Chapter 12

Sierra Leone, Child Soldiers and Global Flows of Child Protection Expertise

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In the field of international struggles for the protection of children affected by war, there are many 'firsts' in the case of Sierra Leone. The peace accord signed in Lomé in 1999 was the first African peace accord to specifically mention the reintegration of former child soldiers. The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone was the first UN peacekeeping mission to include a child protection officer. The Special Court for Sierra Leone was the first international criminal tribunal to convict individuals of war crimes for conscripting and enlisting children.[1]

Since then, the field of child protection for children affected by war has only expanded. Disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation programmes for children are now standard practice in nations where child soldiers exist. In 2006, Thomas Lubanga of the DRC became the first person ever arrested under a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for the war crime of conscripting and enlisting children under the age of fifteen years and using them to participate actively in hostilities. Across the world, there are currently over sixty child protection advisers in seven UN peacekeeping missions and in two UN political missions, and there is a move to include child protection officers in all peacekeeping missions.[2] The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict notes that

> mainstreaming the issue of children and armed conflict in United Nations system-wide activities and within United Nations entities is a central strategy to ensure the practical application of standards and norms for the protection of children. Significant progress has been made, particularly in the peace and security sector. The General Assembly and the Security Council have led the way in enabling more concerted action

by the United Nations system as a whole on children affected by armed conflict.[3]

Furthermore, the UN Security Council has asked regional organizations to include 'child protection expertise' in their secretariats and development of child protection action plans.

This phenomenal growth in the institutional development of child protection for children affected by war mirrors the speed with which the international community adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely and quickly adopted human rights convention in history. At the risk of sounding cynical, it seems clear that child protection for children affected by war is a growth industry, creating new employment and new expertise around the world. The focus of this chapter is these remarkable transnational processes of institutionalization and knowledge production. At issue are the following questions: What is child protection expertise? Where does it come from? How is it created? How does it move around the world?

I address these questions through an exploration of child protection expertise as it was deployed in Sierra Leone during and after the conflict there (1991 to 2002). The war in Sierra Leone is known in the world for three things (rightly or wrongly): blood diamonds, amputation as a weapon of war and child soldiers. Although children and youth's participation in violent conflict is not new (Rosen 2005; Shepler 2010b) the modern phenomenon of 'child soldier' is new. My dissertation (Shepler 2005a) was based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in interim care centres for demobilized child soldiers and in a number of communities where children were reintegrating. In it I described how the process of child soldiers' reintegration drew on two different models of childhood: the Western, represented by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Sierra Leonean, represented by traditions of child labour, fosterage, and training. My work focuses on the conjuncture of the global and the local models of childhood, describing how in practice child soldiers are made at the intersection of the two. Between these two models there are clear power differences, the Western model better funded and based on child protection expertise. Despite the obvious power asymmetry, however, I do not regard this encounter as merely an imposition. Indeed, I found the intersection of the two models to be a productive site for all concerned, with some Sierra Leoneans strategically using child rights discourse for their own ends and international child rights practitioners honing their models for export to other postconflict contexts. Child rights discourse and child protection practice did ease the reintegration of some children and youth while also benefiting some local NGOs and development workers. But it also had broader political effects in Sierra Leone, affecting what Sharon Stephens (1995) calls 'the cultural politics of childhood' and creating new subjectivities, especially for children and youth.

Contending Models of Human Rights

Let us take a step back and discuss some of the contending models of how 'universal' discourses such as child rights interact with particular local contexts. Mark Goodale, in his introduction to the volume *The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law Between the Global and the Local,* notes that

> different orientations to the problem of human rights as a normative category can be usefully placed on a spectrum of degrees of expansiveness. At one end of the spectrum … are the different variations of the view that 'human rights' refers to the body of international law… A somewhat more expansive orientation … consider[s] the ways in which the *concept* of human rights … is itself normative. [T]he other end of the spectrum … treat(s) human rights as one among several consequential transnational discourses. (2007: 6–8)

Goodale calls this last the discursive approach to human rights and argues that to conceptualize human rights as one among several key transnational discourses is to elevate social practice as both an analytical and methodological category. 'Discursive approaches to human rights assume that social practice is, in part, constitutive of the idea of human rights itself' (Goodale 2007: 8).

The discursive approach, with its focus on the importance of social practice, is much more satisfying to an anthropologist than a theory of simple norm diffusion that is totally top down and does not consider power in the analysis. It takes seriously the actions of the people on the ground who are the supposed targets of rights-based interventions. A social practice approach is also more satisfying than a theory of imposition that sees any kind of universal rights discourse as an imperialism of the West, ignoring the contributions of Africans themselves. Seeing rights discourse and practice as a form of neocolonialism or governmentality is also top-down but has the opposite problem of an exclusive focus on power.

Sally Engle Merry finds a happy medium by exploring 'the practice of human rights, focusing on where and how human rights concepts and institutions are produced, how they circulate, and how they shape everyday lives and actions' (Merry 2006b: 39). Her approach is built on the concept of individual translators, or intermediaries:[4]

> Intermediaries play a critical role in translating human rights concepts to make them relevant to local situations. These ideas become localized through the work of individuals who serve as translators between transnational and local arenas. They are people who hold a double consciousness, combining both human rights conceptions and local ways of thinking about grievances. They move between them, translating local

problems into human rights terms and human rights concepts into approaches to local problems. … On the one hand they have to speak the language of international human rights that the international donors prefer in order to get funds. On the other hand, they have to present their initiatives in cultural terms that will be acceptable to at least some of the local community. As they scramble for funds, they often need to select issues that the international donors are interested in, such as female genital cutting, women's empowerment, or trafficking, even though local populations may be more interested in clean drinking water, changed inheritance laws, or good roads (Merry 2006a: 229).

Merry's model, then, is that first human rights are localized through the work of good local translators, and then ideas about discourse and practice move around transnational networks. There is much to recommend this approach, but the model is still essentially top-down and maintains a polarization between the global centre and various local peripheries.[5] I want to move away from the idea that expertise comes from the top down and is imposed on locals (though that is certainly still the model in many Sierra Leonean villages I worked in). I do not want to lose what is useful about Merry's work on the vernacularization of rights, but at the end of Merry's work, one gets the feeling that the local folks, though active translators and hence agentive, cannot leave their locations. Local folks can have local knowledge, which is then taken up and used by the global apparatus. One gets the sense that locals may be moving ideas up hierarchies, especially ideas about how they have cleverly localized rights in their respective contexts, but that as representatives of the local, they have no chance to leave their spot on the ground. Merry admits as much, saying, 'Localizing human rights does not typically change the meaning and structure of human rights. The human rights approach retains its distinctive cultural conception of the person, embedded in the human rights documents, which values autonomy, security of the body, and equality' (Merry 2006a: 229).

Tentative Steps towards a New Approach

My search for another way of understanding what I was seeing in Sierra Leone has led me to *expertise*.[6] In my use of the term, I turn to scientific studies as a way of understanding the politics and social organization of the creation of expertise, and of addressing power head on.

What Is Expertise?

In a review of expertise for the Annual Reviews of Anthropology, Carr (2010) explains,

> Expertise is something people do rather than something people have or hold … (it) is inherently interactional because it involves the participation of objects, producers, and consumers of knowledge.… Expertise is always ideological because it is implicated in semistable hierarchies of value that authorize particular ways of seeing and speaking as expert.… These practices are routinized and organized as institutional boundaries are forged between different ways of knowing the very same thing, spawning the social configurations we call profession, craft, and discipline. (ibid.: 18)

This description resonates with my work on former child soldiers. Ethics for the care of children and models for their reintegration after social crisis already existed in postwar Sierra Leone, but they did not count as expert knowledge. They were local knowledge, or culture.

Carr also talks about naming practices that distinguish expert knowledge from everyday knowledge, and again, his description resonates with what happened around child protection and child rights in Sierra Leone. It was not that people did not know how to take care of their children, but that they were exposed to a new expert language to describe it, what I have called 'the Rites of the Child' (Shepler 2005b). As Mitchell (2002) argues, the rise of modern Egyptian technopolitical expertise would have been impossible without the figure of the Egyptian peasant as nonintellectual Other (cited in Carr 2010: 22). Similarly, child protection experts cannot exist without Africans who do not know how to protect their children.

But expertise is about more than creating and maintaining hierarchies. From a more philosophical direction, Harry Collins and Robert Evans' book *Rethinking Expertise* (2007) presents the 'Periodic Table of Expertises' and discusses ubiquitous and specialist expertises, meta-expertises and meta-criteria, ranging from 'beer mat knowledge' to technical connoisseurship. It includes experience, track record, certification, etc. They conclude that credentials are not a very useful means of judging expertise and find experience and track record to be better 'meta-criteria.'

What Is Child Protection Expertise?

Almost all child protection actors operate from a 'rights-based framework', but child protection expertise includes more than just knowledge of child rights. Child protection in conflict and postconflict settings is certainly also built on some disciplinary foundations: psychology, education, social work and so on. I have argued for the importance of ethnography in understanding the situation of child soldiers in child protection settings, but I am up against scholars such as Theresa Betancourt, who use psychological testing to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorder among former child soldiers (Betancourt et al. 2010). Betancourt's

work is emblematic of another type of expertise: clinical, for which Sierra Leone is a case of a more generalizable condition. She and her team move from case to case administering psychological protocols and diagnosing pathologies. This sort of expertise is undergirded by the medical model and the disciplinary institutions of the academy. Meanwhile, scholar-practitioners like Wessells (2007) and Boothby, Strang and Wessells (2006) apply a less 'scientific', more practice-based knowledge that grows out of the more practical disciplines of social work and social psychology.

However, since child protection in conflict and postconflict contexts is such a new field of endeavour, perhaps only a few decades old, a great deal of the expertise is based on practical experience. In only a limited number of cases has programming even been attempted, and most of the tacit knowledge undergirding child protection expertise is about what has worked and not worked in different places. Thus the building programmes in Sierra Leone ten years ago relied heavily on knowledge of what had been done in Mozambique, Uganda and Liberia (round one interventions).

One revealing example is the pressure that came from international child protection NGOs to find (and fund) Sierra Leonean healing rituals in an astounding conflation of all African contexts: since traditional healing rituals existed in Mozambique and Uganda, the NGOs reasoned, they must exist in Sierra Leone. Transnational child protection expertise assumed there would be 'local' ways of dealing with war-affected children across all African contexts. In the case of Sierra Leone there was no such healing ritual, my informants told me, but savvy local 'healers' were able to concoct a ritual that satisfied the international staff. The really revealing point is that the power asymmetry between the global and local models is so great that child protection expertise is not threatened by the adoption of 'traditional healing rituals' – on the contrary, putting the 'traditional' in its right place is an important part of its function. The logic of transnational child protection expertise undoes ethnographic specificity, conflating all 'local' settings.

Three Groups of People with Child Protection Expertise

In an effort to think through the various types of child protection expertise present in the case of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, as well as those expertises' relationship to knowledge and experience, I have come up with a preliminary typology.

The first type of expertise – that of former child soldiers themselves – comes from personal experience. Certain former child soldiers, like Ishmael Beah (author of best seller *A Long Way Gone,* 2007, famously sold at Starbucks) and others, possess embodied expertise and have, in some ways, traded it on the child protection lecture circuit. Ishmael Beah became a poster boy for child soldiers as the Sierra Leone war became known for child soldiers, and a great many of the public's general ideas about what child soldiers need come from that book. They

are tokens in a way, but also powerful lobbying tools. I have recently been asked, by organizers of panels at places like the United States Institute of Peace, if I knew any former child soldiers for their panel: 'A girl, or someone with a disability would be even better!' The commodification of the former child soldier is a clear phenomenon, but it is not exactly what I am talking about.[7]

The second group of people with a claim to child protection expertise are employees of international child protection NGOs. For the most part they are Americans and Europeans, and they generally have the educational certification (though not always). But as I have noted above, child protection expertise is also very practical. It comes from a 'track record' of successfully implementing programmes. It operates on the currency of 'lessons learned' and 'best practices'. This group of experts has mobile knowledge. They move from context to context and have extensive transnational networks. They have put programmes into practice elsewhere. They showed up in Sierra Leone from postings in Mozambique and Uganda, and went on to postings in Liberia and Sri Lanka. Theirs is 'practical' knowledge.

The third group of experts, and those I am most interested in, are local NGO workers. Like Merry's translators, they use their so-called double consciousness to move back and forth between local expertise and, always in opposition to it, transnational expert knowledge. Within the devastated postwar Sierra Leonean economy, they are part of the new middle class, a professional NGO class whose professionalism is made possible only by international funding and transnational networks.

Of course there are other levels, including workers at smaller NGOs who try to access knowledge in order to access funds. Coulter (2004) has described these 'briefcase NGOs' in Sierra Leone. To the extent that they have managed to learn the language of child protection, representatives of local communities, headmen and schoolmasters also have gained a bit of expertise just by learning how to tell the NGOs and international NGOs (INGOs) what they want to hear. That is, they are somewhat less successful translators. They may have participated in a 'training of trainers.' They may be able to enumerate the victims in their community. INGOs have 'empowered' them, but only to a certain extent. 'Sensitization', the ubiquitous tool of norm diffusion, is supposed to spread child rights knowledge but still maintains the boundaries between local knowledge and expert knowledge (Shepler 2005b).

How Does Expertise Work?

Expertise involves, among other things, the establishment of asymmetries among people and between people and objects. It creates boundaries between expert and non-expert knowledge (even if they are very close in content). For example, while the war was still ongoing in the late 1990s before international NGOs were seriously active, local NGOs such as Christian Brothers and Children Affected by War were doing child protection activities their own way, building on pre-

existing programmes for street kids and orphanages, and often making do with very little by drawing on Sierra Leonean models of child protection like child fosterage. Though in many ways they were doing the job in better, more sustainable ways before the international players arrived, they were outspent and out-expertised when actors such as UNICEF, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee arrived. In Sierra Leone, expertise bore a certain international imprimatur. Should we see this state of affairs as primarily the imposition of the 'Western' way of doing things, simply as power? I believe there is more going on.

Individual Career Trajectories and Actor Networks

Perhaps I can best illustrate this relationship between local and international expertise with an example. My friend Mohammed[8] and my Sierra Leonean husband taught together at the same secondary school in the early 1980s. Mohammed went on to run a local NGO in Sierra Leone for former child soldiers, and was a skilled translator of transnational forms and of local knowledge. He eventually left Sierra Leone to put his child protection expertise to work for UNICEF in Afghanistan (which at the time had great need of staff but little appeal as a destination). After that, he was transferred to several other African postings. What are the components of Mohammed's child protection expertise?

Certainly he learned a lot from his experience in Sierra Leone as the head of a successful child protection NGO, but I believe it was his ability as a translator that made his international career possible. As I said earlier, understandings of local contexts in a handful of national cases form the knowledge base of this relatively new field; therefore being Sierra Leonean is an important part of Mohammed's expertise. Sierra Leone's disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation programmes for children have been deemed successful and are now models for others. The structure of child protection expertise enables this by conflating all local knowledge, as already discussed. Once Mohammed grasped local knowledge in one setting, he could then move seamlessly to another 'local' context and in some ways continue to represent 'the local' in a different national context. Mohammed can trade on his Sierra Leone experiences, and also his Sierra Leonean-ness, not as a token but as part of what we might call an actor-network (Latour 1987). Understanding his experience allows us to move beyond Merry's model of locals forever stuck 'on the ground' in their own settings. Mohammed was a skilled translator but also a mobile actor, contributing to an evolving body of child protection expertise as he moved.

Conclusion

One could argue that this whole chapter is based on the observation that a skilful Sierra Leonean got a job with the UN that he would not have got, had war not

come to his country. There are no grand conclusions here; I have only reframed my original questions about what happens at the intersection of global and local models of childhood by shifting my focus to the nature of transnational child protection expertise to ask whether and how local-level expertise can move in that system. What are the conditions in which individual Sierra Leoneans make use of or contribute to that system? How often are Sierra Leoneans able to act in ways other than representing 'local knowledge'? And how, therefore, does transnational expertise work to replicate existing power relations or create new challenges to existing power relations?

One thing is clear: Sierra Leone is the type of 'case' of child protection on which expertise is built. Sierra Leone is now a node in child-protection actor networks. Sierra Leone, as a laboratory of the most traumatized kids, has a new kind of capital. The dance therapy practitioner goes there to work with a set of war-traumatized youth. The psychological tests woman goes there to design and test her trauma protocols. The participatory research with girl mothers happens there. Others (e.g., Kanyako 2010) have written about the effects of aid flows directed towards reconstruction in postwar Sierra Leone. I want to ask how Sierra Leone has been affected by transnational flows of 'expertise'.

The actor-network model is a good extension of Merry's work because it allows for more creative energy from the bottom up and sees all the participants in the 'global assemblage' (Collier and Ong 2005) as active participants in its creation. Translators are no longer stuck in one location, but they are in some ways stuck being representatives of 'the local', even when they move to different localities. Clearly there is more research to be done on this topic. These are just preliminary thoughts towards a reframing of a research agenda. I believe the next step is to take Merry further and, after accounting for the various particularities of the localization of different sorts of human rights in different locations, to go beyond the relatively top-down model by focusing more on the kinds of moves (for individuals, but also for ideas and practices) that are possible within those various actor networks.

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Notes

1. See Shepler (2010a) for more detail on these and other 'firsts' in child protection for children affected by war.
2. Since 2001 Child Protection Officers have been posted with Peacekeeping Operations in Sierra Leone, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Haiti and the Sudan. See http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/children/cpa.shtml for more information.
3. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Mainstreaming the Issue of Children and Armed Conflict'. Retrieved 25 September 2011 from http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/mainstreaming.html.
4. See also Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan (2002) on 'local development brokers'.
5. Merry acknowledges this to some extent: 'The term *local* is, of course, deeply problematic here, as is its oppositional twin *global*. In the context of discussions of transnationalism, local tends to stand for lack of mobility, wealth, education, and cosmopolitanism, as well as recalcitrant particularity, whereas global encompasses the ability to move across borders, to adopt universal moral frameworks, and to share in the affluence, education, and cosmopolitan awareness of elites from other parts of the world' (Merry 2006b: 39).
6. This move is in some ways driven by my time as an Assistant Professor in Washington, DC, and the omnipresent insistence on 'policy relevance'. As a new participant in various child protection networks that include donors and practitioners, I encountered an unfamiliar knowledge economy and discovered I was an 'expert'. I was even invited to talk about my work at the United Nations by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, a moment when I most felt a part of transnational child protection expertise.
7. I have spoken elsewhere about the uses of the child soldier narrative in Shepler (2006); see also Meyers (2009) and Coundouriotis (2010).
8. A pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

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