

## **DIHAD 2017: CHILDREN IN CRISES AND DISASTERS**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING 'THE ESSENTIALS' RIGHT FROM THE START AND IN AN UN-INTERRUPTED MANNER**

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Why is it important to get the essentials right for children caught up in wars and disasters, at the very start of their lives? Let me offer five key reasons.

**The first important reason** is the sheer numbers of children affected by disasters and conflicts. According to UNICEF, there are some 535 million children – nearly a quarter of all children in the world - living in crisis circumstances.

They are being left further and further behind in their life's journey even as children in more normal or favourable contexts have advanced their development in leaps and bounds, as poverty rates have fallen, and education and health status have improved. But with more than half a billion children in crisis, it is obvious that that Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved overall.

**The second important reason** comes out of the nature of today's crises which have changed a great deal in terms of their scope and duration.

Today's crises are no longer simple short-term shocks due to single hazards from which people recover and rehabilitate quickly as was the case with traditional natural disasters. While such disasters continue to happen, more complex crises are what is usual nowadays. These include a combination of hazards and vulnerabilities alongside chronic poverty. This means that recurrent shocks and protracted crises that go on for many years are the norm.

Thus, for our half billion children, living in crisis is their new normal way of life. Just think of the millions displaced or besieged in Syria, or the 10 million affected children

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in Yemen or the million displaced in north-eastern Nigeria or that half of all primary school children in Afghanistan are still out of school.

**The third important reason** is that child protection standards are slipping everywhere in the worst crisis situations. Children are particularly prone to being separated from their families, and at risk of physical, mental, and sexual abuse and exploitation, violence and trafficking, early marriages, slavery, recruitment as child soldiers, and disease and malnutrition. So even by the brutal circumstances of the modern world, children fare the worst.

**The fourth important reason** is that a brutalised and deprived generation of children grows up to cause further trouble. There is plenty of social and psychological evidence to indicate that mistreated children become violent abusers and exploiters in their own right.

I saw that with the children of Sierra Leone in the 1990s who were tasked with amputating arms and legs by the rebels or drugged to commit other atrocities. When peace came, these severely disturbed children could not just get on with life.

This means that post-crisis recovery and development for a nation full of traumatised children is not at all easy. In fact, it is not just one “lost generation”. We know that hurts and traumas are transmitted across generations so that cycles of violence recur again and again. And at the centre of this is what happens to children and what they learn to do from what has been done to them. As the traditional saying goes: “As you sow, so you reap”.

**An additional fifth reason** is even more important. This is specifically in relation to the critical importance of getting the essentials right for children – from the very beginning of their young lives. It is only in very recent years that the scientific evidence behind this has been properly established. And, unfortunately, humanitarian aid policy and practice have not fully caught up with the implications. So, it is on this topic of early child development that I will focus my remarks.

We define the **early child period** as the time from conception i.e. the nine or so months inside the mother's womb – till about 8 years from birth. This early child period is the most important developmental phase throughout the human lifespan.

The human brain develops fast in the mother's womb so that a newborn baby already has about a 100 billion brain cells. But it is in the very early years of childhood that the brain matures and makes important internal neural connections. It is the richness and density of this internal brain wiring that determines the ultimate potential of the growing person. The brain reaches half its mature weight by the age of six months and 90% of its final weight by eight years. Furthermore, by the age of four years, half of a person's intelligence potential is already set with the rest developed in the few years immediately afterwards.

Thus, your subsequent life chances are largely determined by the environment you experienced in your mother's womb and the 8 years after you were born. This includes your intelligence, of course, but also your physical health, your mental health, your emotional well-being, your social skills and relationships, your competence in literacy and numeracy, and your participation and contribution to the economic life of your family, community, and nation.

So, will you become obese and get heart disease, or be stunted and weak? Will you be a saint or a sinner, a publically minded citizen or a criminal, smart or stupid, kind or cruel? Well, no doubt, many factors will influence your destiny – but the more and more scientific insights we gain, the more we realise that it is the environment of your mother's womb and early childhood that determines who you are and what you go on to be.

If that is the case, **what is this early life environment that makes all the difference?** There are three principal aspects. **First, and of fundamental importance is nutrition.** Inadequate nutrition before and after birth seriously interferes with brain development and can lead, for example, to mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behaviour problems apart from the obvious that good nourishment is vital for children to fend off numerous diseases. It has been estimated

that eliminating malnutrition among expectant mothers would reduce impairment among their infants by a third.

**The second crucial aspect of the early child environment is adequate stimulation of the growing mind.** This means early exposure to playing and learning, and reduced schooling gaps and interruptions that happen in crisis circumstances. This is important because we know from evidence that educational achievement gaps due to poverty or crisis circumstances persist for life and cannot be fully corrected through later remedial learning. Thus, when a disaster or war affected child has their education interrupted, the impairment of the child's potential is permanent as only part of the loss in child development will be overcome with resumed schooling.

**The third critical dimension of early child development is the prevalence of stress.** Serious early stresses – caused, for example, by trauma and violence, neglect, forced displacements and deficits, all affect the bonding between a child and its carers. These are common in the pressurised circumstances of crises and emergencies. So, it is not surprising that children may suffer effects on brain development such as memory, cognition, and later on, behavioural and emotional difficulties which may be permanent and cause dysfunctional impacts on society.

So, these are the essentials to get right in early child development: nutrition, mental stimulation, and stress management.

Of course, as a generalisation, children are said to be resilient in that even a damaged child raised in difficult circumstances somehow survives and even grows up as best as it can and adapts to the environment – however unfavourable it is – to do the best it can in life. While this may be true in the general sense that humans are very resilient by nature – because the survival instinct that is inherent in all of us is very strong – the reality is that such survivors are not necessarily contributing their best to society. Because too much of their energy and capacities is occupied by the challenges of just surviving. Development and growth require a much higher level of energy and capacitation.

If we believe that young children should grow up to be strong citizens that build up and progress their country, the converse is that a nation that consists of millions of damaged children can't really develop properly.

Just think of the generation of children incarcerated in the bloody sands of Darfur, or the starving children of Yemen and South Sudan, or the Afghani and Syrian children who have seen and experienced too many terrible things. Even if these conflicts were, somehow, to miraculously finish tomorrow, their legacy will last for at least three generations: first, the current generation of directly-affected children; second, the children of these children who will inherit the trauma of their parents and become dysfunctional themselves; and, third, the grandchildren who will be brought up in grievance and anger on the stories of the wrongs done to their ancestors. That is at least how long it will take to recover even as the risk of renewed conflict remains.

It is for all these reasons that it is so vital to examine how well we are doing in helping and protecting children in conflict and crisis situations. While mothers and children are well recognised as priorities in humanitarian action, the additional reason is that we need to grow healthy generations of children - physically, mentally, and emotionally –if the world is to get over existing crises and prevent new ones. Only healthy, balanced children will find solutions to problems that seem to elude us – perhaps because we are too damaged ourselves.

However, our current emergency and humanitarian approaches fall well short. Perhaps, because we are trying to do too much for too many? And so, not making a sufficient difference. For example, our food aid programmes, with their stretched resources, may keep people alive but not adequately nourished. Our education programmes don't engage enough, producing barely stimulated kids. And while we get better and better at providing wholesale relief we get less and less able to provide love at the individual level - that being the third and perhaps most difficult component of the environment that shapes child development, and the ingredient that is most lacking in crises.

Perhaps this means that we will need to make even tougher choices at a time of increasing humanitarian funding gaps. To be more provocative, why keep too many people just alive when it would be better for the world overall to target young children and their carers more completely; so that they are “more fully alive” and grow up strong, and enabled to develop their full potential and go on to find real and sustainable solutions to world problems.

Thus, shocking as it may sound, humanitarian reasons alone may not be sufficient in deciding who to help and how. And the humanitarian principle of targeting resources according to need may be worthy but not sufficient either. A dimension of impact is essential. In other words, if there is a choice between, on one hand, a humanitarian intervention that helps many needy persons a little bit in the present and, on the other hand, another humanitarian intervention that may help selected people who may change the situation that caused the crisis, then what would you do?

In conclusion, I think we know what are the essentials for children in crisis situations and why these are important. But getting them right in an uninterrupted manner is a much more difficult challenge because of the dilemmas raised by the implications of the science of early child development.