

Institution: University of East London (UEL)
Unit of Assessment: 23
Title of case study: Improving the protection and welfare of children living in difficult circumstances in Rwanda, Bangladesh and around the world.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research conducted at UEL on the protection, participation and welfare of children living in difficult circumstances in the aftermath of conflict and in contexts of urban and rural poverty has had wide-ranging impacts on international policy and practice. Benefits have arisen particularly from its influence on national policies for orphans and vulnerable children in Rwanda; on international professional standards and 'best practice'; and on legal asylum in the USA. It has been used directly by governmental policymakers in Rwanda and Bangladesh and aid organisations in Africa and Asia, and has formed the basis for the development of new learning and advocacy resources used to improve the services offered by social work professionals in Africa, Asia and the UK. Through its direct impact on these individuals and organisations, the research has delivered indirect benefits to millions of children and adults around the world.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Between 1997 and 2003, Giorgia Donà (Senior Lecturer at UEL since January 2000; Reader since October 2006; Professor since October 2012) conducted four nationwide studies in Rwanda and Bangladesh on the protection and welfare of children living in difficult circumstances. These were funded in various combinations by Unicef, Italian Cooperation, the UK Department for International Development, and Irish Aid. They were conducted in partnership with the Governments of Rwanda and Bangladesh and with Save the Children (UK and Sweden), whose representatives advised on the research process, facilitated access to participants, and contributed to the dissemination of key research findings. The first two of these studies, which focused on family reunification and street children in Rwanda, were initiated prior to Donà joining UEL. The study on street children (conducted in Rwanda in 1998 but analysed and written up predominantly after 2000) was undertaken in partnership with Dr. Veale (University College Cork, Ireland). However, a substantial portion of the research - as well as the analysis and majority of the writing up of all four studies - has been conducted since 2000. So, too, has the fieldwork for the third and fourth studies, which examined foster care in Rwanda (2000) and children living outside parental care in Bangladesh (2001). Donà led the studies on family reunification, foster care, and children outside parental care. As such, she was responsible for their planning and implementation, including the management of research teams, supervision of data analysis, writing up of results and dissemination strategy. The impacts described here arise particularly from the research conducted for, and findings of, the 2000 and 2001 studies.</p> <p>Despite their different geographical and situational foci, these studies shared a common interest in promoting child protection in post-conflict environments and increasing child participation in research, in line with Article 3 (best interest of the child), Article 10 (family reunification) and Article 20 (children deprived of a family) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. All four studies deployed a similar and distinctive methodology consisting of an initial review of policy documents and practice reports, followed by a period of empirical research involving interviews, focus group discussions and participatory research techniques with children; semi-structured interviews and/or focus group discussions with family and community members; and interviews with government officials and service providers. The studies on foster care and children outside parental care took a particularly distinctive approach, engaging groups of children as advisors throughout the research process. In total, 1,728 children and adults participated in the four studies.</p> <p>Donà's research may be distinguished from much of the previous work on child protection and social welfare by virtue of this integrative, holistic and multi-layered approach, and by its positioning of children's experiences in social contexts and in dialogue with those of families, service providers and policy makers, rather than in isolation. The studies described here explored the experiences, voices and wellbeing of refugee and marginalized children generally, and of children in conflict areas more specifically. The research included consideration of the life experiences, expectations, protection and care arrangements for unaccompanied minors in the aftermath of conflict and for children outside parental care due to poverty or other family</p>

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circumstances. Child protection issues, humanitarian assistance and development debates were all considered within social care frameworks and via participatory methodologies.

Important insights from the studies included: the need to understand local contexts (especially post-conflict environments) which influence children's preference either for reunification with their families or for alternative care; and the value of child participation in research about child protection. These have contributed to understandings of child protection, children's rights, and welfare in three key ways: first, by challenging assumptions about the role and meaning of the 'family' and 'family reunification' in post-conflict societies [1, 2] and of 'community' in contexts of poverty [1, 4], whilst also problematising political, humanitarian and social interventions with children living in difficult circumstances. Second, the studies have detailed the strategies through which children can participate in decision-making processes on a range of issues affecting their lives. This includes their involvement throughout the social care process and at all stages of family reunification, foster care and general social care [1, 2, 3, 4], and in the research process [5, 6]. Finally, the studies have exposed three sets of divergent discourses about the ways in which children forced to move as a result of conflict or poverty are positioned within the global system of nation-states. These are: children as product and/or threat of nation-states; discourses on the political and psychological child, and narratives of visible and invisible children [7].

3. References to the research

1. Veale, A. and Donà, G. (2003). Street children and political violence: A socio- demographic analysis of street children in Rwanda. *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal*, 27 (3) 253-269. Peer-reviewed journal article. <http://doi.org/bh3dzj>
2. Donà, G., Mukakizima, B., Muramutsa, F. and Kefyalew, F. (1998) *An Impact Study of Family Reunification*, Kigali, Rwanda: Save the Children UK. Available on request.
3. Donà, G. (2001) *The Rwandan Experience of Fostering Separated Children*, Stockholm, Sweden: Radda Barnen. <http://www.crin.org/docs/FosteringRwanda.pdf>
4. Donà, G. and Islam, T. (2003) *Overview of the Conditions of Children Outside Parental Care in Institutions and Communities*. Dhaka: Bangladesh: United Nations Children Fund. Available on request.
5. Donà, G. (2007) The microphysics of participation in refugee research, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2): 210-229. Peer-reviewed article. <http://doi.org/bbzzdw>
6. Donà, G. (2006) Children as research advisors: contributions to a 'methodology of participation' in researching children in difficult circumstances, *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 2(2): 22-34. Peer-reviewed article <http://doi.org/d3g44m>
7. Donà, G. and Veale, A. (2011) Divergent discourses, children and forced migration, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(8): 1273-1289. Peer-reviewed article. <http://doi.org/cwjj5s>. Submitted to REF2.

The research was supported by **two UNICEF grants** to Dr. Giorgia Donà/Uel: i) *Foster care for unaccompanied children in Rwanda* (August 2000- February 2001): ~ **\$43,000**. UEL received \$15,000 in consultancy fees; and ii) *Children outside parental care in institutions and communities in Bangladesh* (August 2001- April 2002): ~**\$50,000**; UEL received \$21,500 in consultancy fees.

4. Details of the impact

Key findings from the studies outlined above have been shared widely with international policy makers, NGOs and social work professionals to effect significant changes in policy and practice relating to child welfare. The results of the work conducted in Rwanda on family reunification, foster care and street children were communicated nationally to government and non-governmental agencies in Rwanda and internationally through Unicef, Save the Children Alliance and the International Foster Care Association. Findings of the study on children outside parental care in Bangladesh were disseminated regionally through the Asian Office of Unicef and internationally through Save the Children Alliance and the International Committee on the Rights of the Child. The research has subsequently influenced national policy in Rwanda, professional standards and best practice for development workers in Africa and Asia, social work practice for professionals in the United Kingdom, and legal representation in the USA.

Impacts on national government policies in Rwanda.

The research on child protection and social welfare has informed the development of policy in post-genocide Rwanda, including the 'National Policy on Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children' (2003), which draws on the study foster care [3] and on findings reported in the study on street children [1] in setting out its recommendations [a]. The work on foster care particularly informed the strategy set out in section 6.2 of that document, which describes the need to establish a legal framework for fostering and adoption; raise awareness of the rights of children in foster families; and develop effective methods of monitoring, reviewing and sustaining care for children, particularly where they had been spontaneously fostered. Key findings of an earlier (1998) report by Donà and others on street children were summarised in [1] and informed the strategy set out in section 6.3 of the National Policy. This sets out plans to reinforce existing programmes for the socio-economic and social reintegration of street children, and to establish community-level prevention mechanisms.

These policies were discussed and approved by the Rwandan Parliament in 2003, but have continued to have very significant effects during the period of REF assessment. Prior to 2003, Rwanda had no comprehensive policy at all addressing the needs of orphans and vulnerable children, although the number of such children was – and remains – high. In 2011, the Rwandan Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MGFP) estimated that the number of children living in difficult circumstances was approximately one million - one eighth of the population. By informing the research-driven policies that continue to frame the social care of those children, the recommendations resulting from the research outlined above have continued both to feed into existing policy and strategic planning in Rwanda and, thereby, to have important impacts on the lives of this large proportion of its population. This on-going influence is evident, for example, in the 2011 MGFP 'Strategic Plan for the Integrated Child Rights Policy', Section 2 (on 'family and alternative care') and Section 7 (on 'Child participation'), which clearly reflect and respond to recommendations arising from the research [b]. Donà's emphasis on the need for legal frameworks for foster care has been especially influential here, but so too has her call for child participation throughout the foster care process, a recommendation based on the development of the unique participatory methods of child welfare research outlined above.

Impacts on professional standards and best practice: learning and advocacy resources for development and social work professionals.

In addition to its impacts on policy development, that methodology has had a significant influence on the training of and services provided by professionals working in the field of international child welfare, and informed a shift in the approach taken to child welfare by social care practitioners around the world. These impacts on training and, subsequently, on understanding and practice, arise particularly from best practice recommendations made in the studies on foster care [3] and children living outside parental care [4]. Since 2008, these have been incorporated into training materials produced and used by UN child protection officers and non-governmental agency staff working with children in post-conflict emergency and development contexts. Thus, for example, recommendations in [4] about the mechanisms for family support to prevent institutionalisation appear in the 2008 Unicef document 'What You Can Do About Alternative Care in South Asia: an Advocacy Toolkit' [c]. The influence of the research is especially evident in the section on strategies and tools to prevent institutionalization and family breakdowns. The toolkit has been disseminated widely by the Unicef Regional Office for South Asia and by the Kenya Network of Careleavers (www.kesca.org/), a youth organisation run by and for young people who have grown up or spent part of their life in institutional care or rehabilitation centres of some description.

Recommendations set out in [3] for setting up fostering programmes likewise appear in a 2009 Action for the Rights of Children 'Resources Pack' [d], a capacity-building tool for child protection in and after emergencies, which is available to all UN staff and Save the Children workers. Guidelines for setting up individual foster and kinship care arrangements (such as identifying willing families, providing information, undertaking screening, and matching children with caregivers) have also been adapted from [3] and incorporated into Save the Children's 2010 'Alternative Care in Emergencies – ACE - Toolkit' [e], which was prepared for the Interagency Working Group on Separated and Unaccompanied Children. The same study has had further international impacts through its citation in the influential 2012 EveryChild document, 'Making Social Work Work: Improving Social Work for Vulnerable Families and Children Without Parental

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Care Around the World'. Therein, it particularly informs the recruitment of foster carers willing to undertake short-term placements, as well as a system of effective planning for children in foster care [f]. It is likewise used by the Better Care Network (<http://www.crin.org/bcn>), a website set up by UN agencies and non-governmental agencies to increase the global exchange of knowledge and experience about children without parental care.

In addition to informing best practice in contexts of international development and emergencies, Donà's research has also had impacts on mainstream social care both in the UK and elsewhere, especially through its use as the basis for learning and information resources. Various of her publications, including [3] and [6], for example, are available to UK professionals through 'Social Care Online - Better Knowledge for Better Practice' (www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk), the UK's largest database of information and research on all aspects of social care and social work, which is used by childcare and social workers. Guidelines on child participation in research have also been developed in response to the success of the methodology outlined above. These have been used to raise awareness among UK practitioners of the importance of making children's voices heard through online advocacy resources such as Social Care Online, and of the promotion of public involvement in health and social care provided through the UK National Health Services (2011) [g].

Legal practice.

Beyond its intended impacts on and benefits for both governmental and non-governmental organizations in the countries in which it was conducted, the research had some more surprising impacts elsewhere. Information on customary foster care arrangements in Rwanda resulting from [3] has, for instance, underpinned an expert testimony declaration prepared by Donà in February 2010 for US Law Firm Latham and Watkins LLP. This testimony was submitted to the US Board of Immigration Appeals in support of an asylum application from a young Rwandan girl hoping to join her adoptive mother, a lawful permanent resident in the USA. On 31st March 2011, the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) Executive Office for Immigration Review overturned an initial decision to refuse asylum, largely on the basis of the submission of the affidavit containing Donà's testimony. The following excerpt from an email sent to Donà by Latham and Watkins LLP indicates the significance of her research findings for the security and welfare of this single individual: 'Please let me take a moment to express how very appreciative we are of your efforts related to this case! I especially wanted to mention that the BIA decision makes a specific reference to the fostering vs. adoption practices that you discussed in your affidavit, and in your report (which we submitted as supporting documentation), so we know that your affidavit really made a favourable difference in their consideration of the case'. The firm reported recently that their young client has applied for her visa and hopes to be reunited with her mother in the U.S. before the end of 2013 [h].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] For citation of [3] in Ministry of Local Government, Information and Social Affairs, Republic of Rwanda (2003) National Policy on Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children: <http://uni.cf/17nTd7M> p. 27. See section 6.3 for influence of findings and recommendations reported in [1].

[b] For the influence of the work on the 2011 Strategic Plan for the Integrated Child Rights Policy: http://www.unicef.org/rwanda/RWA_resources_icrprstratplan.pdf sections 2 and 7.

[c] For the reference to best practice recommendations from [4] on the 2008 Unicef Advocacy Toolkit: <http://www.crin.org/docs/South%20Asia%20Advocacy%20Kit.pdf>, pp. 4, 5 and 10.

[d] For the incorporation of research recommendations into training materials for child welfare professionals see Module 6 of the 2009 Action for the Rights of Children Resources Pack: Critical Issue Module 6: Separate Children, London; ARC: <http://www.unhcr.org/4c98a5ab9.pdf> p. 49.

[e] For reference to [3] in the 2010 Save the Children Alternative Care in Emergencies ACE Toolkit: <http://bit.ly/18K7sRJ> pp. 150 and 163 (note xci)

[f] For reference to [3] in 'Making Social Work Work': <http://bit.ly/17GEszi> pp. 31 and 50

[g] For reference to [5] and [6] in the 2011 White Rose and National Institute for Health Research: A Bibliography: <http://bit.ly/187ms1z> pp. 15 and 27

[h] Full copy of emails from Latham & Watkins (Washington) available on request. A legal expert there may be contacted for further information about the use and effects of Donà's research.