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CHILDREN AND GENOCIDE

CHILDREN'S MORTALITY AND GENOCIDE

Nothing conveys the plight of children worldwide as clearly as their massive mortality rates. Estimates of the number of under-five deaths for selected years are shown in Table 1.

The number of children dying each year has been declining, but the numbers are still enormous, with around a million

dying every month. Children's deaths account for about one-third of all deaths worldwide. In northern Europe or the United States children account for only two to three percent of all deaths. In many less developed countries more than half the deaths are deaths of children, which means there are more deaths

TABLE 1
Annual Children's Deaths

Year	Child Deaths
1960	18,900,000
1970	17,400,000
1980	14,700,000
1990	12,700,000
1991	12,821,000
1992	13,191,000
1993	13,272,000
1994	12,588,000
1995	12,465,000
1996	11,694,000

Source: United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children* (New York: UNICEF/Oxford University Press, annual).

of young people than of old people. The median age at death in 1990 was five or lower in Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda. This means that in these thirteen countries at least half the deaths were of children under five. In the United States the median age at death in 1990 was 76, and in the best cases, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, it was 78.

The number of children who die each year can be made more meaningful by comparing it with the mortality due to warfare. There have been about 100 million fatalities in wars between the years 1700 and 1987. That yields a long-term average of about 350,000 fatalities per year. The yearly average between 1986 and 1991 has been estimated at about 427,800. These figures can be compared to the more than 12 million children's deaths in each of these years.

The most lethal war in all of human history was World War II, during which there were about 15 million battle deaths. If civilian deaths are added in, including genocide and other forms of mass murder, the number of deaths in

and around World War II totaled around 51,358,000. Annualized for the six year period, the rate comes to about 8.6 million deaths a year—when children's deaths were running at well over 20 million per year. This most intense war in history resulted in a lower death rate, over a very limited period, than results from children's mortality year in and year out. Counting late additions, at the end of 1987 there were 58,156 names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC. That is less than the number of children under five who die every two days throughout the world. A memorial for those children who die worldwide would be more than 200 times as long as the Vietnam Memorial, and a new one would be needed every year.

Children die for many different reasons. The immediate cause of death for most children is not murder, direct physical abuse, or incurable diseases such as AIDS, but, as shown in Table 2, a combination of malnutrition and quite ordinary, manageable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, and measles. Given adequate resources, these diseases are readily managed. If enough resources and attention are given to small children, most would thrive. Many do not do well because their families are desperately poor. But focusing on the children and their families alone blinds us to the ways in which their conditions reflect the policies and actions of their societies.

The failures of governments in relation to children are partly due to bad policies and programs, but more often to absent and inadequate programs resulting from the treatment of children's programs as low-priority items in national budgets. Children could be fed adequately in almost every country in the world, even the poorest among them, *if* that were regarded as high priority in government circles. Even if it can be claimed that some countries truly are too poor to care for their children, it cannot

TABLE 2
Estimated Annual Deaths of Children under 5 by Cause, 1986

<i>Cause</i>	<i>Number (millions)</i>	<i>Proportion (percentage)</i>
Diarrhea	5.0	35.4
Malaria	3.0	21.3
Measles	2.1	14.9
Neonatal Tetanus	0.8	5.7
Pertussis (Whooping Cough)	0.6	4.3
Other Acute Respiratory Infections	1.3	9.2
Other	1.3	9.2
Estimated Total	14.1	100.0

Source: United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 1987* (New York: UNICEF/Oxford University Press, 1987).

be claimed that they have been born into a world that is too poor to care for them. Massive children's mortality is not necessary and inevitable.

Most children's deaths cannot be described as murders. But that does not mean that they are accidental or natural or inevitable. They result from a form of

negligent homicide. Negligent homicide is still homicide in that the deaths are avoidable and unnecessary. The deaths of children are dispersed all over the globe, and are sustained over time. There is no central command structure causing these deaths to happen. There is nothing like the Wannsee Conference of January 1942



The roundup and expulsion of Jewish children of the Lotz ghetto in Poland. (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem)

at which the Nazis systematically set out their plans for the extermination of the Jews of Europe. The widespread deliberate and sustained neglect of children is not the calculated program of a few madmen assembled at a particular moment in history. Arguably, the massive mortality of children is more frightening precisely because it occurs worldwide with no central coordination mechanism. *The culpability is not individual but systemic.*

Some argue that genocide should be defined narrowly, as deliberate extermination, to prevent the debasement and trivialization of the concept. However, a narrow definition may suggest that other kinds of large-scale mortality that are permitted to take place are less important. The alternative is to acknowledge that there are *different kinds of genocide* associated with different categories of victims and different forms of intentionality.

The massive mortality of children is not the deliberate action of readily identified actors, in a specific place and time. It differs in many ways from the Holo-

caust and other atrocities commonly described as genocides. The differences, however, are not sufficient to dismiss the issue. The conclusion is inescapable: *children's mortality is so massive, so persistent, and so unnecessary, it should be recognized as a kind of genocide.*

Where children's mortality rates are much higher than they need to be, the governments' policies amount to a form of genocide. When not just one child but children as a class are not adequately nourished and cared for, that constitutes an ongoing crime by society. And as a crime there should be mechanisms in law for correcting that manifest injustice, including means for calling not only parents and local communities but also governments to account.

—George Kent

References and Recommended Reading

Kent, George (1995). *Children in the International Political Economy*. London/New York: Macmillan/St. Martin's.

United Nations Children's Fund (1980-; annual). *The State of the World's Children*. New York: UNICEF/Oxford University Press.