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Response

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Response

Leigh Bercaw

Last semester I walked to school through one of the toughest neighborhoods in the capital city of Madagascar. Every morning my friends and I passed the same gang of sleeping street-children—honestly the best word for it is puppy pile. They were a shivering, shifting heap of children, and they broke my heart. On the way home from school, they were awake and I was afraid of them. If I walked alone, they would surround me and steal everything in my pockets. They eventually pulled one of my friends to the ground and took her backpack. As a student of anthropology trained to approach multifaceted issues by looking first through the lens of the particular, these kids, for me, embody the complexity of the lives of children living in difficult situations. They inspire our compassion and move us through their vulnerability. Yet, they simultaneously remind us that they are agents in their own right.

I am honored and humbled to engage in an exchange about children's resilience and vulnerability with Mr. Tonderai Chikuhwa. His experience in the field with children in conflict dwarfs my own; yet the themes in his essay demonstrate that there are parallels between our experiences. One characteristic of vulnerable children that he too has encountered is their embeddedness in the societies they come from—the issue of children becoming soldiers did not occur spontaneously, but is reflective of greater global trends of human insecurity. In a world where malnutrition, poverty, and environmental crises are increasingly trans-state organisms, child soldiers are part and parcel of the changing state of human security. In his essay, Mr. Chikuhwa proposes that the violations being perpetrated against children constitute a legitimate threat to international peace and security. He details the work the United Nations Security Council has done to prosecute transgressions on children's rights and proposes that the Security Council continue to systematically and purposefully engage in interventions for children in armed conflict. His essay is an example of a passionate and grounded argument for increased international intervention on behalf of compromised children.

The implications of humanitarian intervention through the Security Council merit investigation, however. In my response, I intend to further the discussion by examining the changing nature of humanitarian aid and questioning its role in protecting vulnerable children. The nature of human security is changing. Humanitarian aid intervenes on behalf of populations that survive in multi-state conflicts and economies. Children should be protected because they represent the future—but the consequences of maladaptive humanitarian interventions form the societies we leave to them.

In this response, I will begin by examining how populations in conflict blur state boundaries in the pursuit of human security. Then I will demonstrate the transformation of humanitarian aid working in a climate of trans-state conflict. I will illustrate some unintended consequences of a humanitarian aid system that oversteps state sovereignty under the banner of urgent action. Last, I will conclude by inquiring into the symbolic use of vulnerable children as humanitarian motivators.

I. Unraveling Boundaries: Characteristics of the Global Community

To understand the phenomenon of child soldiers one needs to begin at the level of the individual; to understand their personhood in their social context.¹ What are the forces that affect the security of an individual in a conflicted state? Civilian involvement in warfare goes beyond landmines; their very livelihoods are woven into the international economy. In her ethnography on international crime networks, anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom introduces the concept of the “extra-state.” She proposes that societies in the 21st century have broken the fragile boundaries of the state in favor of extra-state economies of transnational, informal networks characterized as “economies of war based on pillage.”² In Nordstrom’s depiction of sub-Saharan Africa, modern warfare restructures the economy in that “the business that transports people, equipment, and commodities often rely on military-controlled travel.” The factors that propel economies—“airplanes and vehicles...are always military matters.” The military involvement of child soldiers is representative of the militarization of their societies—the humanitarian response has been reshaped in response to human security being embedded in these militarized states.

Humanitarian aid is part of the balance of international power systems. It represents one society’s recognition of human security transgressions in another society. Insecurity at the level of the individual is heavily tied into economic power. To some extent insecurity is intrinsic to the capitalist system. As anthropologist Thomas Eriksen explains:

The entrepreneur fares like everybody else in the age of neoliberalism, which values freedom so highly but neglects security. Whenever one has success, the range of options and the scope of personal freedom feels fantastic, but the moment one hits the wall, freedom is reinterpreted as insecurity...the entrepreneur becomes an anomaly the moment he fails to succeed.³

In the context of a globalizing economy, developing nations are the entrepreneurs that risk human insecurities to engage in this economy. And when this insecurity is apparent on the national scale, humanitarian aid intervenes with urgency.

Humanitarianism is faced with several contradictions: how to adapt the use of force at the scale of the individual and how to engage at the level of the state without feeding extra-state economies. Child soldiers are one of the manifestations of the increased militarization of civilians and simultaneously one of the most obvious breaches of human rights. Aid organizations are working in the context of the extra-state yet governed by the bureaucracy and militarization of the state. To mediate this, militarized powers like the U.N. Security Council have evolved as technical and strategic tools in the name of human security. Militarized humanitarian aid acts to correct outwardly perceived insecurities while the groups that determine what insecurities need addressing and how they should be addressed are part of the constant negotiation of global power systems.

II. “The Duty to Intervene”: Humanitarian Aid as National Security

In her critique of modern humanitarian intervention, anthropologist Chowra Makaremi characterizes human security militarization as “legal utopianism,” or the “aspiration to transcend governments in the name of the common good of humanity.”⁴ To exemplify this, Makaremi quotes Kofi Annan defining the modern state as “the servant of its people, and not vice versa”

and explains that “when states do not prove responsible to their population...if they fail to provide for their human security, the international community has the responsibility to free this population from its irresponsible governors through an intervention.”⁵

Transgressing state sovereignty was not originally the intention of the development-focused aid system; in the early 1990s, the “right to intervene” was created for the short-term purpose of creating “humanitarian corridors” that would serve the good of the people above the interests of the states. However, by the late 1990s, after the defeat of U.N.-led humanitarian interventions in Somalia, problems in Bosnia, and failure in Rwanda, human security was redefined from economic insecurity to “a concern of safety and protection from violence.” Infringement on state sovereignty in the name of human security has resulted in the remilitarization of humanitarian interventions—which were originally designed as the demilitarized approach to security.⁶ In the process of legalizing this militarization, the passionate discourses questioning the “duty to intervene” have been lost. In official documents from the U.N. Commission for Human Security, “freedom from want and freedom from fear” are the common denominators of human security. Under these definitions, human security interventions are part of the “project of modernity,” as “man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown.” What is lost when the project to eliminate insecurity operationalizes national sovereignty?

As is argued in Chikuhwa’s essay, the extension of U.N. Security Council policy to allow militarized interventions into conflicts involving children is part of a larger aid system that, in the words of Makaremi, “erodes the concept of state sovereignty in the name of enforcing humanitarian standards of safety wherever necessary.”⁷ In the context of global power systems, who decides when intervention to enforce safety is necessary? On what basis are these decisions made? The unintended consequences of human security interventions become an even higher-stakes game in the context of Nordstrom’s extra-state economic trade systems, in which redistribution of aid resources along corrupt government lines are widespread. In reframing child soldiers as a threat to security that merits widespread intervention, Chikuhwa opens the door to a body of interventions justified by vulnerability. In the context of international power systems, humanitarian aid becomes the management of global disorder as a goal of national self-interest.⁸

III. Symbols of Vulnerability: Child Soldiers as Humanitarian Motivators

In the realm of intervention in the name of human security, why do the rights violations of a child soldier merit more action than the rights violations of a starving child? If intervention is justified by the protection of children as our future, then why are children embroiled in political violence more likely to be damaging to the future than children embroiled in structural violence? A child soldier is psychologically damaged by the atrocities forced upon him or her, but the damaging effects of malnutrition on a child begin in utero. Why does violence prompt us to act when other kinds of global vulnerabilities prompt, at best, detached compassion?

In critiquing U.N. Security Council disarmament of child soldiers, I am not advocating the continued use of children in warfare, but rather suggesting a humanitarian aid system that targets the systems that manifest in human insecurities—certainly the systems that contribute to food insecurity share similarities with the systems that create child soldiers. A society in which children are forced to kill, submit to sexual violence, and are torn from their communities cannot stand. Yet transgression of state sovereignty in the name of a common good cannot remain unquestioned, particularly when the common good is defined by the interests of a select group of states.

IV. Conclusion

According to Makaremi, “the issue now facing human security intervention is how to adapt the use of force to a situation where lives matter.”⁹ I interpret this as the conundrum of effective and educated humanitarian military intervention when the cost of delayed action is literally human lives. The work of Tonderai Chikuhwa is invaluable; as a Senior Advisor at the United Nations he has done illuminating and courageous work identifying massive breaches of human rights and proposing relevant and timely intervention. Through a decade of work in humanitarian aid, he has become a force for systems change.

The academic community, in turn, must respond in a way that problematizes system change to create solutions that integrate the context of globalizing power dynamics and extra-state economic systems. While Chikuhwa has done his job so effectively that he is a force in reshaping the way the U.N. Security Council engages with vulnerable child populations, I cannot respond in turn with a humanitarian aid solution that does not compromise state sovereignty or feed into international systems of corruption. Luckily, I am part of an academic network greater than myself; doubtless the Macalester community has something to say about the issue, so I turn the conversation over to you. Is there a humanitarian aid system that can address not only the vulnerable child soldiers and displaced children that Chikuhwa discusses, but also the vulnerable street children that I encountered in Madagascar? In some sense, all children are vulnerable. Is humanitarian intervention the right tool to address global child vulnerability? How can the response to child vulnerabilities be met both effectively and with some urgency? I thank the Macalester Community—in particular Tonderai Chikuhwa as part of the Macalester Community—for the opportunity to ask these questions.

Notes

1. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, Ellen Bal, and Oscar Salemink, eds., *A World of Insecurity* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).
2. Nordstrom, Carolyn, *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money, and Power in the Contemporary World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Cal.: University of California Press, 2007).
3. Eriksen 2010.
4. Makaremi, Chowra, “Utopias of Power: from Human Security to the Responsibility to Protect.” in *Contemporary States of Emergency*, edited by Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2010), p. 119.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 117.