

## **EPES Mandala Consulting – Child Protection and Well-Being**

All the leading consultants of EPES Mandala have more than 15 years of experience with designing and implementing child protection programmes in post-disaster or conflict settings or in the context of longer-term development.

Our work to promote children’s holistic development aims to strengthen family and community systems that support child protection and well-being. Consistent with and framed by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, we strive to promote the child’s best interest and create positive environments in which children grow up amid respect, hope and social justice. It is important to recognize our responsibilities to protect children from harm, to promote children’s rights and to ensure healthy development.

In recent times, in situations that present serious physical, emotional and social risks to children, protection has had an increasingly prominent place in the humanitarian community. However, despite this development, child protection remains a low priority in most countries’ emergency responses or in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of communities in the aftermath of conflict or disaster. The gap in child protection has to be addressed, since women and children typically comprise three quarters of populations affected in emergency situations. Children have special vulnerabilities and require additional protection from armed conflict and its associated ravages, such as disease, hunger, malnutrition, displacement and child soldiering.

EPES Mandala’s approach to child protection and well-being in conflict or post-conflict situations is quite distinctive from existing dominant approaches and reflects the extensive learning of our expert team from different programmes conducted or evaluated in countries deeply affected by disaster or conflict and can be summarized in the following chart:

	Existing Dominant Approaches	EPES Mandala Approaches
1	Emphasizes the reduction of physical risks	Holistic emphasis on a wider array of risks – physical, emotional, social and cognitive
2	Deficits approach on protecting against the worst rights abuses	Emphasizes both protection from abuse and promotion of well-being and positive child development as part of a preventive, community-based strategy

3	Focused on adults' essential, immediate needs	Recognizes that children have special needs that require specific attention and child participation
4	Emphasis on victimization, injury, and rescue approach in which victims require palliative care	Recognizes the resilience, capabilities and coping mechanisms of children, families and communities and the importance of culturally grounded approaches
5	Legal, policy focus on rights protection	Makes a reality of children's rights through an integrated strategy that combines community programming with education, advocacy and networking
6	Little attention to child rights, which are subsumed under human rights (for example, data on children are rarely disaggregated).	Strong focus on child rights in particular with careful attention to data disaggregation and community programming
7	Use of case management approach for monitoring and reporting through official channels of individuals who have suffered profound rights abuse	Emphasizes a community-based approach that assists all war-affected children on the basis of need; provides additional support for vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, separated children and other marginalized groups: and supports wider systems of monitoring, reporting and addressing risks or violations, including both official and non-official channels

8	Children and youth are regarded as recipients or beneficiaries of protection efforts	Children and youth need to participate, deserve to have their voices heard, and can exercise leadership on child protection
9	Protection work is conducted by protection specialists	Child protection is viewed as a collective responsibility, integrated into all sectors of humanitarian work, and conducted by humanitarian workers and local people who are not protection specialists but who have received child protection training
10	Focus on individuals	Ecological emphasis on strengthening systems of child well-being at family, peer, community and societal levels

Child protection cannot be defined solely in terms of freedom from risks, since rights protection entails positive development and well-being. Nor is it limited to emergency contexts alone. Indeed, we at EPES Mandala seek to promote children’s well-being in longer term development contexts by strengthening the social , emotional, cognitive and behavioural competencies that promote their positive coping, resilience and well-being .

The approach is holistic also in that it strengthens families, communities and civil society which are children’s essential life support systems and sustainable resources for child protection programming. In addition, we support community-driven processes of child protection and the strengthening of local networks that enable child protection, care and well-being, as well as the active and meaningful participation of children and youth.

We believe that any effort to improve children’s well-being must start with an understanding of the environment in which they are growing up and how this influences their development. This requires an in-depth knowledge of how a particular environment works, and how it is influenced by the more immediate environment (household, family and community) as well as the more distant environment (private and public institutions, local and national governments).

## **Child Soldiers**

EPES Mandala's expert team has more than 10 years of experience in planning, designing and implementing programs that work towards the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of children and youth who have been part of the fighting forces in the many internal and cross-border conflicts on different continents.

In spite of state laws to protect children and international standards such as the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict, child soldiering is not uncommon. Worldwide, government armies, warlords, rebel groups, paramilitaries and other militarized groups include an estimated three hundred thousand children (defined under international law as under 18 years of age) although it is very difficult to get exact data on this. In some conflicts children are the main combatants, such as in Liberia and in the Lord's Resistance Army (northern Uganda and now Democratic Republic of Congo.). Nor is the problem confined to boys, since girls also fight as well as become camp followers. In EPES Mandala, we talk more about Children Associated with the Fighting Forces, since many children abducted or forcibly recruited serve as labourers, porters, guards, messengers or sex slaves.

While focusing on the issues related to child soldiers, we are mindful of the fact that this group has been singled out as the one that has suffered the most among children who live in war zones. In fact, the lot of child soldiers as compared to others can often be better, since they usually have better access to food and protection than children who are subject to attack, displacement, and separation from their families. It is important not to privilege to excess child soldiers, since this can lead to many problems, especially during the rehabilitation and reintegration process with communities. Evidence shows that the vast majority of former child soldiers show remarkable resilience. The plight of child soldiers cannot be separated from the wider suffering of all children in war zones where the fighting harms the well-being of all children in catastrophic ways.

In dealing with the demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers, we believe that a separate process for children is important and necessary. The international community is still very much in a process of learning how to provide effective DDR supports for children. Different experiences and evolving guidelines (from UNICEF and major NGOs such as Save the Children or CCF) have provided valuable lessons and practical guidance on how to develop child-friendly DDR processes, to include the following:

Separate children's DDR process. Because child soldiers have distinctive needs, children should have their own DDR process.

Gender equity. A high priority is to provide focused supports to girls and women, including mothers, in DDR processes and to ensure equal rights for women in the wider society.

Reintegration focus. Despite political pressures and the military background of many DDR planners, the planning and implementation of DDR programmes should have an overarching emphasis on reintegration and rehabilitation.

Timing. DDR processes should be implemented immediately following a ceasefire. Giving child soldiers access to positive life options and an incentive to abandon war as a way of life

Demobilisation and Reintegration during armed conflict. Although DDR is typically organized as a post conflict support, cases such as the DRC indicate the need for demobilisation and reintegration during active conflict

Coordination. Poor coordination, the weakness of many DDR programmes, is frequently visible in problems such as excessive emphasis on demobilisation, poor information-sharing between agencies, and difficulties managing expectations. An effective DDR coordination process is vital for harmonizing different elements in a manner that supports children's well-being

Education. Access to quality education is a high priority in DDR processes because war deprives child soldiers of the education to which they have a right and leaves them at a disadvantage in seeking jobs and becoming productive citizens.

Job skills and employment. DDR programs should provide former child soldiers with vocational and life skills training that prepares them for jobs

Interim Care Centres. Although ICCs are valuable transitional devices in some settings, they should be used sparingly, and include steps to educate the local community about its purpose, minimize children's length of stay, reduce dependence on the centers, and promote family and community integration

Cash payments. Cash payments to former child soldiers are damaging and should be avoided

Child protection. DDR processes should include comprehensive efforts to protect children and prevent child recruitment. The protection of all children is a priority because the most vulnerable children are at risk of becoming soldiers.

Child participation. Errors occur repeatedly in DDR programmes due partly to a failure to learn from children's perspectives. Children's voices should be heard in all phases of the DDR process- assessment, design, preparation, implementation and evaluation.

(Adapted from Wessells, M.G..2006. Child Soldiers. From Violence to Prevention. Pp. 179-180. London: Harvard University Press)

### **An Expert Team**

Dr Michelle Elcoat Poulton is a child development and protection specialist who has designed and managed important programmes for children and youth on four continents. She has won international accolades for her work with non-formal education, early childhood development and the rehabilitation of children of war (using locally adapted psychosocial approaches). Dr. Michael Wessells is a world-renowned psychologist and child protection expert, who has a particularly deep and broad understanding of the impact of children's participation in armed conflict (his book, Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection was published in 2006 by Harvard University Press, London). Dr.Ghassan Rubeiz is a social worker with many years of practical experience in the

Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa, working with Governments and civil society to improve the lives of children. Likewise, Dr. Mary Daly, Solene Edouard, Lucy Lainfiesta and Hourig Babikian have worked for many years in the area of child protection and well being.

## **A Range of Relevant Experience**

### **Designing and Implementing Child Protection and Well-being Programmes**

EPES Mandala's combined experience covers five continents, including Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, North, Central and South America and the Middle East. Experience includes setting up long term community based programmes for the improvement of children's lives and promoting the protection of their rights, working with international NGOs as well as a wider range of institutions, including UNICEF, UNDP, the European Union, DFiD, USAID and host governments in many parts of the world. In designing and planning programmes for deprived and vulnerable children and youth, monitoring and evaluation systems have been incorporated from the beginning. Our experienced consultants have introduced many new approaches to child protection and development, in particular in the areas of non-formal basic education, community-based primary health care, early childhood care and development and child protection.

### **Supporting Children and Communities in the aftermath of Conflict or Disaster**

EPES Mandala consultants have carried out pioneering work in prioritising the protection and well-being of mothers and children in times of conflict or disaster. Our consultants have broad experience in carrying out rapid assessments on the plight of children (including Afghanistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, Angola, Northern Uganda, Iraq and India, Sri Lanka and Aceh, Indonesia post tsunami), designing and implementing rapid response programmes focused on children and working very closely with UNICEF (in Afghanistan, Timor Leste, Liberia, Angola, Sierra Leone and Chad) in the design and implementation of DDR (demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration) programmes for children. Our consultants have been particularly effective in mobilizing communities around activities for children and encouraging the participation of children and youth in the reconciliation and reconstruction process.