world...we do not commonly regard the child as a political child, yet children's politicization is enabled precisely because it is being simultaneously underplayed' (Brocklehurst 2005:121-122). The study in OPT highlighted the way children decided to throw stones or join political parties without adult advice or support precisely because there was chronic under-recognition by adult family or community members of what their experiences of childhood involved.

The experiences of Palestinian children within the study builds a picture corroborated by children's responsibilities in other crises such as the economic responsibilities adopted by children following cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh (Save the Children, 2008, unpublished), or the roles of children who joined armed groups in DRC (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). In such circumstances, children may also become perpetrators or cause serious harm to other children or adults. Thus, part of discarding the 'universal notion of childhood' also involves acknowledging that children may choose or be forced to act in destructive ways (Brocklehurst, 2005). Until organisations acknowledge that children are actors as well as victims and survivors in humanitarian crises, interventions may fail to address children's real needs. Conversely, proper recognition of children's positive and harmful roles will inform far more relevant responses to children's key concerns and will warrant greater respect from children themselves.

The study highlighted the link between children's frustration at being misunderstood and the collapsing protective environment which communities could provide to children. It also exposed children's belief that they may not find support in the older generation, driving them to choose risky and potentially harmful means of expressing themselves and widening the gap between the generations. This reaffirms O'Kane's (2003) argument that preparing adults and building their relationships with children is a critical component of supporting and working with children. Taking these issues into account, current NGO approaches to child participation may be insufficient in contexts of crisis. The reality of child decision-making is often at odds with funding norms and a project-driven model of development practice (Hart, 2007; Newman, 2005), and even the attitudes of NGO staff themselves (NGO Staff interview, w4, 2007). The study demonstrates that, as Cooke and Kothari argue, there is: "the need [for] collaborative alternatives" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001:167).

This study argues that going beyond current approaches to child participation requires a perceptual shift in humanitarian action away from participation in NGO projects towards interventions of protective solidarity with children's actions, promoting a more realistic understanding of children's roles in contexts such as OPT and in humanitarian crises globally. Essentially, humanitarian agencies must witness – through children's eyes – how children perceive and experience their reality. It puts organisations in a position to take a bold stand, providing children the necessary support to act upon their own solutions in the face of



humanitarian crisis. If done inclusively, this can also help to improve cross-generational communication and support between children and their communities, as well as have a democratising effect on the inclusion of children in official civic structures (Cussianovich & Marquez, 2002).

In practical terms, protective solidarity poses many challenges within the current humanitarian framework and may be difficult to duplicate interventions or create normative models for involving children in dissimilar contexts, making the task even greater.

Despite these challenges, one cannot ignore the role that children play in standing up against political injustice and coping with humanitarian crisis as demonstrated in the OPT. As Newman argues: 'though the fabric of children's lives may be badly torn, individual and collective resources for survival still exist' (Newman, 2005:32). Indeed, if many children see themselves as the most likely generation to bring about real political change, humanitarian players, acting in solidarity with children's concerns, are in a position to build Palestinian and Israeli recognition of the role of children in the search for alternative solutions to the crisis. Protective solidarity in the context of OPT implies standing beside children as they determine what they need to change in their lives, facilitating a space for them to explore the options available to them, and supporting them as they take action to achieve this. It also means engaging with community members such as parents, religious leaders, teachers and government as an inclusive means to re-building belief across the generations for the need to engage with one another in solving their issues. Such protective solidarity can re-ignite the hope that drives many children to persevere:

We come to you as NGOs to ask that you stand beside us through this bad situation...All we ask is a small thing – a very small thing. We want you to give us the fire from which we can begin: we want you to plant the hope in us, to help us solve our problems and issues and to listen to our opinions (Co-Researchers Children's Speech, w7, 2007).

Ultimately, NGOs are in a position to support the evolution of a youth movement that takes a fresh look at OPT from the chronically under-recognised perspective of children and tackles the root causes based on their experience. Palestinian children's activism is palpable but lacks unity and clear direction. This implies a serious commitment from NGOs to transform their own organisations – as highlighted by Hart (2007) – to reflect the vision of solidarity with children.

However, many questions surrounding the concept of protective solidarity remain unanswered within and beyond the context of the OPT. At what point should humanitarian actors draw the line in supporting child responsibilities and in condoning children's actions for a humanitarian cause? Should humanitarian actors judge the decisions children make and discourage them from certain activities? How does such solidarity relate to the principles of independence and neutrality? Are children in danger of being co-opted and influenced by NGOs or by political interests?

These questions enable fresh examination of the 'child participation' debates within NGO practice and require further study. This article has attempted to stimulate such questions – from adults and children's perspectives alike. Ultimately, humanitarian actors strive to alleviate human suffering and fight for people's right to life with dignity – this can only be achieved when children and adults at the heart of the humanitarian crisis are recognised as the pivotal agents of change in their own lives.

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