

Submission for general comment on the rights of the child in the context of migration – The Brazilian experience on refugee children

Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli¹

1. Introduction:

United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) calculates that children² (accompanied by their relatives or on their own) are half of all asylum seekers in the industrialized world. Besides that, 46% of refugees and 56% of people in camps are children. There are two important definitions regarding refugee children: “Unaccompanied children” that are people under 18 years old who are separated from their parents and are not being protected by an adult who by law or by custom is responsible for them; and “Separated children” that are those accompanied by other family members, but have been separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver (UN A/60/300 2005)

Refugee children are in the most cases treated as victims without voice and they are given no opportunity to take part in their asylum-seeking process and in finding durable solutions. The intrinsic relation between children’s protection needs and children’s participation is not really addressed by humanitarian organizations, governments and the refugee’s communities themselves. Brazil is an example of a country with developed juridical instruments to protect refugee children but with no mechanisms to guarantee their participation. Participation is the practice of including those affected by programming and policies into the decision process. Child participation occurs when adults listen to children and consider their point of view (Guyot 2007, 165).

The Brazilian case is a particular one. This country has internalized the Geneva’s Convention on Refugees’ Status (1951) by the law 9.474/1997 and the United Nations Convention on Child’s Rights (1989) by the law 8.069/1990 that recognizes the children’s right to participation. According to the Brazilian National Committee to Refugees – CONARE, there are almost 4.500 recognized refugees from 79 different nationalities in the Brazilian territory. This is a small number comparing to the Brazilian Population. In 2012, Brazil received more than 2.000 new asylum demands, 8% of them were from children (near 150 children) and 36% of them were between 0 and 5 years old. This annual number of asylum seekers does not make Brazil enter the list as if it were in an emergency situation. For example, the most part of refugees in Brazil lives in urban territories and more than 60% of all asylum appliances are made in the Southeast region of the country, the richest one.

This paper studies the Brazilian case in order to show how good juridical mechanisms to protect refugee children are not sufficient to guarantee their integration (the durable solution most utilized in the country) where there are no means to assure their participation in the asylum process. Its’ main objective is to analyze other experiences of refugee children participation to suggest how this group could be heard and included in

¹ Master Student in International and Comparative Politics and Graduated in International Relations by the University of Brasília (UnB). Collaborator in the Centro Scalabriniano de Estudos Migratórios (CSEM)

² Children are girls and boys under 18 years old, as it is defined in Article 1 of the UN Convention on Child’s Right (1989).

participative spaces to express their needs and to help themselves, their families and societies in the Brazilian context.

It is a fact that refugee children have special needs and traumas that children who have not passed by a forced migration process do not have, but these children have their right to participate and should be seen and heard as social actors that can contribute to solve their situation. That is why this paper suggests that the Brazilian treatment to refugee children (including its understanding in the national Law for refugees) is a humanitarian one that understands refugees as merely victims without an opinion. In this vein, the refugee children's right to participation faces a double exclusion: one regarding the fact that their early age makes their opinion less important to the authorities and the other regarding its refugees' status with the victimization of this group.

First of all, this article presents the Brazilian legal framework regarding refugee children which includes the Brazilian Law to Refugees (9.474/1997) and the Brazilian Statute on Children and Adolescents (8.069/1990) in order to understand how the Brazilian government guarantees this group's rights. After that, it discusses the benefits and challenges of refugee's children participation and it concludes that participation is intertwined with the objective of meeting refugee children's protection needs. The third part of the papers studies some concrete cases of refugee children's participation and the local process that have constructed these child friendly spaces. Finally, there is an analysis of the local integration of refugee children in Brazil to stress this process' challenges and difficulties and the lack of real participatory spaces to refugee children in the country. This reflection hopes to raise awareness of the Brazilian government and population to the situation of refugee children in order to create participatory spheres for this excluded group. Besides that, it seeks to evidence a humanitarian logic that permeates the treatment given to refugee children in the Brazilian context. Refugee children have rights and all these rights should be respected, including the participation and free opinion ones.

2. The Brazilian protection to refugee children.

Brazil was one of the first countries in South America to create a national legislation about refugees. It was also a pioneer in adhering to the international regime on refugees. These facts and its actions in regional Conferences to discuss the refugees' situation made Brazil a regional leader in this thematic (Moreira 2010, 119). In 1997, Brazil published the Law 9.474 that internalizes its obligations with the ratification of Geneva's Convention on Refugees Status (1951) and this Law extends the causes that can justify the recognition of refugee's status.

The Law 9.474 recognizes as a refugee every person that runs away from his country or place of habitual residence because persecution's fear relating to race, religion, nationality, social group or political opinion or because of the existence of a severe and generalized human rights' violation situation (Art. 1). This Law has created the CONARE, the Brazilian tripartite Committee - composed by representatives of the Brazilian Government, Civil Society (with right to vote) and UNHCR (with voice but no right to vote) - that is responsible to recognize asylum seekers as refugees and to set public policies to these groups. Brazil has also

a Solidary Resettlement Program dedicated to receive refugees that need to go to a third asylum country. Today, this program is dedicated to help Ecuador and Venezuela to deal with the refugees' fluxes originated from Colombia.

The Law 9.474/1997 such as the Geneva's 1951 Convention on Refugee Status does not mention specifically the situation of refugee children. The 1951 Convention guarantees in its article 22 the refugees' right to education with the same treatment given to nationals. A study of CONARE's decision may conclude that it gives special attention to vulnerable groups such as women and children (Leão 2007, 34-38), with the recognition of refugee status of children that escape from forced recruitment situations and the respect of the "best interest of the child" principle. The Brazilian Law has also incorporated the principals of *non-refoulement* (no devolution of asylum seekers to countries where their lives and freedom are threaten) and no discrimination between refugee, asylum seekers and Brazilian citizens.

Another innovation of the Brazilian Law is the right to family reunion that is explicit in its article 2 which says that the effects of the refugee condition will be extended to other members of the family that are economic dependent of the principal applicant if they are in Brazilian territory (Moreira 2010, 118). This article is really interesting and provides refugee children with the family's reunion and the refugee status without the necessity to begin another process. However, the unaccompanied minors that enter Brazilian territory by themselves are not included in this dispositive.

Besides that, the Law 9.474 states that the demands of refugees' and asylum seekers' documents in bureaucratic processes (for school registration, for example) should be simplified. The recognized refugees by CONARE have also others rights and duties internalized by the government because of Brazilian position as a Member State of others international treaties (Leão 2007, 55-56). This includes all the child's rights listed in the UN Convention on Child's Right (1989) that Brazil internalized in 1990 with the Statute of Child and Adolescent.

The Law 8.069 was published in July 13th, 1990 and it is the principal legislation on children in the country. The Statute of Child and Adolescent (known as the Portuguese Acronym, ECA) was written in a way to put children and adolescents as rights' subjects, that means, they are rights' owners. The ECA is also based in other important principles such as the best interest of the child, the search for its full and priority protection and the first and solidary responsibility of the public power.

This law divides children in two categories: child (people under 12 years old) and adolescent (people between 12 and 18 years old) (Article 2). It affirms that no child will suffer negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression (Article 5). It guarantees child's right to health services (article 11), to freedom of movement, opinion and expression, belief and religious cult, to participation in family and communitarian life without discrimination, to participation in political life, to seek asylum (article 16). The right to education in equal conditions and the right of organization and participation in students associations (article 52) is also present in the law. More important than that, the ECA puts as a duty of the Brazilian State to offer free and good education to every children from kindergarten to high school and to provide public day care centers and schools as near as possible from the families' residences (article 54). Its' article 141

evidences the child's right to access justice and the article 58 stresses that, in the educational process, the cultural, artistic and historic values of the children will be respected in order to provide them freedom of creation and access to cultural resources. This idea of values' respect is fundamental for refugee children that come from a different cultural, political and historical environment and they should have their traditions respected.

The Brazilian protection to refugee children, provided by these two laws, gives these boys and girls rights to free and universal education (until high school) and health services. Although the Brazilian Law on Refugees does not guarantee the refugee children's right to participation, the ECA emphasizes it. That is why we can say that refugee children have their right to participation and freedom of opinion and expression ensured in the Brazilian juridical framework. In theory, every refugee child can participate and express itself, in reality, there are not any permanent spaces where this group can use your voice and be heard. "Further developments need to take place to ensure that their opinions, interests, and goals are taken into account in a manner that carries consequences" (Guyot 2007, 167).

The next section discusses how the construction of refugees' images as victims and humanitarian views impact negatively in the refugee's right to participation.

3. Humanitarianism and the participation's exclusion of refugees and children

Many supporters of the "humanitarianism" concept defend it as a sign of progress towards human freedom and emancipation (Belloni 2005, 1), in order to bring relief to people in sufferance and crises. Belloni (2005) defines it as a way to sedate political crises, prevent their escalation into wars with cross-national and cross-border consequences, and limit their impact on Western countries (8). This means that the humanitarian idea of helping other people in crises is not altruistic at all and it is impregnated by Occidental concepts, what includes that only the European adult man has voice and power to be heard, excluding other nationalities and groups such as women and children. "Humanitarianism sustains a worldview in which individuals are victims or perpetrators rather than human beings in complex set of relationships" (Belloni 2005, 17), women and children are, in the most part of the times, the victims.

Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: [...] (Barthes 1980). Of course, refugee populations usually consist of people in urgent need who have been victimized in numerous ways. The problem is that the necessary delivery of relief and also long-term assistance is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims (Malkki 1996, 378).

People in situation of forced displacement are normally perceived as traumatized victims, dependent for their salvation on the relief agencies (Boyden 2001, 55). This vision of helplessness is linked to the idea of refugees' speechlessness where helpless victims need protection and someone to speak for them because their lack of voice (Malkki 1996, 388). It is easier for humanitarian workers to identify refugees as hapless victims,

malnourished children, or ethnically cleansed people (Belloni 2005, 17), rather than to hear them and deal with their traumas in a participative way. Children are usually seen as not-adults that have less experience of the world, and can be easily manipulated because of their lack of basic elements of political power (Chawla and Johnson 2004, 65). There is “a reflexive protective paternalism predicated on an unspoken assumption that children are incapable of making rational, effective contributions to larger questions about policy” (Nugent 2006, 220).

For relief workers, “it is hard to imagine children in such conditions as having the will or the resourcefulness to take part in decision making and participative collective activity. Perceptions of the vulnerable dependent victim are more clearly articulated in relation to children than to adults” (Boyden 2001, 55), especially because in the Occidental perspective children are seen as people that are not ready to participate in political arenas: they are manipulative, immature and do not understand politics or “adult’s issues”. Brandão (2007) suggests that “[w]hen children and families are seen as mere objects of public policies or beneficiaries of charitable services, they become disempowered and submissive to their benefactor — the government, multilateral organizations, or private institutions” (8).

The Western conception that children should be protected does not commonly involve children’s participation. The humanitarianism as a Western idea shares this view. Besides that, “it focuses too narrowly on short-term, ad-hoc solutions at the expense of long-term political action; and it reproduces the same social, political, and ethnic divisions it seeks to address” (Belloni 2005, 2), because it creates a reality where the participation of the local actors (understood just as speechless victims) is not considered.

Agency approaches to refugee children reflect the model of children’s rights promoted most widely at present by the international community. This model depends on a triadic structure of child: family: state. Refugee support measures tend to focus first and foremost on “basic needs” (clean water, sanitation, food, shelter, health care) which are taken to be universal and hence not to require consultation or discussion with affected populations (Boyden 2001, 54).

A humanitarian approach to refugees characterizes them as mute and passive victims that have participation rights but, because of their traumas and the forced migration situation, do not have the capacity to exercise them. Children in the Western culture are generally excluded from the decision making processes and participation spheres. The participation of refugee children faces this two distorted conceptions. The next section shows some benefits of these boys’ and girls’ participation for them, their families and societies. It also stresses some other practical barriers to this effective participation.

4. The Brazilian Case: participation and local integration of refugee children

Brazil has the greatest refugees’ support net in Latin America, with near 100 local organizations and civil society entities that act in all regions of the Brazilian territory. As it was seen, the Brazilian juridical framework provides refugee children with access to public education until high school and health services and in general they benefit from these basic social services and the civil society’s support (Haydu 2011, 140).

In order to obtain an effective local integration, the Asylum State should accept and support initiatives that will facilitate the refugees' local integration; the host community also has to accept these refugees to avoid animosities and discrimination situations; the local integration should be economically possible that is why its programs should have external financing; the local integration should be volunteered and, to be successful, the refugees should have an opportunity to obtain the Asylum Country's nationality (Haydu 2011, 139)

However the refugees in Brazil face many challenges during their local integration. The biggest problems are access to work, habitation and discrimination (Moreira 2010, 123). Many refugees including refugee children feel discriminated by the local population. There is a lack of consistent and informative campaigns to sensitize the Brazilian population about the refugee's situation. Many times, people mix up refugees with fugitives (Haydu 2011, 143). Refugee children many times face discrimination in their school and it remains as a barrier to their local integration. School teachers should be informed about the refugee thematic to better address refugee children needs in a participative way and to instruct the Brazilian children in order to create an environment that promotes the refugee's integration.

It is necessary to work themes such as globalized human solidarity, ethics, tolerance, respect and diffusion of different cultures, costumes and beliefs in schools and universities, in order to raise awareness of the people about the cultural richness acquired with international migrations. There is also the need of internal education for refugees' welcome because the lack of knowledge about the issue reproduces and creates prejudices and fears and this precludes the refugees' treatment in assistance programs for their protection and social integration (Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 180).

The access to public policies is another difficult to refugees. The number of schools and hospitals is not sufficient to deal with the Brazilian citizens' demands and the refugees face the same problems of the nationals in these areas. The difference is that a national understands better how the Brazilian system and bureaucracy work and they speak Portuguese; a refugee, most of the times, does not have many documents asked in these sectors and they have traumas and needs resulting from the forced displacement process that a Brazilian does not face. It is important to highlight that there are no refugees' camps in Brazil. The most part of the refugees and asylum seekers lives in cities, especially in São Paulo and one of the main barriers to local integration remains the Portuguese idiom (Rodrigues 2010).

A special attention should be provided to separated and unaccompanied minors that enter the country without their parents and, many times, have physical and psychological traumas that should be treated with priority (Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 179). Brazil is not prepared to address the protection and participation needs of this specific group that is in a vulnerable situation. Besides that, there are no internal mechanisms with the function to save the refugee's family reunion right (Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 179), present in the Law 9.474/1997. Family reunion is a crucial matter when considering refugee children's local integration. The lack of effective structures to provide family reunion impacts directly and negatively the refugee children's lives in Brazil.

There are some specific public policies to refugees: specialized assistance for refugees in hospitals in São Paulo (Clínicas' Hospital) and in Rio de Janeiro (Servidores' Hospital); the training for health employees

in the National Health System (SUS) to deal with refugees; there are a program of mental health for asylum seekers financed by CONARE; a public shelter in São Paulo for refugees and asylum seekers; a program of scholarships to refugees in some public and private universities and the programs to teach the Portuguese language and to help asylum seekers and refugees to find work organized by civil society organizations (Moreira 2008, 419; Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 177). The main objective of these public policies is the democratization and the legitimization of the integration process in order to seek the effective protection and implementation of the refugees' rights (Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 178).

Another central dilemma is to obtain secure and permanent financing to execute projects to integrate refugees in a way to grant their autonomy and institutional empowerment. Further resources are also necessary to develop other specific policies to refugees that have special needs (Moreira 2010, 125). In this sense, a rubric to welcome refugees from the Federal Union Budget created in 2005 is a first step (Pacífico and Mendonça 2010, 176).

In Brazil, refugees do not participate in the process of public policies' formulation regarding issues that concern them. There is no refugee's representative in CONARE and the Committee does not have an institutional channel to hear the voices and meet the demands of this group. This situation makes clear that the Brazilian policy to protect refugees is based in a humanitarian logic that treats refugees in a passive way (as an object of policies) and not as active subjects and right holders who can and should engage themselves and contribute to the political process (Moreira 2010, 125). In the Brazilian context, refugees are not able to pressure the government in a way to influence its decision because they are a little group without political force in the middle of the local population (Moreira 2008, 416).

The challenges to refugee children' participation are huge in Brazil. Even though there are not the problems regarding forced recruitment or competition by scarce resources between children leaders, the lack of any kind of refugee's participation is a main barrier. If adult refugees are not heard, children refugees that are seen as immature and incapable of expressing themselves difficultly will have participative spaces to show their perspectives and points of view. In fact, neither the Brazilian government nor the UNHCR have the will to construct participative structures and child friendly spaces that could positively contribute to address these children protection needs. UNHCR develops participatory assessments with refugees at least two times a year. This activity provides a democratic and open space where refugees can express themselves. In theory, this is a great participation opportunity, but in practice, the refugees' suggestions and opinions are not put in practice or taken to decision making spaces. That is why this kind of activity loses its main objective: to guarantee effective participation that will change for the best the refugees' reality. In the last years, just one participatory assessment was realized with children in Manaus. This is a first step but the lack of a systematic realization of participatory assessments with children in all Brazilian regions makes it clear that children's participation is not a priority for UNHCR Brazil.

The humanitarian approach that sees refugees (especially children) as speechless victims is present in the Brazilian protection to refugee children juridical framework and practice. The Brazilian Government, UNHCR Brazil and the most part of the civil society organizations are not worried with refugee children's

participation. This is also clear in other aspects of the refugee protection process when for example sole the principal applicant adult is interviewed as part of a family's asylum claim. These spaces are not "open for children to express their views and this can inadvertently silence children's specific protection concerns" (Skeels 2012, 18).

5. *Conclusion*

All children have the right to participate; they have a voice that should be heard and they can change their realities because they live in it and they reflect about it. Refugee children also have this right. They understand better their situation and needs than a politician, an Academic or a relief worker. A humanitarian logic embedded in all levels from the juridical framework to the practice prevents children and other refugees to exercise this right. This paper has shown that the protection needs of refugee children could be better addressed if their right to participation was respected in all the spheres.

The Brazilian case makes clear that an innovative juridical framework to protect refugee children is not enough to guarantee their local integration, especially when all their rights are not respected. The participation right is a human right that demands spaces to be put in practice and there is no channel or structure or child friendly space in Brazil where refugee children can manifest their opinion. Unfortunately, the lack of participation of refugee children will remain as a challenge for their integration in Brazilian territory until the Brazilian government, UNHCR Brazil and other civil society's entities recognize the relation between children's protection and children's participation and do something to change this situation of exclusion.

Changing from a needs-based perspective, seen in Brazilian case, to a rights-based approach in program and policy development is a difficult task (Brandão 2007, 8), but it is possible. There is the necessity to change the discourse and approach from an inherently "alienating" humanitarian paradigm to a child welfare and child-centered paradigm that gives primacy to the child's perspectives, needs and involvement, (Nugent 2006, 220). Listening to children before making decisions that may affect their live and creating real opportunities for them to form and express their opinions is a first step (Brandão 2007, 11). All the process involving refugee children should be flexible, transparent and use language, tools and approaches that reach different groups of children and adults in a way that they can relate to (Chawla and Johnson 2004, 68), in order to create effective and real participatory spaces and assessments.

"The future holds great promise if we learn to provide [refugee] children with the tools and spaces for their empowerment so that their unique voices, experiences and opinions directly impact relevant policy and legal reform efforts" (Nugent 2006, 235). If we are seeking local integration as a durable solution in Brazil we cannot exclude refugee children anymore from political spaces. In this sense, respecting and guarantying their right to participation is the last frontier to be conquered in the Brazilian regime to protect refugee children.

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