

## **Engaging with Youth, Engaging with War**

**Review by Helen Brocklehurst, Swansea University**

Stephanie Schwartz. *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change*. Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009. 184 pp. \$14.00.

*Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* has been written with great precision, focus, and clarity. It is short but powerful, much like the lives and experiences it documents. As such it makes an extremely erudite and important contribution to our understanding of the role that youth can play in countries emerging from conflict.

At the core of this book is a concern over how to better tailor youth programming to improve reconstruction programs. As Schwartz puts it, “reconstruction programs can alter, for good or ill, the same decision-making structures that lead youth to destabilizing behavior.”<sup>1</sup> Counter-intuitively, her research suggests that community-based programs may be more efficient than demographic-based programs. Schwartz also shows how meeting critical needs of youth in a particular order might be crucial to stability. Particularly important is a commitment to youth empowerment. As she illustrates, youth who are supported in ways which allow them a voice and post-conflict roles within their community have been shown to mitigate subsequent societal challenges; they are arguably integral to post-conflict reconstruction and development. In short, allowing youth both practical assistance and social space may foster a stable peace.

### **Situating the analysis**

Child soldiers have been ‘poster children’ of so-called “new wars” for the past decade, and across the globe human rights instruments and advocacy campaigns have left us in little doubt that war is harmful to children. The fact that young people’s roles as soldiers are subject to intense scrutiny is not surprising.

Increasingly, we recognize that young people can be more than victims in war: they are often depended on and dependent on it for survival. However, literature on youth and peace is still dwarfed by literature on youth as threats in war. In consequence children have largely been considered as harnessed only to passive roles in society, whilst youth have often been perceived as a “lost cause,” with both projections sidestepping capability for participation in politics or peace respectively.<sup>2</sup> The “childhood” that undergirds these children is one characterized by protraction and protection, thus guaranteeing that the child soldier’s opportunity to live a life as both “child” and “soldier” remains an impossible fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

As Rosen notes of the recent attention afforded teenage soldiers, this contemporary “child soldier ‘crisis’ arises from a complex set of interconnections between humanitarian and political drivers.”<sup>4</sup> It is not a new phenomenon; neither is it driven by the peculiar nature of

modern warfare.<sup>5</sup> Yet the slow recognition of young people's potential in peace building efforts still poses something of a puzzle. In 2007, the revised United Nations' Machel Study advocated the importance of youth and their agency and literature that explores the specific challenges held by youth and young people during and after is now emerging.<sup>6</sup> Analytical literature on youth and post conflict reconstruction, however, remains thin on the ground and it was this paucity of analysis that drew Schwartz to the analytical framework here.

As McEvoy-Levy notes, "contemporary peace practitioners are exposed to a confusing array of discourses about children and youth that are mostly emotive and/or reductionist."<sup>7</sup> One of the strengths of this important book is that it sets out the debates on contemporary projections of childhood and youth. This is especially important in that it illustrates the shortcomings of the rights of children, which stop at age eighteen. Youth may be social and political actors—providing labor, experiencing parenthood and wielding violence—and yet as members of the international community they are circumscribed by a framework of children's rights which does not capture or reward their agency. In wartime, this tension between international principles and a child's reality may be even more pronounced. McEvoy-Levy captures this well:

...under international law, an 18 year old is left out of the child category and therefore does not have access to the psychological and social reintegration resources provided to children whereas a 16 year old who led her peers into battle may require support beyond just helping locate her family.<sup>8</sup>

Pre-existing ideas about young people may be just as important as their actions in directing attention and resources toward youth-related issues. Youth may be subject to simultaneous framings as local moral guardians or amoral thugs and as national symbols of suffering or of triumph. Responses to youth are shaped by the social construction of ideas about childhood and adolescence: masculinity, sexuality, and innocence. We know that children have been at the heart of humanitarian appeals, whilst youth have often been depicted as social deviants. More recently, scholars such as Samuel Huntington postulated that youth bulges would contribute to global insecurity, an idea that regained resonance after the attacks of 9/11.<sup>9</sup> Harboring the anxieties and uncertainties of society, youth have often been convenient scapegoats. Young people's relationship with conflict is thus complex and also shifting as war takes its toll. Nevertheless, as Schwarz notes with some alarm, "the impact of a large youth population during post-conflict reconstruction" has been largely overlooked.<sup>10</sup> Coupled with the limitations of a rights-based approach which renders young people as passive, Schwartz is positioning her research work within a significant theoretical and practical gap.

Continuing in this critical vein, Schwartz makes neat work of three theories that posit a causal relationship between youth and conflict. Crucially, she argues that these theories all suggest that youth's decisions can indeed be shaped by their environment. Youth are not therefore a destabilizing factor *per se*. Two current models, greed/grievance and capabilities, explain the rationalization of continued violence by young warriors. She points out, however, that further economic and social incentives to demobilize and reintegrate might also inform these same warriors during peace accords. The youth bulge theory also explains why largely powerless

youth may resort to violence. But it does not test if economically or civically empowered youth will potentially resort to peace on the same scale.<sup>11</sup>

In synthesizing this literature, Schwarz also makes a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding the roles that youth may have. Early on she also pays due attention to the different understandings of youth and war at work in legal and humanitarian discourse. The first-time reader on this subject is thus instantly armed with a nuanced analytical framework for the issue, rather than overwhelmed with the complexity of young people's life-worlds.

### **Analytical framework**

The book is in three parts. Chapter one is rich in information and forms the foundation of the project. It explains the methodology behind the book and includes a brief mention of key findings so that the reader is effectively introduced to the tapestry of information that is to follow. Chapters two, three and four deal with the three major case studies: Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kosovo. Chapter five synthesizes the findings for all three cases and provides a substantive number of recommendations for further research. The purpose of the analysis is to “gather, explore, and compare the available data to better locate and define possible causal relationships.”<sup>12</sup>

The case studies have each been selected to demonstrate a diversity of experiences. In addition to data richness, the cross-regional cases all share the experience of civil war, a post-war accord, reconstruction activity with domestic and international influences, and a relatively large youth population. They also fall along a spectrum of post-conflict stability, with Mozambique being the most successful, the Democratic Republic of the Congo being least stable, and Kosovo falling somewhere in the middle, while holding one of the world's highest percentages of youth in its population.<sup>13</sup> A historical outline of the conflict and an overview of the subsequent challenges facing youth is provided in each case—including a coding of youth levels and of youth involvement in the conflict. In doing so, Schwartz prepares the case for using youth presence as a dependent variable in this context, not an independent variable—itsself an important contribution of the text.<sup>14</sup> The degree of instability of each state is also a dependent variable, and this is evidenced through a rich selection of indexes.

Schwartz then outlines each of these post-conflict environments. In each case she divides reconstruction policy into four broad categories of independent variables (domestic policy, NGO programming, international interventions, and cultural contexts), each coded as having a high, medium, or low, as well as negative or positive impact (compared to a regional baseline), on the influence of youth in the reconstruction process. The international involvement variable includes the type and impact of UN and regional organizations' programs. The domestic policy variable includes post conflict educational and employment programming, for example. The NGO involvement variable examines the level of effort, coordination, and quality of programming implemented by non-governmental organizations during the reconstruction process.<sup>15</sup> Cultural or environmental factors range from the mitigation of war's impact on youth, through existing religious practices, to the impracticality

of terrain. The resulting variable measures what kind of impact these factors made on youth programming.

The cases evidence a range of roles and outcomes. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, has little stability, a high use of youth in conflict roles and an enormous international NGO presence. The Kosovo case study includes a historical examination of the NGO base, the impact of a decline in volunteerism in the post accord period, the exit option available to disenfranchised young Kosovars, and the impact of continued sexual violence and insecurity on young women. The author illustrates this dense matrix of information with grids to clarify the type and level of impacts of the different variables (such as “the inept assessment of domestic capacities in the DRC and Kosovo” by the national government and international community respectively).<sup>16</sup> Throughout the book she draws comparisons demonstrating how this matrix of variables may support or undermine the role of youth in post-conflict reconstruction. A systematic analysis of the youth cohort’s effects, positive and negative, on the post-conflict environment is indicated after each section of evidence. As Schwartz notes, this creates a rich mix of data from which to draw findings:

By allowing for in-case and cross-case evaluation of the different variables on the overall level of post-conflict stability, the case study design makes possible a cohesive and comparative analysis of the relationships among youth, intervening reconstruction actors, and stability, in a field where no similar studies exist.<sup>17</sup>

### **Key findings**

Schwartz finds that a high proportion of youth in a population do not necessarily mean that instability will follow. The research does, however, indicate that youth are sensitive to post-conflict reconstruction, and it is through the efficiency of reconstruction processes that youth’s impact on stability is amplified or eroded.

Schwartz crucially takes the emphasis away from agency and victimhood but positions youth within a broader matrix of actors and environmental contexts. “Protection, reintegration, and empowerment” are three critical youth needs that must be met in post-conflict environments.<sup>18</sup> One of the most interesting findings is that intervention specifically aimed at youth may be unnecessary.<sup>19</sup>

What matters more in determining whether youth become a permanent force for stability is how effectively certain transition functions are fulfilled – regardless of who implements them or whether they target youth specifically or communities as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

Mozambique is a case in point. Community-based programming that addresses critical youth needs may be sufficient. Again, this is in keeping with practitioners who have long argued for a holistic or community-wide approach to integration.<sup>21</sup>

The book modestly suggests that the research “does not attempt to be conclusive put points to gaps in our understanding.”<sup>22</sup> The author carefully disentangles all of the possible threads of enquiry that the research has opened up.

At the heart of each question that Schwartz poses is one central problem: how to design better peace building mechanisms. The central thrust of Schwartz's argument is that an analysis of what constitutes efficiency in a reconstruction context is needed. Schwartz shows that UN DDR programs in Mozambique fulfilled the "function" of youth support, although they were in "form" community-wide rather than youth-specific. In Kosovo, regional actors undertook the function of supporting youth in refugee camps, a role normally undertaken by NGOs. Focusing on "function over form" increases efficiency, and may mean circumventing cultural and environmental challenges, or recognition of appropriate local capacity.<sup>23</sup>

The attention on NGOs and their limitations is interesting and is an area that is not yet subject to critical scrutiny in academia. Schwartz draws attention to the competitive scrambling for resources that may distract them from implementing programs in tune with the actual, local needs of youth.<sup>24</sup> Schwartz also demonstrates that increased NGO funding or manpower do not necessarily create a better mission, with the DRC being a case in point.<sup>25</sup>

Schwartz is also well aware that youth, like childhood, is made, as well as lived and lost. The reality of war forces adult roles upon children, potentially making them more, not less, in need of integrating into society as permanent, functioning members. This is an important consideration, and as she observes from her findings:

it is the programs that go further, providing quality social and economic reintegration programming, education opportunities, and platforms for youth voices to be heard in the reconstruction debate, that are the most successful.<sup>26</sup>

In this sense the work follows in the rich vein of authors attempting to shed light on the positive contributions that children can make in war as civic agents and good citizens. In summary, Schwartz asks for a more "dynamic" understanding of youth's role in conflict.

## **Conclusion**

More countries have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child than any other human rights treaty in history. We are little closer, however, to recognizing the cultural fluidity of the concept of childhood and its awkward appendage, youth, especially in the context of war. This book marks an important reversal in this trend and makes a major contribution to existing literature on youth and conflict. There is no comparable text—no comprehensive survey and assessment of such actors' impact on youth programming, supported by evidence and informed analysis.

Although it is mostly drawn from an exhaustive reading of primary and secondary data, the text is extremely readable, combining the complexity of a Ph.D.-level analysis with the finesse of a report. This is thus a very accessible and informative book, containing many detailed findings, all relayed with clarity and a deft amount of commentary. One of the refreshing aspects of this text is its comprehension and consistency given that it is the work of a single scholar. The text is also candid about the gaps in supporting evidence (for example Kosovo data being subsumed under Serbia until 2008) but goes on to provide as much of an analytical framework as is possible using alternative sources.

Although this book is written from a critical trajectory it is fiercely practical. In the foreword, Betty Bigombe, a Ugandan minister and Member of Parliament, confirms Schwartz's "remarkable" and "welcome" thesis, that the right "constellation of reconstruction" programs determine youth's opportunities to contribute meaningfully to peace. It would be valuable to know how this book is received by other international actors and funders as it can surely offer a template for progress and further research.

A final act of sensitivity is the cover image: a photo of youth which does not seek to recreate their vulnerability. Very few publishers and humanitarian agencies obscure the faces of children and young people in war so that individual recognition is impossible. Once these images are freely circulating, privacy is violated and at worst, lives are endangered through retribution or shame invested on a future adult, their family or kin.

This book should be of equal interest to scholars and practitioners and reinforces the need for a critical dialogue in this context—not least with former agents of war. The book contributes to a vital literature that looks at war itself as a potential source of citizenship training and explores how the political dynamics of a conflict can affect youth's ability to enrich their society through leadership and civic awareness. We may afford young people engaged in the theater of conflict a premature and disproportionate degree of independence and rationality. This is perhaps a necessary risk. Much like the diversity we accommodate within the apparent rationality of the "adult" world, there is a broad spectrum of childhoods, past and present, for whom engagement can be profitable if not always predictable. Without this commitment to understanding lives constructed by conflict, war is always harmful and youthhood looms without promise, and potentially without peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Schwartz, *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009) 158.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Brocklehurst, "Just children? Just War?," in *Just War theory: A Reappraisal*, ed. Mark Evans (Edinburgh University Press).

Helen Brocklehurst, *Who's afraid of children? Children. Conflict and International Relations*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Helen Brocklehurst, 'Childhood in Conflict: will the real child soldier please stand up?' *Ethics, Law, and Society*. Vol. 4 ed. Jennifer Gunning and Søren Holm (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> David Rosen, "Child soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalisation of Childhood," *American Anthropologist*, 109, no. 2, (2007): 96-306.

<sup>5</sup> David Rosen, "Child soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalisation of Childhood," *American Anthropologist*, 109, no. 2, (2007): 96-306.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in collaboration with UNICEF, *Machel Study-Ten Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World* (UNICEF, 2009).

Siobhan McEvoy, *Trouble Makers or Peacemakers? Youth or Post-Accord Peace Building*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

Alpaslan Ozerdem and Sukyana Podder, *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Christopher Blattman, 'From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda' *American Political Science Review*, 103, no. 2 (2009) 231-247.

<sup>7</sup>Siobhan McEvoy 'Children, Youth and Peace Building', in Thomas Matyók, Jessica Senehi, Sean Byrne - 2011 *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*, (Lexington Books, 2011), 161

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, 8)

<sup>9</sup> See for a critique of youth bulge see Siobhan McEvoy, 'Children, Youth and Peace Building', in Thomas Matyók, Jessica Senehi, Sean Byrne eds. , *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy* (Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 12

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 25

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 30

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 163

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 29

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 177

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 25

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 23

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 158

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 156

<sup>21</sup> Neil Boothby, Alison Strang and Michael G Wessells, *A World Turned Upside Down: Social Ecologies of Children and War* (Kumarian Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 155

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 159

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 20

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 179

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 23