

Praise for *Youth and Post-conflict Reconstruction Agents of Change*

“This book serves as an important addition to the body of literature which looks at the relationship between youth and conflict. While the wealth of literature around this subject focuses on the potential for destabilization as a result of a youth bulge, this publication contributes an important step in beginning to identify what the proper steps of addressing youth needs in the post-conflict setting should look like, as well as some of the expected results when these needs are addressed. The volume is unique in its approach to carefully consider independent variables such as international involvement related to youth, domestic youth policy, and cultural and environmental factors.”

—**L. Randolph Carter**, Center for Peacebuilding International

“An ambitious and detailed study of a vitally important issue, this book offers significant insights about youth and conflict. Timely and very well-written, Schwartz has successfully synthesized a number of different variables, theories, cases, and policy areas, into a compelling and useful analysis. This book will be of interest to students, scholars, NGO personnel and policymakers worldwide.”

—**Siobhan McEvoy-Levy**, Butler University and author of *Troublemakers or Peacemakers? Youth and Post-Accord Peacebuilding*.

“Stephanie Schwartz’ book on youth in post-conflict reconstruction is a very welcome addition to the literature on youth and violence. Schwartz forcefully argues that we need to pay attention to the positive roles that youth may play in post-conflict reconstruction. Most importantly, she identifies and discusses strategies that may contribute to breaking the cycle of violence. This book will help change the perception of youth as primarily being a threat to one of youth representing an opportunity.”

—**Henrik Urdal**, The International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)

YOUTH AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION



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YOUTH

AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION

AGENTS OF CHANGE



STEPHANIE SCHWARTZ

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Foreword

During my career working in post-conflict zones, I have seen and experienced all types of reconstruction efforts. Some have failed and others have been successes. Each had its own set of goals, parameters, and subjects, but few have focused on engagement with youth in peacebuilding after war. Youth are pivotal to the success or failure of any post-conflict peacebuilding or development exercise, especially in those countries in which they participated in the conflict. Stephanie Schwartz's book, *Youth and Post-conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change*, is a remarkable and welcome volume that focuses on this neglected group.

This book not only asks what role youth can play in post-conflict reconstruction but also features the author's finding that youths in war-torn societies are neither necessarily forces of instability nor passive victims, as they are often popularly portrayed. They themselves can be agents of peace given the right constellation of reconstruction programs. As Schwartz argues, this constellation must not only address the protection and reintegration needs of youths but also empower them.

My own experience in working with youth in Africa confirms this thesis. I have witnessed a great number of cases where efforts fall apart due to the lack of attention to youth empowerment. At the same time, I have also seen the difference young people can make toward establishing a lasting peace, particularly in circumstances where individual attention has been giving to the young person or persons.

A few years ago, I met "Andy," a youngster from Uganda who at the tender age of nine was abducted and enlisted into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). During his conscription Andy was forced by a commander to kill his own brother in a most brutal fashion. Six years later, Andy escaped from the LRA. With his parents having long since fallen victim to the LRA, he located an aunt with whom he was able to settle. However, unable to cope with his profound sense of guilt over what he had done to his brother, he had trouble adapting to his new-found freedom and constantly contemplated suicide.

It was at this point that I was introduced to Andy through the nongovernmental organization Invisible Children. I immediately understood how psychologically destructive his experiences had been and asked him what, if anything, he needed to move forward. He replied that he wanted to see and speak to the commander who had made that fateful order for him to kill his older brother. I agreed to help him and quickly tracked down the commander, who by this time had been granted amnesty. At first the commander was unwilling to meet Andy. He told me that he had started a new life and did not wish to face old demons. However, over time, I made him see that without this meeting, Andy would never be able to move on.

When the commander and the boy first met, the boy was trembling, overcome with raw emotion. The commander did not even recall who he was, which suggested to me just how unremarkable—and common—that day must have been for him. Even so, Andy proceeded to recount the story of his brother's death, so upset he could barely get the words out. After listening to Andy, the commander said that he wished he could change what happened, but that he could not and was sorry for what he had done. To my surprise, as the conversation drew to a close, Andy shook the commander's hand, and then gave him a hug. With the help of his aunt and Invisible Children, Andy now attends university in Uganda and regularly speaks to young children about the need to stay in school and work hard. Although Andy knows his wounds will never completely heal, he no longer sees himself as a killer, but as a role model and future leader.

Another young person that came to mind while I read this volume was “Renaldo,” who fought in Mozambique's civil war as a young boy and who benefited from the government's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program in the late 1990s. The DDR program helped the country transition from war to peace by ensuring a safe environment, encouraging ex-combatants to reintegrate with society. While Renaldo received food, a stipend, and education and was reunited with family, allowing him a fresh start, he too suffered from guilt because of his participation in war. Even with all the support from the DDR program, Renaldo never felt like he belonged. Although his material needs were met, the reintegration side of the program did not include a psychosocial element. Fortunately, soon after Renaldo began his new life, he took an interest in soccer and began playing with a local team. The experience helped him understand rules and fair play and gave him the opportunity to socialize with other children—as children—again.

As time passed, teachers and other students came to recognize his talent on the field. He gradually rose up the ranks, as coaches continually recommended him to more accomplished leagues and teams, and he eventually became a member of Mozambique's national soccer team. I met him after he was already famous, a leader to his community. Knowing the horrors he had experienced as a youth, I

could not help but be struck by his remarkable transformation—how someone’s sense of self and worth could be so radically altered in a short number of years.

While individual cases are important, I have also seen the change that occurs in larger groups within society with the right type of support. Just as war has witnessed the forced conscription of boys, it has also witnessed the forced conscription of girls, who are at times overlooked in reconstruction programming. While boys are abducted solely to become fighters and killers, young girls are abducted not only to fight in the bush but also to serve as sex slaves, cooks, porters, and child bearers. Indeed, senior soldiers take several wives at a time, including very young girls, to service their needs and provide them with children. Those girls who bear children are known as child mothers.

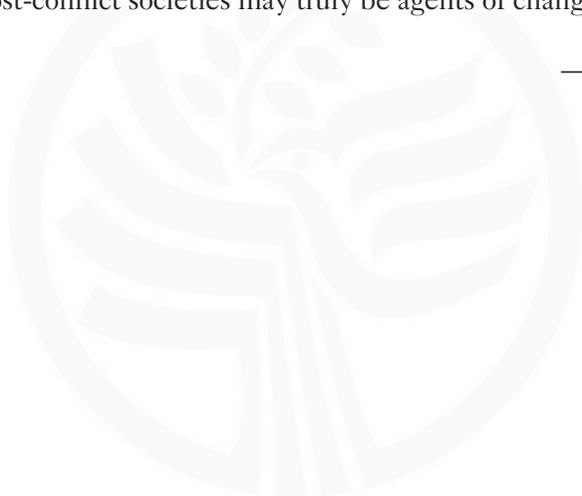
Child mothers lucky enough to avoid death and to escape with their children often face rejection by the very societies from which they were stolen. Some return to families that are simply too impoverished to feed additional mouths, while others are turned away for having given birth to children of killers. Although most of these girls are eager to enroll in a formal education program and become productive members of society, with no one to take care of their children and little chance of finding potential mates, they must abandon such hopes.

With the help of local and international programs, many of these child mothers have bonded together in the face of this rejection and formed local education groups of their own in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda. Through these groups, they receive education in a trade. For example, they might learn how to make jewelry, how to weave baskets, or how to run a catering business. Members of these groups then help one another sell their products locally, nationally, and even internationally. Through these businesses, the child mothers earn money to support themselves and their children. This success has also enabled some girls to help support their extended families or to find new husbands. Having met many of these girls through my own work in Uganda and elsewhere, I have witnessed firsthand how they define themselves not by the crushing poverty, abuse, and social rejection that they once experienced, but by what they have since accomplished and by the space that they have created for themselves in society.

I relate these stories not only in support of this volume’s central argument, but also to help put a face to the subject matter that Schwartz so assuredly examines on the following pages. I know from both personal and professional experience that the stories that I have presented here are the rare exception, and not the common rule. But I specifically chose to relate such inspirational examples of success to highlight a common thread that runs through them and that should run through all post-conflict protection, reintegration, and empowerment programs. That thread is identity—or, more specifically, the reconstruction of identity. We should not forget that when we speak of reconstruction, we are not just speak-

ing about the reconstruction of countries or societies, but of individual lives—in short, of a person’s sense of self and worth. Although not all youth will be able to draw on the emotional maturity of Andy, the physical gifts of Renaldo, or the supportive network of the child mothers to transform themselves, it is my hope that scholars will draw on this volume and continue to develop this vital line of inquiry. I also hope that policymakers and practitioners will draw on the singular findings in this book when designing their own courses of action so that one day all youths in post-conflict societies may truly be agents of change.

—Betty Bigombe



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