Deconstructing Childhood Vulnerability: An Introduction

Kristen Cheney
International Institute of Social Studies
The Hague, Netherlands

Over the past decade, there has been increasing discussion of "vulnerable children" in the international development and humanitarian aid literatures. The term is used in Africa to define children as objects of developmental and humanitarian intervention, often in problematic and contrary ways. For example, the aid acronym OVC, for orphans and vulnerable children, was created at the height of the African AIDS epidemic to include children "at risk" because of the disease – beyond the millions of children recently orphaned by the AIDS virus. But as Cheney (this issue) points out, this leads to a rather ephemeral definition that, when combined with aid resources, tends to generate rather than ameliorate vulnerability.

This special issue is based on a panel of the same name that took place at the 2009 African Studies Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans. Our aim is to combine perspectives from anthropology, international law, and education to deconstruct the notion of childhood vulnerability. We ask how vulnerability is being defined, applied, and operationalized in Africa. How does the definition of childhood vulnerability affect perceptions of need and aid operations in the midst of deepening economic crisis? How do global humanitarian ideologies and practices differ from local constructions of vulnerability, and what differences exist in the value

systems they promulgate? These papers suggest that the way vulnerability is defined and enacted in development efforts profoundly affects the lives of the African children whom it is coming to define, determining such things as their access to education, their culpability as child soldiers, and even their very survival.

Drawing from case studies across the continent, this special issue aims to contextualize and critically analyze the vital development concept of "childhood vulnerability." Topics include examining public policy development in Uganda that both appropriately recognizes yet untenably expands the population of vulnerable children in need of services (Cheney); questioning assumptions behind international constructions of vulnerability for war-displaced children in Sudan (Epstein); discussing the effects of moralistic constructions of vulnerability on educational initiatives in Malawi and Mozambique (Kendall); revisiting the notion of vulnerability as applied to street children (Kilbride); and weighing the accountability against the vulnerability of children recruited to fight wars (Rosen).

The Ethnography of Childhood Vulnerability

The articles in this issue are rooted in anthropology and use ethnographic methods to highlight the

complexity of vulnerability's conceptual development, qualitatively detailing vulnerability's impact on children in their daily lived experiences. They also strive for a holistic understanding of vulnerability's instrumentalization. Nancy Kendall, for example, notes the dual impact of lineality and gender in determining children's educational possibilities, where orphaned boys and girls are differently pressured to marry depending on local lineage. In patrilineal societies, boys bring wives into the family to care for younger children. In matrilineal societies, there is a need to bring men into the family for certain parts of agricultural production. Either way, lineage has important consequences for children with limited choices. Similarly, David Rosen's historical account of the changing role of child soldiers in Africa demonstrates how questions of children's culpability for war crimes cannot be well understood outside of historical circumstances, or the more recent concerns that drove many children to voluntarily join the Civilian Defense Forces in Sierra Leone's civil war. These articles also highlight the various viewpoints that inform local/global understandings of childhood vulnerability through vertically integrated approaches that privilege African and Africanist perspectives regarding children and childhood, while still considering the hegemonic practices of the international donor/aid community. Through the use of ethnography, they reveal the sometimes muddy reality of aid work and the challenges of child survival.

Vulnerability, Neoliberalism, and Development

While anthropologists have been studying international development since the discipline's birth in colonial Africa (Falk Moore 1994; Schumaker 2001), anthropologists have just recently begun to embrace the study of children as social agents in their own right (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Yet studies of children and national development are rarely linked in anthropology (cf. Cheney 2007), despite the targeting of children by global aid and development campaigns (Mahon 2010). It is important to consider the ways that both childhood and the aid industry are depoliticized in popular discourse, despite the fact that both domains are rife with poli-

tics. The body of work represented in this issue suggests that African children are commonly made objects of the political motives behind aid agendas, local and global. The authors in this issue, therefore, also approach this topic from the perspective of critical development studies.

Vulnerability is often – but not always – conceptually tied to poverty. The proliferation of the concept of vulnerability closely follows the trajectory of global neoliberal economic policies. "In keeping with the economic philosophy of 'neoliberalism,'" James Ferguson writes,

> it was preached that removing state 'distortions' of markets would create the conditions for economic growth, while rapid privatization would yield a flood of new private capital investment… The idea that deregulation and privatization would prove a panacea for African economic stagnation was a dangerous and destructive illusion. Instead of economic recovery, the structural-adjustment era has seen the lowest rates of economic growth ever recorded in Africa (actually negative, in many cases), along with increasing inequality and marginalization… (Ferguson 2006, 11).

Yet neoliberal policies prevailed in the post-SAP era in the form of non-governmental organizations. The growth of NGOs in the late 1980s and early 1990s was largely based on a neoliberal democratization agenda that held that working through unfettered markets allowed more grassroots participation and empowerment, especially when targeting particularly vulnerable populations (Fisher 1997); hence the recent popularity of microcredit programs and donor support for strengthening civil society by redirecting funding from presumably corrupted states to local and international NGOs that "were understood as more 'direct' or 'grassroots' channels of implementation…" (Ferguson 2006, 38).

Though scholars like Sarah Michael (2004) claim that more powerful NGOs contribute to quality service delivery when left to pursue their own agendas, critics of the proliferation of NGOs believe that it depoliticizes the structural roots of poverty by

focusing on vulnerable populations rather than on transforming the structures that give rise to their vulnerability. James Ferguson contends that governments were "decapacitated" by the redirection of donor funds to NGOs (Ferguson 2006, 38). Further, Harri Englund points out that the conflation of democracy and "freedom" with free markets has had the effect of "erasing from discussion the actual power relations underlying poverty" (Englund 2006, 197) that bear "uncanny similarities to the late-colonial orders of exclusion and exploitation" (Englund 2006, 200). Children are not exempt from neoliberalism's deleterious effects. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham write that, "...the current climate of economic liberalization has plunged children into the center of the market in ways that previous laws sought to prevent. The processes associated with globalization – be they socially progressive or neoliberal – challenge older ways of constructing childhood" (Cole and Durham 2008, 16-17). In the current political economic climate, African children are increasingly being constructed as victims in need of "saving."

Benevolent Interventions for Vulnerable Children

The construction of childhood vulnerability fits well with the neoliberal configuration of global capital, perhaps because the kinds of humanitarianism for children produced by NGOs are also well suited to the neoliberal state, who is then off the hook for providing services to needy populations (Ferguson and Freidus 2007). They also appeal to the desires of western donors to "save" the children of the global South. The authors in this issue adeptly show how this trend puts children in the position of identifying with various definitions of vulnerability – orphan, refugee, street child – as a way to make claims, or "tap the market" of aid available to vulnerable children.

Terence Ranger et al. (2008) have discussed the gradual conjoining of evangelical with democratic movements in Africa since the anti-colonial independence movements of the last century. Erica Bornstein points out that the discourse of Christian faith-based initiatives underlying PEPFAR programs share much with free market ideologies: "The con-

struction of individuals in relation to the divine, as conceived of by the Christian discourse of faith-based NGOs, parallels neoliberal assumptions of individual 'choice' that underlie the discourse of a 'free-market'"(2003, 5). This trend toward benevolent humanitarianism is exemplified by recent US foreign policy. The Bush II administration focused on neoliberal economic policies while they also implemented neoconservative social programs like the Presidents' Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and reinstated the global abortion gag rule, refusing to fund programs that include family planning. At the same time, as they championed programs for children, these policies contributed to overpopulation and rising rates of new HIV infection. While neoliberal policies drive the supposedly benevolent humanitarianism (termed "compassionate conservatism" in US political discourse and exported in Bush foreign policy) that would target vulnerable populations with services, the accompanying rise in population continues to deepen poverty by putting undue strain on limited natural resources, most importantly food and land. Focusing on enumerating the numbers of individual vulnerable children in this context becomes a way to avoid tackling the bigger issues of poverty and structural violence that affects entire populations. Children are thus made objects of intervention by a humanitarian industry that is often undergirded by neoconservative, evangelical movements. Leslie Butt calls this trope "the suffering stranger," which "...works as a rhetorical device to strengthen claims of collaboration and consultation... this device is primarily the result of the imperative to try to speak for others on a global front. The use of truncated tales of suffering strangers prioritizes international moralities over local experiences" (2002, 3). It is precisely because they are children, innocent and unable to fend for themselves, that they deserve intervention. In part, this is achieved by reinstating children's victimhood.

Social Agency

Also approaching these phenomena from the perspectives of new childhood studies, many of the authors in this issue frame children's and families' responses to these trends as acts of social agency, and even resistance. These incidents tend to take

on a performative aspect; children and families start to tap global markets through humanitarian intervention, where their participation comes to be seen as a type of social capital. Cole and Durham write that, "By engaging with commodities in everyday practices, children and youth transform the categories and the processes that constitute broader patterns of globalization, linking intimate domains to larger social formations…" (2008, 20). In development discourse, children themselves become the commodities that circulate to produce new forms of vulnerability. Hence non-refugees in Sudan try to claim refugee status in order to take advantage of schooling opportunities (Epstein), and orphans try to get entitlements by publicly embracing their vulnerabilities, where doing so not long ago might have caused shame (Cheney).

These articles highlight the paradox of humanitarian intervention instigated by proliferating notions of childhood vulnerability, revealing fine distinctions between empowerment and victimization, vulnerability and agency. By drawing attention to such conundrums, we hope to offer solutions for resolving the contradictions that prevent the concept of vulnerability from being of greater relief for the populations it describes – for children in particular.

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