Synopsis of Ziba Vaghri’s presentation for CRAN meeting of January 2016

As a first time attendee of this forum, I had put myself down to participate in “children in armed conflicts” or “child solders” theme. However, my eventual presentation was comprised of bullet points that summarized my reaction to the STM documents as well as the other presentations of the forum. I have summarized them under 3 main points:

1. Throughout the Moving The Shakers (MTS) documents we clearly heard the resounding voice of our youth articulating an acute need for education. This indeed aligns with what the professionals working with and for youth, as well as the child advocates, all identify as priority area. This alignment is not only another testimony to the fact that education is an urgent need, but it also indicates that “educating our youth” may serve as a safe place to start working side by side with our youth on designing educational tools, resources and educational sessions. A different kind of tool designed by the youth and for the youth that could exemplify how their right to participation can be enacted in a genuine and non-tokenistic manner is in great need.

2. We also heard throughout the document how the youth enjoyed and exercised their rights to participation and expression of opinion when they are given comfortable space to do so. Some youth identified the absence of adults as a criterion for this ease/comfort and the adults’ presence as a cause for unease. While it is understandable that such space becomes more conducive to participation by all when the adults are not involved, it is my hope that we (the adults) can gradually find our way to these spaces and learn to coexist, create opportunities to start constructive dialog, and work on issues of common interest such as the above-mentioned issue of education.

3. On the issue of “children in armed conflicts”, I noticed that the youth participating in the STM events spoke about this issue assuming that children living in conflict areas are still living inside institutionally governed worlds where laws are reinforced and justice seems at least possible. This really is not the case most of the time!

Often these children live in environments where some catastrophe has wiped out all social structures and protective mechanisms, the capacity of the state to protect childhood has been seriously weakened if not totally lost, and the gang, thugs and bullies have taken over. In fact, not only is there no mechanism to protect the children caught up in these conflicts, but the children are also put in the positions that they are often forced to collude with the dysfunctional status quo in order to protect their families.

When the conflict results from an ongoing or acute issue, such as financial collapse, while the capacity of the state is weakened, other structures, such as the communities, may be viable and step up and take over to protect the children (eg. Village Grandmothers in Africa raising groups of AIDS orphans).
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However, when the capacity of the state to protect children has been shredded by devastations such as civil war, all the social structures become dysfunctional or disintegrate.

The legal power to protect children from conflict requires a functioning state apparatus with all the machinery that goes with it. Social intention, awareness, social mobilization or anything based on social media fails to generate legal action when there is simply no legal mechanism to invoke.

Additionally, war brings out the worst in people as terror drives them to desperation. When there is no legally effective authority there is no formal constraint on behaviour so respect for CRC and other internationally accepted norms fails to compel good behaviour.