

## **Debating Universal and Contextual Childhoods.**

### **Humanitarian Interventions during Syrian Displacement in Lebanon**

*Focusing on the 2011–2014 forced migration of Syrian refugee children into northern Lebanon, this article examines the child protection strategies of two international and one local NGO in the Tripoli governorate. It explores psychosocial care programmes and play activities that are meant to heal and integrate the refugee child. It shows how programmes for crisis-affected childhood and the sport-for-development formula predominantly remain universalised models, failing to incorporate local specificities despite increasing campaigns promoting contextualisation approaches.*

**Keywords:** Child Protection; Syrian Forced Migration; Lebanon; Psychosocial Care; Play

#### **Introduction**

Since the Syrian conflict started in 2011, more than one million Syrians have fled violence and persecution—among whom nearly 500,000 are children—and arrived in Lebanon. Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) currently number over one million, with the majority residing in the Beqaa Valley, northern Lebanon, and Beirut. New forced migration flows and the arrival of international humanitarian agencies in politically volatile settings generally pose political and socio-economic challenges. Local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as UN agencies, have been playing a significant role in response to political and security risks in regions that became primary destinations for refugees and migrants. In the context of the Syrian refugee influx into northern Lebanon and in line with de-securitised approaches to refugee childhood and youth (Pace and Sen 2018), this article investigates the role of humanitarian protection and, more specifically, child protection, primarily aimed at preventing specific harm: namely radicalisation, war recruitment, and political violence in this region. Defined as protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence in article 9 of the 1990 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, child protection has only recently gained importance within emergency responses (Jabbar and Zaza 2014: 1523).

Overall, our fieldwork findings in Lebanon indicate that local and refugee child protection interventions, implemented in contexts of chronic poverty and vulnerability which have later turned into spaces of crisis management, do not manage to shift from a universal to a local paradigm. Findings rather point to an unproductive entanglement of the *universal* – which often characterises the philosophy of global humanitarianism – with the *local* – Eg. everyday struggles oscillating between economic hardships, political repression, and war – and to a strategic *impasse* in humanitarian programming. The local and international humanitarian agencies that are presently addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in Syria’s neighboring countries predominantly rely on two different strategies: psychosocial support for war-affected children and youth and play and sports activities. Predominantly led by Global North’s models of care and protection, these strategies are mostly employed to enhance social cohesion and stability within demographically diverse settings. Indeed, with a focus shift from more recent refugees to broader vulnerable categories of children, humanitarian agencies have enlarged their scope of intervention by including Lebanese youth and children in their programmes. However, in practice, these NGOs tend to address each national group separately to avoid complex relationships with contextual actors and involvement with local governance. The vulnerable children who are addressed by the humanitarian programmes represent a blurred vulnerable category; most of them relocated to Lebanon as a result of human displacement through war, but they end up facing issues of food security, healthcare, clean water, employment, and housing. These latter concerns, not directly related to emergency crises caused by war, impinge on local lives to the same or greater extent as threats of violence (Chatty et al. 2005: 397).

By using NGO discourse analysis and interview-based material, we intend to examine the humanitarian practices that address children’s experiences of forced migration, their different vulnerabilities, and, at times, their dire living conditions. We analyse the psychosocial support and play activity programmes and the theoretical approaches to child protection adopted by two international NGOs—War Child Holland (WCH) and Right to Play (RtP)—and one local NGO—Himaya (meaning ‘protection’ in Arabic). All of these organisations officially adopt a community-based approach, having shifted their focus from emergency relief to longer-term development programmes due to the protracted regional emergency and crises.

Through child-focused programmes carried out in northern Lebanon, WCH has implemented its internationally well-known methodological package called I-DEAL, which represents a key psychosocial component of its programmes. The WCH's play- and sport-based activities in the Lebanese context have additionally drawn on the theory of change (ToC), presently adopted by several international organisations (INGOs), and the sport-for-development (S4D) approach, which also inspires the RtP's initiatives. In this framework, the local NGO Himaya runs the resilience program, which is likewise aimed at providing individual psychosocial assistance for children between 12 and 18 years of age.

In the summer and fall of 2016, in the Tripoli governorate, we conducted semi-structured interviews with four staff members from WCH and Himaya, 15 boy soccer players aged 8–13 and three field coaches trained by RtP. Access to the children was provided only by RtP (a factor that may have limited the implementation of independent selection criteria in our methodology). We also combined the interviews with NGO discourse analysis, based on the campaign and policy material the three NGOs provided us with and the material they published online.

An up-close look at our context importantly shows how the historical past of Lebanon's Tripoli is one of the pull factors for NGO programmes meant to address childhood and youth. The relationship of Tripoli-based Lebanese and Syrian nationals with political violence is related to the Syrian army's presence in the country from 1976, which started during the Lebanese civil war until 2005. In 2005, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad decided to end the so-called *Pax Syriana*, which had been ratified in the framework of the 1989 Taif Agreement. The Syrian presence is still remembered as an experience of repression, detention, urban destruction, rape, and economic crackdown (Author 2017), especially in the North of Lebanon where there is a longstanding history of political opposition to the Assad regime. Tripoli and the whole northern region of Lebanon were ignored regarding post-war economic empowerment and reconstruction, and Tripoli's urban poor remained marginalised by state policies and services (Seurat 2012). This region was also rarely addressed by NGOs before the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Neglect thus incubated widespread feelings of frustration among later Lebanese generations in the Tripoli governorate today. These people share resources and space with

Syrian refugees and Palestinian youth who mostly reside in the neighboring Baddawi camp, established in 1955.

Against the backdrop of an increasing number of humanitarian programmes in the Tripoli area, young newcomers, as well as poor local youth, have come to be practically addressed as people of concern (PoC) and as a homogenously vulnerable group. We will show how international programmes have officially approached local and refugee beneficiaries as subjects of decision-making and politico-social awareness, but they fail to concretely do so. In this context, single local operators who work either for international or local NGOs—rather than local entities *per se*—endeavour to emerge as policy-makers within these organisations, emphasising the tension between official discourse and concrete program implementation. In this framework, the humanitarian discourse about children’s vulnerability and protection is formulated according to universalised concepts of childhood (Cheney 2010). Conscious of the emergence of a sociological field of childhood studies in the early 1990s and a rights-based approach within the field (Hart 2014), we illustrate the complex nuances of vulnerability, war- and displacement-induced trauma in violence-ridden settings, and unravel the diverse understanding and expectations about child protection and integration in regional displacement settings. By drawing on interview-based analysis of humanitarian discourse and strategies, this article offers a specific focus on the pragmatic complexities of paving ground for a nuanced understanding of childhood and humanitarian practices beyond the Global North-Global South binary. With this purpose, we endeavour to build an intersectional space between the studies of childhood, humanitarian protection, and articulated forms of vulnerability in Lebanon. In more detail, intersectionality can better capture the complex arrangements of children’s lives in contexts characterized by chronic vulnerability, which have later turned into spaces governed by crisis management. Echoing recent theories on how the ‘cultural translations’ of universal models and particularism do not necessarily destabilise ‘the hegemony of a modern western childhood’ (Balagopalan 2019: 25), we likewise show how, to a certain extent, the particular is already incorporated into the universal in a way that it does not challenge the ‘fixity of the universal itself’ (Balagopalan 2019: 26).

With this purpose, we first explain how child protection historically emerged as a political and juridical concern in Western settings, and how ‘northern-led’

humanitarianism operating across the Global North and Global South contributed to the dissemination of a –presumably universal– definition of childhood which revolves around innocence, an acontextual need for protection, and child vulnerability. We build on the scholarly literature which shows how Western-driven humanitarian work with children in conflict and crisis settings makes northern subjects the guardians of such a universal childhood.

Then, we focus on psychosocial support programmes and play and sports activities that are deployed in the framework of child protection interventions in order to ‘heal’ children affected by vulnerabilities and war-caused trauma. While this article does not endeavour to propose an alternative model of psychosocial care, it efficaciously shows how trauma –defined by Western clinical and psychological traditions– is not locally perceived as able to address broader traumatic experiences and everyday hardships. As a result, while INGO official strategies are seemingly more context cognizant, from a local and refugee perspective, such programmes fail to acknowledge the complexity of the Lebanese context and its historical relationship with Syria and regional displacement. However conscious of the contextual constraints, we show how such child protection interventions are still unable to enhance social cohesion because of the compartmentalisation of their professional activities.

On the one side, we will prove how INGO local staff members - and not necessarily local NGOs *per se* - play a crucial role in contextualising child-focused programmes and in promoting a participatory approach. On the other, it will be evident how such international-local partnerships, from a practical perspective, still largely preserve the northern hegemony over conceptions of childhood and protection in vulnerable settings.

### **Debating Child Protection through Universalised and Contextualised Approaches**

In the Western European context, child protection practices are the result of historical changes in the adult’s social attitudes toward children at the micro and macro levels (Ariès 1973 and Fass 2013). This comes to explain how, for international humanitarian action, children became PoC regarding their experiences of forced migration and with their parenting. The distinctive innocence of children considers them as human beings in need of protection, adults’ primary love objects, and the future of the global society. According

to this approach, adult people are to become more watchful protectors and attentive to children's wellbeing (Jenks 1996).

The sentimentalisation and sacralisation of the child (Zelizer 1985) in the Western world have baptised the twentieth century as the 'century of the child' (Key 1909). Throughout this century, particular importance has been given to ensure a higher legal and moral status for children at an international level. Jurists pioneered the creation of transnational techniques and the elaboration of a universal language of children's rights. They laid the foundations for recognising rights and giving protection to orphaned children, children born from stateless parents, and children displaced by conflict, migration, or poverty. In this framework, the League of Nations' Committee for the Protection of Children (1919) and other humanitarian international organisations such as the Save the Children Fund and the International Committee of the Red Cross took considerable action (Droux 2011). What has been codified as the universalism of children's vulnerability and the right to protection have been ratified in several international normative texts: the *Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (1924), the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (1959), and the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Likewise, in 1987, a UN commission presented the report, *Winning the Human Race*, which made specific reference to the needs and protection of urban youth and street and refugee children (Chatty et al. 2005: 395).

Following the First and the Second World Wars, and later colonial rule, new global aid actors corroborated this expanding legal field, and intensified the provision of humanitarian assistance in European and non-European territories in order to counterbalance the brutalisation of societies and wars. The international belief of children being vulnerable in crisis settings and their consequent need for protection seemed to provide a panacea and, at least, a short-term solution to social and political brutalities. This way, children-focused programmes came to satisfy both the sense of duty in adults and offer a valid rationale for humanitarian action (Marshall 2002).

The development of an international juridical framework has established specific standards for all children's protection. The work of international agencies contributes to the exportation of the (supposedly universal) Western-constructed definition of childhood to other parts of the world, with at least two significant effects. The 'modern Western

notion of childhood has become the childhood by which to judge all societies' (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame 2012: 3), including the Global South. Its normative protection approach has paved the ground for contemporary strategies of child protection by which international humanitarian agencies tend to assess the state of childhood worldwide.

Models of childhood that are other to the Western codified model are either assessed as improper or are ignored, whereby Western-born international organisations' interventions aim to right wrongs and guarantee a 'normal' childhood to 'children without childhood' (Burman 2008; Boyden et al. 1998). How international organisations aim to protect children is frequently inspired by paternalistic approaches (Burman 1994: 243), according to which adults are better placed to decide what it is in children's best interests. This paternalistic vision of child protection implicitly threatens the recognition of children's agency and participation in wider economic and socio-political processes (Pace and Sen 2018). As a result, universalised conceptions of childhood neutralise and reify children's role in such processes. In this regard, Erica Burman maintains that

The abstraction of childhood [...] detracts from children's rights to their own wider cultural membership [...] The dominant view of children as victims politically disenfranchises children from their active roles in war and survival (Burman 1994: 243-244).

Such approaches have often involved the infantilisation of the Global South in relation to the mature, competent, and caring Northern donor (Ibid.). The 'in-need-of-protection children' model, corroborated in both the legal and the humanitarian fields, undermines the understanding of the actual role that children can realistically play in political affairs. It also tends to overlook the impact children's political involvement can have on their lives while coping with crisis-produced hardships.

In response to the universalised normative approach to child protection in international development, a community-engaged approach has been developed. While recognising international human rights as guiding principles, this approach acknowledges the need to adopt those rights in respect of circumstances, cultures, and communities. Contextualisation—complexly interrelated with the 'localisation of aid' agenda in international debates on humanitarian affairs, which we will not discuss in this paper—is

a ‘newer perspective on how to build child protection, one based [...] socially in community dynamics, including the participation of children’ (Myers and Bourdillon 2012). The focus is primarily on actors (e.g., communities, families, and children) located within their context. This approach avoids the risk of divorcing a phenomenon from the contextual circumstances that define it (Dodge 2011) and challenges the understanding of a singular childhood privileging with ‘multiple childhoods’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979) considering the unique ecological system of individuals’ development and social interactions (Balagopalan 2014). Children, as active agents, tailor their relationships with their families, environment, and society. In other terms, contextualisation encourages an approach to children’s lives within their pre-existing contexts.

Theoretically, contextualising child protection means gaining a more comprehensive understanding of children’s lives and avoiding the introduction of strategies that aim to adapt local values and practices of social protection to universal models, which are thus likely to fail. The contextualised approach rests on a bottom-up child-centered approach, according to which assistance and support practices come from internal social relations (Heissler 2012). Indeed, this approach is beneficial to understanding child-affected issues such as child labour or street children. For instance, children’s work is inseparably linked to the socio-cultural context in which it takes place. In this vein, previous studies have demonstrated the contextual nature of international concerns such as child labour. For instance, Bass (2004) affirmed that child labour in sub-Saharan African societies has been shaped by the so-called triple heritage concept of indigenous/African, Islamic, and colonial influences. Situating children’s lives contextually helps to develop an understanding that goes beyond the abolition of child labour and acknowledges the need to see children’s work as sustaining a family livelihood (Bourdillon 2006). Similarly, investigating street child workers in postcolonial India, Balagopalan (2014) showed how children can develop capacities for resilience. The universalised humanitarian discourse of children’s vulnerability and victimhood would prevent relating marginalised children to their context: in the case of India, the state’s absence and its welfare provisions, and critical school quality (Balagopalan 2014).

### **From Forced Migration to Trauma: A Glance at Psychosocial Support Programmes**



The conditions for Syrian refugees' in Lebanon are generally very precarious with economic vulnerability, food insecurity, unaffordable or inadequate housing and shelters, a legally uncertain status, and discontinuous access to education (Janmyr 2016). Such hardships often produce important psychosocial issues. For example, refugees are affected by high levels of mental disorders, such as depression, sleep disturbance (Montgomery and Foldman 2001; Soykoek et al. 2017), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other anxiety disorders (Basoglu et al. 2005; Davis and Davis 2006). Gradually, 'trauma' became an umbrella term for such issues, only after it appeared in manuals on refugee health in the 1980s (Summerfield 1999). In the 1990s, scholarship focused on war-caused trauma diagnosis using Western criteria, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* created by the American Psychiatric Association (Hart 2014), and such criteria have been adopted to determine symptoms of PTSD. In this regard, psycho-traumatology has historically authenticated the suffering of the victim according to pre-fixed clinical models. Other studies have reported that the frequency of PTSD after wars covers a wide range, that is, between 4.4% and 86% (Alpak et al. 2015: 45), and that post-traumatic stress reactions may even increase over time after resettlement. These disorders can be a direct consequence of pre-migration experiences—such as exposure to war—as much as post-migration experiences—such as separation from families, difficulties adapting to new cultural settings, unemployment, inadequate housing, and more (Bogic et al. 2015).

It is necessary to look at the child's life-changing space and consider what factors define the child as vulnerable to assess vulnerability in the processes of an unknown duration of mobility. In international humanitarian practices, children are generally expected to be 'innocent' (Burman 2015) in order to be considered eligible for accessing an assistance regime. As such, post-war traumas preserve a child's innocence and are, in a limiting manner, seen as the product of shocking events rather than everyday hardship (Pupavac 2005; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). Up against the ongoing humanitarian 'medicalisation' of human suffering (Pandolfi 2000), Kleinman (1995) has denounced how depression and other psychological feelings tend to be considered as individual medical problems rather than interpersonal experiences, that is, a product of social suffering. Against this backdrop, NGOs and UN agencies are largely responsible for the space of sociality in which children's suffering is recognised, denied,

and reformulated. More recently, the line between social and medical problems has become increasingly blurred in humanitarian action (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), and awareness of the sociology of the traumatised victim often goes unheeded.

In the Lebanese context, (un)political violence and petty crimes are an ongoing phenomenon; half of the Lebanese people have been exposed to war-related traumatic events that correlate with a high risk of developing mental disorders (Karam et al. 2008). In this context, children and young people have everyday encounters with multiple conflicts—sometimes other than war (Van Ommering 2017: 53). The experience of migration raises the importance of turning the new public space of residency into memory. The impossibility of memorialising space gives rise to a societal ‘meta-trauma’ (Zenker and Kumoll 2010), that is, the political, social, cultural, or economic impossibility of socialising one’s memory and, consequently, the psychological condemnation of the individual to re-experience trauma through mnemonic inhibition. In this sense, play and sports activities are meant to ensure that the risk of meta-trauma is avoided by helping children to rebuild and reclaim their space within society.

The numerous conflicts in Lebanon’s history have connected the country to continual catastrophe and, consequently, to the presence of international psychological assistance. While the inadequacy of medical and psychological healing in the postcolonial Arab Levant has often been an ethnographic focus (Wick 2011; Moghnie 2017; Dewachi 2017), the public validation of war-torn people’s suffering—which includes some victim profiles and bans others from such a validation—has barely been considered by many NGOs and UN agencies. Scholars have often traced the disconnections between ‘readings of violence in the everyday and the humanitarian understanding of violence as a traumatic encounter’ (Moghnie 2017: 25), missing its ordinary facets (Das 2007) that may not need professional treatment. To summarise, scholars identify a disconnect between the individual-centered diagnosis of ‘war trauma’ adopted by international humanitarian agencies (Summerfield 1999) and the experiences of suffering and resistance of war-affected communities in Lebanon (Moghnie 2017: 28).

The conception of trauma as an individual-centered event in line with the tradition of Western psychoanalysis is indeed questioned in the contemporary contextualisation trends that challenge the universal childhood approach. Indeed, international psychological assistance often deals with the constructed status of victimhood as a pure

and absolute state, wherein we can tick the box of a present or absent feature (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) regardless of contextual specificities. In contrast, trauma can primarily be defined as a private experience that changes in relation to the social setting of the individual. Socialising meta-trauma as a political issue rather than individualising it under the guise of personal failures would allow subjects to regain individual agency within their society and come to terms with hegemonic forms of trauma management (Zenker and Kumoll 2010). If trauma has gradually lost its exclusively clinical nature (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 276)), defining and assisting traumatised people becomes a social experience that varies within specific societies.

In this framework, as it emerged from our interviews with local aid workers, the principal aim of NGOs' activities is to guarantee protection to vulnerable children (Eg. war-affected or chronic poor) and to prevent them from engaging in early marriage; exploitation and under-age labour; and from radicalising themselves, for instance by joining armed groups in Syria on the opposition or regime sides. As it emerged during interviews with Lebanese and Syrian children in the summer of 2016, wars are not conceived of as events disrupting normalcy, even though the NGOs working with them tend to address them as 'exceptional events'. For instance, among other similar accounts that we collected, 'Ali, a 10-year old boy from Tripoli, emblematically contended that he had always grown up in violence, 'to the extent that I really don't know when exactly a conflict starts and ends'.

The interviewees' views suggested that regional wars have engendered nothing new in that they have been a hyperbolic repetition of cyclic oppressions and aggressions, primarily connected to the Israeli (1978–2000) and Syrian (1976–2005) governments and armies in Lebanon. In this volatile context where catastrophising has served as a modality of governance (Ophir 2010) and resource attraction (Author 2016), the maintenance of harmonious relations with one's own family and community (Summerfield 1995) becomes a more important source of existential certainty and point of call for local resources and life chances within Lebanese society.

The primary politicisation of children is an integral part of such contextual life chances. For instance, 60% of the soccer players we interviewed in summer 2016 emphasised that once grown up, they want to end poverty in their area or become judges

to do justice in Syria and Lebanon. Political aspirations in the Tripoli context are not necessarily associable with future radicalisation, which was instead regularly mentioned in our interviews with NGOs. Radicalisation remains a primary concern because, worldwide, children are sent off to fight in war-torn hotspots, from Colombia and Sudan to Kashmir and Sierra Leone, and considered as either a victim (Warren-Singer 2005) or as victim aggressors (Rosen 2005). Child recruitment has been particularly tackled from a legal and human rights perspective since the United Nations' promulgation of the *Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* in 2002 (Hart 2014). In the Syrian case, since the conflict escalated, children have been regularly recruited by armed groups to become combatants or employed in other ways in their organisational structures. In 2016, a total of 362 cases of child recruitment was reported by the UN Security Council, generally working as guards conducting patrols, often at checkpoints (UNHCR 2016). The International Labour Organisation has recently estimated that among school-age refugee children not educated in Lebanon—a figure estimated by some to total between 300,000 and 400,000—70% to 80% are involved in some form of child labour. The necessity to enhance family income results in children dropping out of school at a very young age. Economic hardships sometimes lead families to marry off their young daughters in order to make life economically sustainable. A UNICEF (2016) report shows that 6% of women in Lebanon aged 20 to 24 marry before they turn 18. Child marriage appears to be on the rise among the more than one million Syrian refugees in the country, with 24% of refugee girls aged 15 to 17 being married. In practice, NGO action is initially aimed at a return to the normal by adopting an aprioristic therapeutic approach to migrant and displaced children, and, at a later stage, addressing local chronic vulnerabilities to achieve cohesion between vulnerable local and refugee groups.

Among our interlocutors, the Lebanese Himaya and the international WCH implement psychosocial support programmes to address Syrian refugee children's trauma (codified through so-called PTSD). Instead, RtP delegates NGOs like WCH to take care of cases for which they do not have the professional expertise. Since its foundation in 2009, Himaya has specialised in child protection services and activities for all children living in Lebanese territory, regardless of nationality (therefore, mostly dealing with Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese children). Since the massive arrival of Syrian displaced people into Lebanon and the financial support provided by international funders (mainly

UNICEF and UNHCR), the refugee crisis has been prioritised. The NGO, hence, started to work primarily with Syrian refugee children while reproducing the northern conception of child protection and the way it has classically been translated into coping and transformative strategies. Himaya's resilience programme provides psychological, social, and juridical services, assuring individual psychosocial assistance for all children aged between 12 and 18. Emergency care missions for abused children can include hospitality in emergency centers for up to three months or—according to specific cases—in resilience centers for up to three years. As a Himaya psychologist told us in fall 2016, the resilience program provides follow-ups with children and their parents, generally for one year, carried out by a psychologist and a social worker, who work together to implement case-based strategies through what is called a community-based approach. Both specialists hold regular weekly sessions with children and their parents. After this initial session, a strategy coordinator runs parent-only sessions aimed at agreeing on a common strategy to develop the child's wellbeing. In this sense, although being a local NGO, Himaya proposes a model of protection and care which adopts strategies and tools that are similar to external psychological approaches, such as those of WCH.

In more detail, WCH adopts the group-based psychosocial life skills methodology—including communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and coping strategies—called (Claessens 2012: 46) I-DEAL. Developed in 2006 by War Child International (WCI), I-DEAL is the key psychosocial component of WCI's integrated programming approach, which includes protection and education to support the holistic wellbeing of children and young people affected by armed conflicts. Using various creative and participatory techniques (e.g., drama, music, drawing, and games), I-DEAL aims to strengthen the moral resilience and self-esteem of children. The intervention is designed for groups of 25–30 children (aged 11–15) and young people (aged 16–20) and consists of six theme-based modules with specific objectives for each module: identity and assessment; dealing with emotions; peer relations; relations with adults; conflict and peace; and the future (War Child Holland 2016). With a total of 17 sessions, each module has two to five sessions of 1.5 hours during a period of four to six months. The localisation approach is, however, not meant to rethink modalities of intervention contextually, rather, as noted in a report, it is implemented through the deployment of local community workers who receive a five-day training session on the international approach (War Child

Holland 2016: 16). This points to the involvement of local NGO workers as a safe and effective way to access children and their communities but, at times, not as knowledgeable interlocutors and programme designers.

In Lebanon, WCH implements the classic I-DEAL and BIG DEAL strategies to support Syrian and non-Syrian children. As a WCH aid worker specified,<sup>1</sup> these programmes are combined with participatory activities, such as play and sports, especially football. This psychosocial care programme is made up of nine child protection focal points that are composed of professional figures, youth leaders, and coaches contributing to implementing child protection and dealing with community affairs. Each focal point involves eight to ten children. The children are selected based on a vulnerability assessment (i.e., out of school, one-parent, disabled, and or refugee children) and reached through municipality networks. As described in the I-DEAL action plan and highlighted by a WCH aid worker,<sup>2</sup> the aim of children's direct participation in decision-making processes is intended to make them agents within their community. Nonetheless, the WCH objectives and pre-established plans often collide with the reality on the ground that children and their communities face (e.g., gender inequalities, parents' opposition, unexpected displacement, and multiple relocations). This ideally induces the NGO to reconsider its development plan strategies but then eventually clashes with a standardised approach to child vulnerabilities. In May 2015, a Tripoli-based Syrian refugee and family breadwinner expressed the idea of such NGO programmes being ineffective:

International NGOs in Tripoli try to implement their cultural views and seek access to local people. They end up addressing families who are not politically persecuted or would never send their kids to fight in Syria. Children develop the same culture as their parents. How can they have tangible results? Their beneficiaries are recruited among their circles. After all, I don't know any local NGO which acts differently.

### **From Trauma to Play and Sport Activities**

The NGO sports and play activities analysed here tend to have two main purposes: addressing the individual and addressing their social environment. Innocence and playfulness have long been intertwined (Amar 2016: 595), and a child's promptness to

play has often been associated with their (in)capacity to assert themselves at a socio-political level. In this framework, NGOs tend to make the child an object of structured, scientific play under the tutelage of re-educated parenthood (El Shakry 1998: 126; Amar 2016: 570). In this sense, childhood has, overall, been configured as a limiting force and engine of dependency, discipline, and vulnerability (Amar 2016: 572). Moreover, play has often been correlated with order-making as a central feature of human societies (Henricks 2006). Nonetheless, in crisis-affected settings, while restoring a sense of agency to children, school and community centers are still considered as fundamental protective factors (Giordano et al. 2014).

WCH and RtP have responded to the Syrian crisis by implementing psychosocial and play activity programmes. Their interventions aim to provide a safe environment for play, learning, and development for children who have been affected by conflict. While the initial purpose of these agencies was addressing Syrian refugees, since the beginning of the Syrian refugee inflow, their scope of intervention has started to encompass a larger number of child vulnerabilities, as an RtP representative on the soccer field affirmed.<sup>3</sup> As he stated, starting with assistance in areas particularly populated by Syrian children, these NGOs now address demographically hybrid regions, where children from different national backgrounds do not seem to integrate. Nonetheless, play and sports activities are mostly organised in separate national groups, in which children hardly end up playing with others who do not belong to their social group. This results in the compartmentalisation of NGO activities along nationality lines. As Abdallah, a child soccer player, told us on a soccer field:<sup>4</sup> ‘I know there are Palestinians and Syrians who come here to play too, but we rarely play together’. NGOs take compartmentalisation as a strategic choice to reflect the requirement to comply culturally with the local social order, without challenging the context:

Sometimes we try to organise mixed teams, but, to some extent, you need to reflect what society wants and how it would join your activities [...]. So, you need to start mixed teams, but without saying that. You do it in the hope that the children will become friends and will change society at a later stage. It’s an interesting circle: you need to say to your organisation what sometimes you are not going to do, and other times you do what you cannot say to people.<sup>5</sup>

Partnerships between different NGOs that challenge the compartmentalisation strategy are, however, on the increase. For instance, the WCH-led partnership with RtP and the Royal Soccer Federation of the Netherlands (KNVB) aim to achieve social cohesion and stability by bringing together different national groups—namely Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians—through sporting activities. As WCH aid workers highlighted,<sup>6</sup> areas where Syrian refugees recently resettled are the most addressed area by INGOs and UN agencies, assuming that social tension is more easily identifiable within demographically hybrid settings. Adopting multi-national social cohesion as a key humanitarian policy is, therefore, an increasing INGO decision. Hybrid sports teams may help end the controversial effects of securitising Palestinian refugeehood in bounded camps throughout the decades (Hanafi 2012; Knudsen 2018). As Sugden (1991) maintained in his study of Northern Ireland, sport can have a focus on integrated mixed teams, and the design and management of sports-based reconciliation projects in the case of children belonging to social groups in conflict. The aforementioned partnership shows how humanitarian work with Syrian and non-Syrian populations is founded on the WCH's ToC and the S4D formula, which refers to the use of sport as a tool for improving people's lives and enlarging people's choices, on the basis that sports-based initiatives can be powerful and cost-effective in achieving individuals' developmental goals.

Several other partnerships between international and local NGOs have been implemented to change society and make it a place where children can easily recover from war traumas, be socially comfortable, and simply be kids again. In this context, the ToC is the guidance for the design and evaluation of NGO programmes. The ultimate purpose is to 'ensure that children grow up in peace, free from fear and violence', as the 2016 WCH annual report reads, and it should help the NGO to identify and provide tools that produce life changes in order to achieve the desired impact. One of those tools is to implement an inclusive integrated care and support system within communities, which results in improved psychosocial wellbeing among children. This NGO intervention thus features a combination of child protection, education, and psychosocial support focused on both the individuality of children and the parent-child relationship since adults remain essential in children's lives and in relation to the broader community, mainly schools (War Child Holland 2016: 23-24).



In light of the ToC, the S4D theory considers sport as a strategic vehicle for positive social, health, and economic change. S4D has been defined as:

The use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution (Lyras and Welty Peachey 2011).

S4D has become a global and legitimate movement after the creation of the United Nations Office for Sports Development and Peace in 2001. Indeed, since then, NGOs have developed projects and programmes where sport is adopted as a tool to achieve developmental objectives and make public spaces safer.

In this framework, while resorting to local coaches to train children puts a contextualisation approach into practice, similar to psychosocial programmes, sports and play programmes are standardised across Lebanon and the different social groups involved. Against this backdrop, fieldwork in the Tripoli governorate indicates that attempts to localise play and sports activities—and team formations—are particularly made by local staff members, while also conveying the official INGO manifesto that initially intended to deliver standardised models. Disentangling the northern from the southern agenda is not possible in this case and, as a result, the North-South binary does not represent an accurate approach. As a positive example, a WCH aid worker<sup>7</sup> argued that the PEACE DEAL and the SPORTS DEAL try to attune sport skills to contextual life chances and the community's aspirations with the support of the Beirut central office. The WCH aid workers<sup>8</sup> also asserted that the NGO sponsors the formation of youth committees on the basis that children express their opinions, participate in the decision-making process, and are, therefore, considered as agents of social change to promote children's participation in society. Transformation supposedly stems from the participation experience through which children learn new skills, acquire confidence, expand networks, and render adult-child relationships more egalitarian. The cumulative effect of such a transformative individual and institutional process is to lead ideally to the broader transformation of society, in which the realisation of children's protection is practically possible, as the RtP country director affirmed.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of S4D strategies has gradually grown within the UN system, in which sport nurtures society by fostering equality, mutual respect, and an acceptance of rules. As such, it is an important vector of social cohesion. Nonetheless, there has often been an overestimation of what play and sports can do, as they can provide a further social opportunity that may be grasped or not by beneficiaries (Schulenkorf 2017). S4D programmes may not necessarily address serious psychosocial issues that children may face in forced migration contexts (Hamilton 2016); also, they could have a negative impact if conducted by untrained personnel (Richards et al. 2014).

As our interviews with WCH, Himaya, and RtP have suggested, NGO projects tend to be conducted in areas where similar needs among diverse social groups of children are identified and assessed. Nonetheless, humanitarian protection programming is generally designed across the whole country with the same strategies—'standardised at a national level'<sup>10</sup>—and eventually remains largely implemented along nationality lines. This emphasises the use of the contextualisation approach as a campaign tool and an innovative strategy, which does not have effective implementation. Moreover, play and sports activities may be over-estimated in their capacity to engender the desired effects of social development and transformation, especially if they still reflect the INGO compartmentalisation strategy.

## **Conclusion**

We have endeavoured to examine the NGO approach to psychosocial support and play/sports activities for children in the context of crises that are normally tackled as unpredictable and solely negative events. We have sought to illustrate how child protection programming is approached—universally and contextually at the same time—in the Syrian refugee context and is used as the most effective prevention measure for social decline with regard to children experiencing displacement and vulnerability. Within this framework, play and sports activities are increasingly integrated with psychosocial programming and are theoretically meant to ensure the active participation of children in shaping a hybrid social space and contributing to social cohesion and stability. Through these processes, 'the poor and marginalised acquire influence [...] and experience that they can use to improve their lives' (Hart 2008: 407). In line with a conflict transformation approach toward humanitarianism (Duffield 2001) and child

protection trends (Myers and Bourdillon 2012), such participatory practices—within which play and sport lie at their core—are meant to transform societies. Although depicted as ‘participatory’, such interventions mainly act on individuals and work toward rendering them as subjects compliant with international—rather than contextual—programming and models of childhood. Identifying local understandings and strategies of child protection, therefore, does not emerge as an easy mission in the official context of international-local humanitarian cooperation. Indeed, both local and international practices are entangled that beneficiaries and local people, as seen, describe as ineffective. This may suggest that endemic models of child protection—maybe even defined differently—could rather emerge outside of institutionalised arenas of assistance provision.

With the medicalisation of child suffering, and through the participatory approaches of play and sports activities, protection is not yet contextualised and rather emerges as a factor of order-making, which incapacitates children to challenge adult-born (as well as humanitarian-born) care. Indeed, children remain in the foreground as ideal vectors of crisis-produced vulnerability and under-development. Also, forced migrant children, as vulnerable subjects inhabiting the humanitarian sphere, likewise serve the inscription of human mobility and child vulnerabilities within catastrophes. In this respect, local NGO workers, even though sharing the local interpretation of crisis—as a continual process rather than a disrupting event—and voicing a strictly contextualised treatment of what can be classified as war trauma, still find it hard to challenge the standardisation of crisis management and universal models of childhood. As seen, community-based proposals and insights are welcomed at times, but they do not represent the full opening to local conceptions and strategies of psychosocial and play/sports programming.

The routinised psychosocial practices and the *a priori* assertion of children’s mere right to play becomes part of a larger pattern of international aid responses that purport to pathologise, heal, and then reintegrate the victim into politically volatile settings. In this sense, international humanitarian responses, through the ludic impetus as well as the provision of therapeutic services, have historically been associated with the urgency, the illusive unpredictability, and the misleading insolvability of crises from Yugoslavia and Rwanda to Gaza and Syria. The field of childhood is still dominated by what many call the Global North (Connell 2007 in Nilan 2011: 22). On the one hand, a considerable

number of local NGOs tend to conform to such Northern models although, at times, emphasising the latter's inappropriateness. On the other, international agendas are also open to local approaches. However, as some local workers and residents pointed out, these discursive and strategic multilateral influences do not translate into effective contextualisation, rather preserving the 'fixity of the universal' (Balagopalan 2019: 26). In this framework, universalisation and contextualisation approaches do not emerge as exclusive; they rather seem to co-exist in complex and muddled forms. However, such a co-existence seems to bring to neither the transformation of the addressed societies nor the actual transformation of humanitarian programming. Universalised and normative types of childhood are yet the only to be globally known.

It is indeed important to highlight how, during fieldwork, the role of local staff—rather than local NGOs as a whole—has emerged as crucial in shedding light on the divide between, on the one hand, external designs and conceptions and, on the other hand, the contextual nuances of vulnerability, need, and play. More research is needed into context-driven approaches to child displacement to push the analysis beyond the picture of a colonial, paternalistic, adult North that offers help and knowledge to an infantilised South (Burman 1994). The predominance of Northern models and views and their universalisation are not the only reality on the ground but also muddled relationships and practices, typical of NGO partnerships, that end up backgrounding individual efforts toward practical contextualisation. If captured, these acts can challenge operational standardisation and the universalisation of childhood in humanitarian programming. In this context, 'healing' childhood was interpreted as a professional act to be combined with play and sports activities that are inherently able to preserve a pre-established and abstracted innocence. The role of psychosocial support and play in the preservation of social order passes through the previously discussed compartmentalisation of humanitarian services, which, by marking out the national identities of the beneficiaries, partially preserves standardised programmes rather than seeking out fully contextual approaches, therefore, missing the very roots of child protection.

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Upcoming