



Book Review: *Early Childhood Development in Humanitarian Crises: South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda* by Sweta Shah

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BOOK REVIEW

***EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES:
SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEES IN UGANDA***

BY SWETA SHAH

ROUTLEDGE, 2020. 236 PAGES

\$48.95 (PAPER), \$160.00 (HARDCOVER), \$44.05 (E-BOOK)

ISBN 9780367228576

Early Childhood Development in Humanitarian Crises: South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda, Sweta Shah's comprehensive book on early childhood development (ECD) in humanitarian crises, benefits from, and is likely to draw criticism for, its stated desire to appeal to a wide audience. Any part of this expansive work could itself be a book, which runs the risk of leaving some readers wishing for more on a particular topic. It also makes this an excellent text for those looking to be introduced fairly quickly to a wide range of issues of critical importance to improving the long-term outcomes of the tens of millions of children who are currently displaced from their homes due to conflict and disaster, and the countless more likely to be so in the future.

In part one, Shah leverages her 18 years of experience at the crossroads of humanitarian responses, international development, and ECD to present a broad overview of ECD and humanitarian responses, which she examines both separately and as they relate to each other. She also provides a deep look at the South Sudanese conflict, in particular the situation of South Sudanese refugees living in Uganda, and a theoretical underpinning for those thinking about child development and the goals of ECD. While presented as background to her own research, part one encompasses more than half the book, and it is where Shah shines most brightly.

Shah first makes an extremely compelling case for why we must focus on ECD, particularly in emergency situations, while clearly articulating the myriad reasons ECD has been largely overlooked in so many humanitarian responses. These reasons include a general overreliance on Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the humanitarian response, despite compelling evidence opposing the use of this model and the difficulty of providing multisector services in a context of siloed funding streams, service provision, and oversight entities. As Shah makes clear, ECD addresses education *and* parenting *and* health *and* nutrition *and* child protection. She then provides a rich history of the humanitarian sector as a field and describes the current topography, how emergency responses are prioritized,

and the multifaceted and complicated ways emergency responses are usually funded. She then turns to the specific situation in South Sudan.

If anyone wonders why, in presenting its inaugural \$100 million award to Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee in late 2017, the MacArthur Foundation identified an early childhood response to address the effects of conflict and displacement as the “idea most likely to change the world,” they need only read the first four chapters of Shah’s book. While her history stops short of this award and the \$100 million Lego Foundation award that followed it, Shah more than makes the case for why the development of young children is of such vital importance in emergency responses, and why responding well to the growing number of conflicts and crises is of such vital importance to global wellbeing.

Shah paints a vivid picture of the conflict in South Sudan before turning to the theoretical approaches underpinning child development responses and goals. While her writing is not always as accessible and straightforward in this chapter on theory as it is in the rest of the text, her combination of central child development theories (Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in particular) and a human capability approach to development more broadly (as put forward by Amartya Sen and colleagues) makes a critical contribution to how the field thinks about the aims, processes, and cultural relevance of child-development initiatives. One of the key questions in education psychology is how one defines teaching and learning and, indeed, what the goal of education is. In combining these two theoretical frameworks, Shah presents an approach to ECD and learning that is both explicitly context specific (i.e., each culture can and should define their own most valued beings and doings) and deeply grounded in the more universal science of child development, which is influenced by both micro and macro cultures and scaffolded throughout children’s daily activities and interactions.

It is perhaps the breadth (and success) of these background chapters—and the almost unending stream of ideas and facts they give readers to think about—that make parts two and three of this text feel like a little bit of a letdown. The field undoubtedly needs more qualitative research focused on adapting ECD programs to emergency settings (chap. 6); thoughtful work on measuring ECD outcomes in culturally appropriate ways (chap. 8; she details her research methodology in chap. 7); and more research that examines the effects of ECD in emergency settings (chap. 9). However, in moving on to these specifics, Shah retains only part of the wonderfully rich background she so expertly articulates in the early chapters. Shah’s presentation of her own work would benefit from being linked more regularly and explicitly to what came before, especially in relation to the

broader opportunity created through focusing on ECD as a critical part of any humanitarian response, and to the South Sudan refugee response in particular.

This said, Shah's descriptions of her work do concretely highlight lessons learned in adapting ECD models to humanitarian settings, as well as the range of challenges faced in providing services and conducting research in these settings. These include the need to be flexible in terms of what aspects of a model are delivered and how; the realities of dealing with competing needs and time demands (e.g., food distribution lines) during program or research hours; the high mobility of refugees; space constraints and the multi-use nature of the spaces provided; insufficient or culturally inappropriate materials; and ingrained beliefs about what education should look like (i.e., rote learning). Challenges also include difficulties around research design, such as finding a convincing control group, given the realities of refugee environments, and disentangling gains in child development from familiarity with the items on child assessments in settings where such activities are foreign to children who are not enrolled in ECD programs (i.e., most control groups). Understanding these challenges, and the different ways practitioners and researchers approach them, is critical to any effort to expand access to and the quality of ECD in humanitarian settings.

Overall, Shah more than succeeds in pulling together various fields and disciplines to present a comprehensive picture of ECD in humanitarian settings: what it is or is not, what it could be, why we need it, and why it is not already more widespread. She also offers her own experience as a case study of what ECD can look like in these settings and what on-the-ground challenges researchers and practitioners face. Those just entering this field are unlikely to find a better introduction to its complexities than Shah's book, and those already working in ECD are sure to discover new ways of thinking about and framing their own approach. As Shah notes in her conclusion, ECD in emergencies is a hot topic at the moment. And rightfully so.

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