CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITIES

in South Africa

Some Ethical Perspectives

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CHAPTER 1

THE PLIGHT AND VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN LIVING IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

It happens so easily, that we do not notice the children around us. The little ones, the poor ones, the suffering ones, the weak ones, the ones without a smile. We are so busy, so selfish, in such a hurry, that we easily look and walk past them. Pass them also in our thoughts and with our actions. In many ways they become ‘invisible’ to us. We go into lockdown mode. We apply social distancing. We forget them.

This book wants to remind us that our vocation is to remember them; to not forget them. To remember their vulnerabilities and to act morally responsibly, not only to them, but rather with them and for them. To look them in the eyes and walk towards them with determination to share the load of their vulnerabilities with them, to act with them and on their behalf, against their suffering and exploitation, giving them a voice to speak out against the circumstances and powers impacting their lives. This is why the title of this book is: *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa – Some ethical perspectives*. The intention is to remind us of the ethical challenges we face with regard to the vulnerable children in our midst and the living realities to which they are exposed. But more so, it also calls us to live and act morally more responsibly with and for the vulnerable children living in South Africa.

This chapter connects with this call and the title of the book by reflecting on the concept of vulnerability in relation to South Africa’s children. To do that, we first have to understand who the children of South Africa are. Therefore, it is necessary to start with a demographic overview of the children of South Africa.

THE CHILD SEGMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN POPULATION: A DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

According to Stats SA (2019:v), South Africa’s estimated total population in mid-2019 was 58.78 million people of whom 16.9 million

or 28.8% were younger than 15 years. Although reported with a different age interval and estimated a year earlier, it is important to take cognisance of the estimation of the South African Child Gauge 2019 (Hall 2019a:216) that South Africa's total population in mid-2018 was 57.7 million people of whom 19.7 million were children under 18 years. Stats SA (2018a:x) indicates that in 2016 adolescents made up 18,5% of South Africa's population. From these statistics, it seems fair to assume that about a third of the total population of South Africa is children under 18, only in numbers an important segment of the South African population.

The gender division for children is equal (Hall 2019a:216) but it raises the ethical question: Is the position of the girl-child in South African society really equal to the position of the boy-child? It seems that we have to ponder this much more and act accordingly with regard to this situation. In terms of the racial categories used during the apartheid era, 86% of children are African, 8% are Coloured, 4% are White and 2% are Indian (:216). It shows clearly that the child population group in South Africa is not a homogeneous group of people living in the same situations. They are a diverse group of people living in diverse contexts with different real-life experiences. In our reflections about the situation of children in South Africa, we should take this reality into account.

Although the situations of some subgroups and individuals and/or some localities may differ, children are a distinguishable population or social group about whom generalisations may be drawn, as long as it is remembered that these are not true of every child and every context in South Africa. Any generalisation in this chapter, and even in the rest of the book, should, therefore, be academically evaluated with some suspicion because of the many differences present in this population group. The theological ethical challenge is that this population group, and specific subgroups in this totality, as well as the plight of individual children, should more and more become the focus of theological ethical reflection. This is the goal of this chapter and the rest of the book: To contribute to and promote academic theological

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ethical reflections about the situation of South Africa's vulnerable children and our moral obligations towards them.

As an important part of our reflections, we have the responsibility to critically investigate the concepts and language we often use to describe the factors and situations that influence children's lives, such as 'vulnerable' or 'vulnerability'. In the next section, this concept is discussed. Although this discussion draws some general lines to vulnerability, it is a search to identify how 'vulnerability' relates to children.

THE CONCEPT 'VULNERABLE'

A 'BUZZWORD'¹

Various terms are used in relation to the plight of people and children in this world. One of these concepts is vulnerability. This concept is used prominently in academic research, in government circles, as well as colloquially, in referring to the situations which endanger many children in the world and in South Africa. The concept is also used in relation to other individuals and population groupings who experience similar marginalisation or social exclusion in one way or another (cf. Brown 2015; Koopman 2013). Many '[p]olicy makers and practitioners are now concerned with addressing vulnerability through an expansive range of interventions' (Brown et al. 2017:1). Vulnerability is used so widely and connected with so many situations and challenges that it seems as if we live in 'a vulnerability zeitgeist or "spirit of the time"' (:1; cf. Brown 2014). The first and important question to ask in this chapter is: What is vulnerability?

1 cf. Brown, Ecclestone & Emmel 2017:2.

WHAT IS VULNERABILITY?

A COMPLEX CONCEPT

To answer the question ‘what is vulnerability’ is easy and straightforward for some people, especially those who experience it every day. For others it is not so easy to get clarity about the meaning of vulnerability. For them it is a very complex concept because of its inherent diversity and the interwovenness of so many factors: of the global and the local, as well as the personal and the systemic aspects. It seems as if the concept of vulnerable inherently contains a simple-complex paradox (eds. Bankoff, Frerks & Hilhorst 2004:1). It is, thus, not so easy to define or understand the nature and meaning of the concept of vulnerability.

The wide range of use and the complexity of the concept has led to a situation where vulnerability as a field of research is burgeoning and the concept is used in many disciplines. Brown (2013:19) declares that in the academic world today, the study of vulnerability is an intellectual field with many disputed and opposing views, reflecting wide divergences of opinion and usage. The result is that vulnerability has no consistent meaning (Herring 2018:12), and that many different definitions of the concept exist (cf. Brown 2015:48). Brown (:32) opines that although vulnerability has already prevailed in research for quite some time, there is still a lot of blurriness around it and that it is used to express a plurality of meaning. Because of its malleability, the concept is clouded with vagueness. Some academics is of the opinion that it is exactly this impreciseness that makes the concept useable: it is broad and can include all forms of hardships or afflictions children experience. For others, this view is problematic. They do not want to use the concept precisely because of the fact that it is so vague and imprecise. This situation is the result of the fact that there exists, in broad terms, two kinds of theoretical approaches to what vulnerability really is: a broader view and a narrower view (cf. Formosa 2014; Levine et al. 2004:46; Walbank & Herring 2014:14).

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UNIVERSAL VULNERABILITY

The first, broader approach links the understanding of vulnerability to its Latin origin (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds 2014:4). According to Reynolds (2008:135) “the expression ‘vulnerable’ derives from the Latin word *vulnerare*, meaning to injure or harm. Human beings are open to be wounded. We suffer.” The implication is that human embodiment is equally predisposed to be wounded. Thus, vulnerability is an ontological condition of all people, it is “universal and constant, inherent in the human condition” (Fineman 2011:161), it “emerges with life itself” (Butler 2004:31; cf. Käll 2016; MacIntyre 1999; Turner 2006). Nifosi-Sutton (2017:4) confirms this view by stating that “vulnerability is universal in the sense that it unavoidably features in everyone’s life or may occur in everyone’s life.” This is a very broad understanding, to such an extent that children should rather stay in bed, wrapped up in their bedding to escape the possibility of being harmed or wounded than by taking the risk of entering our world (cf. Herring 2018:12)! This approach is known as universal vulnerability or the “vulnerability thesis” (Brown et al. 2017:12).

SITUATIONAL VULNERABILITY

The second, narrower view of vulnerability is used in connection to something specific, to specific factors present in and affecting or influencing people’s living situations. It emphasises the specific circumstances or experiences created by people’s surroundings which are unfavourable to their welfare and well-being. According to this view, vulnerability is usually connected to something specific, to a person or a thing which endangers the life of another person, a group of people, a community, a whole society or even the globe, or different parts of it. The implication is that it is a situation in which you need protection against this ‘something’ or ‘someone’ and the harm it can bring. This view implies that there exists a specific agent(s) that threaten or can harm your interests, even your life, or the interest(s)

of a group to which you belong, and against which you need some sort of protection.

In Goodin's (1985:112) view, vulnerability is, in essence, a relational concept that entails dependency: You depend on somebody to provide something you need. According to Goodin,

references to vulnerability imply two other references. One is *to what* the persons or things are vulnerable. Where do their weaknesses lie? What mechanisms are capable of inflicting harm upon them? The other is *to whom* the persons or things are vulnerable. Who can inflict the harms upon me? Who can protect me against them? One is always vulnerable to particular agents with respect to particular sorts of threats. ... Any briefer description of the situation would be radically incomplete. Like the notions of power and freedom, that of vulnerability is inherently object and agent specific. (p. 112)

In this object-agent relationship of dependency and protection, receiving and delivery plays a huge role. It is this relationship that confronts us with many ethical challenges. It is not so easy to construct these relationships in a way that is ethically responsible to both parties. It will become clearer in the next section that focuses on some challenges for our thinking and actions.

SOME CHALLENGES FOR OUR THINKING AND ACTIONS

Brown (2015:11) recognised that the notion of vulnerability is actually "[a] slippery idea loaded with moral and ethical connotations." The concept of vulnerability is often associated with negative connotations of victimhood and victimisation, of helplessness, neediness and deprivation, of deservingness, transgression and blame, of stereotyping and even pathology. This includes the language we frequently use to express our ideas related to vulnerability, such as 'weakness or to be weak', 'failure', 'to be a problem which should be solved', 'wrong-doing', 'troublesome', 'bad behaviour', 'disadvantaged', 'victims',

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‘labelling’, ‘classification’, ‘stigmatising’. We start to think and talk of the vulnerable as ‘them’, as different from ‘us’, emphasising their ‘otherness’ and see them only as the subjects of our benevolence (MacIntyre 1999:2). It is sometimes accompanied with a strong paternalistic attitude and agenda. We decide who are vulnerable, what their specific vulnerability is and what exactly they need.

Sometimes we struggle with dichotomous representations of people, such as either ‘vulnerable victims’ or ‘dangerous wrong-doers’ (Brown 2014:371). As victims, their vulnerability is not of their own doing and, therefore, they have legitimate claims to protection and resources. In such situations, we react easily with merely hand-outs without thinking about what it is doing to the human dignity of the ‘victim’. As ‘dangerous wrongdoers’ they are classified as transgressive to such an extent that they may even be seen as a risk to society. They need attention and sometimes even control because society needs to be protected from them.

According to Luna (2019:86), vulnerability was traditionally used to “describe certain kinds of populations deemed worthy of protection.” To this description, Nifosi-Sutton (2017:5) adds that vulnerable and vulnerability are commonly used to “refer to situations involving actual or potential exposure to harm and suffering affecting mainly specific groups of persons.” Such groups are sometimes described as vulnerable groups. Labels are sometimes attached to these vulnerable groups: homeless people, poor people, disabled people, and prostitutes.

These labels can help to identify specific protection and/or care for a specific group, but labelling people may become, according to Levine et al. (2004:47), stereotyping when “whole categories of individuals, without distinguishing between individuals in the group who indeed might have special characteristics that need to be taken into account and those who do not.” Furthermore, the labelling of groups as vulnerable has burgeoned to the extent that “so many categories of people are now considered vulnerable that virtually all potential human subjects are included” (:46). Mackenzie et al. (2014:6) are of the opinion that “[b]y labelling everyone as (equally) vulnerable, this approach

renders the concept of vulnerability potentially vacuous and of limited use ... because it obscures rather than enables the identification of the context-specific needs of particular groups or individuals within populations at risk.” In this regard, Levine et al. (2004:46) express the view that “[i]f everyone is vulnerable, then the concept becomes too nebulous to be meaningful.” This is true to such an extent that Collins (2014:63) concluded that “the proposition ‘everyone is vulnerable’ is the beginning of an argument, rather than a conclusion.”

The inherent tension between universal vulnerability and situational vulnerability cannot easily be dissolved, although these two streams are not mutually total exclusive. But it is difficult to develop a taxonomy of vulnerability that will include and classify all forms of vulnerability. Luna (2019:87) even rejects “the usefulness of taxonomies to analyze vulnerabilities.” Rather than to develop a taxonomy of all possible vulnerabilities, it may be better “to recognise a mutual inherent vulnerability, but also to emphasise ways in which particular individuals in some circumstances have extra vulnerability” (Wallbank & Herring 2014:16). This view on vulnerability is emphasised in Collins’ (2014:64) statement that vulnerability should be studied as a real life-concept. With this approach, she moves away from focusing on vulnerability as a theoretical and abstract construct and brought peoples’ lived experience to the centre of reflections on vulnerability. She (:64-65) argues that a single description of vulnerability is not necessary because “it would overlook the fact that vulnerability represents all the rich complexity that we might expect of a real-life concept, and we should want this to be reflected in analysis of it.”

To guide our thinking about the ethical challenges with which the concept vulnerable, and the real-life realities it expresses, confront us, Brown’s (2015:32-49) discernment of five broad themes of meaning present in the academic literature, although difficult to delimit and sometimes overlapping and interwoven, may be helpful. These themes are:

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- ‘natural’ or ‘innate’ vulnerability, determined by physical and/or personal factors that are often associated with certain points in the life course such as childhood ...;
- ‘situational’ vulnerability, referring to biographical circumstances, situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force, and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent);
- vulnerability as related to social disadvantage, the environment and/or geographical spaces;
- universal vulnerability, where vulnerability is seen as a state shared by all citizens, but which is social or political constituted to varying extends;
- vulnerability as a concept closely related to risk. (p. 33)

From the above discussion, it is clear that vulnerability has many faces (cf. Brown et al. 2017). It challenges us to discern very wisely when we deem it necessary to react on any vulnerability we perceive. In such situations, it can come in handy to remember the following pronouncement by Brown (2015):

Diverse configurations of vulnerability ... map onto various notions of citizenship and particular constructions of disadvantage. ... When vulnerability is framed as a ‘natural’ or individual state, it carries very different implications from when it is imagined as socially or politically instituted. The various uses and understanding of vulnerability reveal the profound ethical implications of the concept, and ... it becomes evident that any attempt to make sense of vulnerability also brings into focus the nature of the connections between institutions, social practices, individuals and the state. (p. 33)

The above words are also applicable when we relate the concept of vulnerability to children.

THE USE OF THE CONCEPT 'VULNERABLE' IN RELATION TO CHILDREN

Vulnerability related to children essentially means that they are at risk of some form of harm and are not able “to sufficiently protect themselves or to be sufficiently protected by others” (Schweiger 2019:289). Brown (2015:48) emphasises this same aspect when she indicates that the concept of vulnerability usually refers to “the particular vulnerabilities of those who are ‘in need’ or who are likely to come to experience particular dangers or harms.” In its most basic form, children need protection and nourishment, especially during the years of their early childhood (MacIntyre 1999:1). It is when children’s basic needs for a dignified life are not met that they become vulnerable (Koopman 2013:44).

Children are regularly associated with innate or natural vulnerability. This can be attributed to the fact that innate vulnerability is connected with the specific developmental moments of people during their life course. These moments are dictated by physical, biological or personal factors. “As with other more biologically-inclined accounts, such an approach proceeds from the premise that some people are ‘naturally’ more vulnerable than others” (Brown, Ecclestone & Emmel 2017:5). This understanding of vulnerability “appears to have particular resonance for children and young people due to dominant developmental ideas, which imagine children as in some way incomplete, not fully developed and dependent on adults” (Brown 2015:47). Nifosi-Sutton (2017:5) is of the opinion that children “are more at risk of harm owing to the fact that they are still developing physically and emotionally and depend on others to satisfy their needs ...” In this approach, James (2012) opined, childhood is viewed

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as a period of inherent vulnerability because of the perceived innocence and lack of competence of children, as a result of which they are thought to require protection. Such thinking is implicit in biological and psychological developmentalism, which implies that, because the child is not yet fully developed, it is vulnerable to any adverse influences that may disrupt the 'normal' completion of the developmental process. (pp. 132-133)

But the view that children are innately vulnerable raises some questions and ethical challenges. Although this view is connected to natural development and is to some extent true, we should take into consideration that our understandings of childhood are social constructs which are constructed differently in different cultures and at different moments in time. There exists an almost universal concept of childhood as a life stage that is different from adulthood, but the way we define what this difference(s) exactly is, leads to different conceptions of childhood (Archard 2004:27-29). Thus, our conceptions of childhood are contextually bound and are very much influenced by social, economic, historic and political circumstances and changes over time. These changes will, in all likelihood, also change "the parameters adults use to define risk, vulnerability and protection" (James 2012:133). The implication is that vulnerability is also a social construct and thus exposed to the same sort of influences and changes as our concept of childhood. If we accept that vulnerable means that there is 'something' present that wants to harm children, how we define that 'something' will influence our understanding of vulnerability and our practical reactions in relation to this vulnerability. This is also true of the link made between 'innate' and 'vulnerability'. If that something is 'innate', how we define and link this innate factor to vulnerability, will define how we shall react.

But it is also true that our view of childhood will always have a huge influence on how we see and define innate vulnerability. Although certain developmental moments and the possible vulnerabilities they exposed children to, is an almost universally generally accepted theory, it is not a static theory but also, among other factors, influenced by

our growing biological, psychological and medical knowledge and our cultural situatedness. There also exist many personal exceptions to the generalised accepted developmental moments, which could influence our views of this innate vulnerability. Our views of innate vulnerability are also contextually situated and influenced by, for example, the availability or not of health care facilities. If health care facilities are not available or inaccessible, it may result in children not being regularly vaccinated and becoming prone to various illnesses which can have negative consequences for their 'normal' development. Such a situation indicates that even in innate vulnerability there are systemic factors to be taken into consideration. The systemic factors also come to the fore in state interventions and laws promulgated to protect children from not achieving their developmental outcomes and/or the enhancement of the possibilities to reach these outcomes. Sometimes these measures, although they want to protect children, can lead to or enhance innate vulnerability.

An appropriate question to ask at this point is: What are the views of childhood underlying the construct 'innate vulnerability'? Both Brown (2015:47) and James (2012:132-133), as quoted above, give descriptions of the view(s) of childhood that they identified as lying behind the concept of 'innate vulnerability'. These descriptions include: "in some way incomplete", "not fully developed", "dependent on adults" (Brown), and "perceived innocence", "lack of competence" and "require protection" (James). It seems that the view of childhood underlying innate vulnerability is one-sided, tends to be a negative approach towards children (e.g. incomplete), is very disempowering giving minimal space for their agency and participation as equal human beings with adults, over-emphasising their protection rights, and leaning towards the patronising.

It is true that as children develop, some of them may experience developmental challenges, but it seems that to speak of 'innate vulnerability' confronts us with many challenges as expressed above. Furthermore, is it not perhaps demeaning of children's human dignity to use the concept innate vulnerability as if there is 'something' inside

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all children that can or even wants to injure, harm, or wound them and let them suffer (cf. Reynolds above)?

Brown (2015:14) indicates that some people criticise the way the supposed ‘inherent’ vulnerability is sometimes used in the welfare state. In this regard, she referred to the way it “can function as an excuse for failing to tackle overarching structures and systems of marginalisation ... foregrounding personal experience in the difficulties experienced by individuals [children–JG] ... and serving to legitimise justifications for the narrowing of provision.”

What makes it difficult to pinpoint children’s vulnerability is that their “vulnerabilities are interwoven by the common threads of oppression, poverty, lack of cultural security, family stability, child labor, and the many faces of discrimination” (Johnson et al. 2013:14). Schweiger (2019) describes this interwovenness aptly by stating:

Inherent and situational vulnerabilities are often intertwined, and situational vulnerabilities are based on, increase and exploit inherent vulnerabilities. A baby’s body is highly vulnerable to physical force (inherent vulnerability) but the fact that some babies are at greater risk of being injured by abuse and corporal punishment is driven by social factors (situational vulnerability). (p. 289)

Often their vulnerability is caused by the infringement of their children’s rights by these common threads. These infringements, according to Johnson et al. (2013),

are encapsulated in issues of (1) invisibility due to family secrecy and abuse, ... poor government oversight, etc.; (2) protections that are either poor or nonexistent, ... inadequate or absent laws, policies, supports, ... ; (3) and “undefendedness”, the inability or lack of will by adults, communities, or governments to be the advocates ensuring basic needs and the betterment of children’s lives. (p. 12)

Vulnerability is not just a predisposition or an exposure to risk but also children's experiences of real hurt and suffering. "In a very special way, their physical, social and even teleological needs are not met" (Koopman 2016:197). Actually, children are "the most extreme form of the vulnerable, the poor and the marginalised ... the epitome of vulnerability" in our world (:197). Wall (2010:Loc. 28-29) even states that "[c]hildren are arguably the most marginalized group in all of history." It also rings true for today and for South Africa's children. What makes children's vulnerability very complex is that it is rarely caused by a single factor. They experience that the issues they face are often "embedded layers of risk. For instance, to address fosterage or mental health as separate experiences is a false discussion of the problem. The problem for children is that they live at the intersection of many of these problems" (Johnson et al. 2013:16).

Mackenzie et al. (2014) remind us to remember that

[c]hildren are paradigm examples of persons who are vulnerable to harm or exploitation by virtue of the asymmetrical relations of dependency, power, and authority in which they stand to parents or other caregivers. But in the case of children, those to whom they are most vulnerable are not always committed to protecting them from harm or exploitation; indeed, in some cases these very persons might be the ones who, through abuse or neglect, pose the greatest threat to a child's welfare. (p. 14)

Vulnerable children are easily labelled: street children, homeless children, refugee children, disabled children, migrant children, child prostitutes, child soldiers, child criminals. In South Africa, we easily use labels, such as black children, coloured children, white children, Indian children. And when they are labelled, they are stereotyped, and we see them either as victims of other people, social structures or government institutions, or we see them as transgressors who deserve their situation. And it is not only our thoughts about them that are influenced in this way, but also our attitudes and actions towards them, their situations and other role players in their contexts.

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As discussed above, it is also important in the case of children to connect the concept vulnerability to their real-life experiences of harm here and now. But we also have to look to the long-term effects of their harms, the “harms to their well-becoming (their future well-being)” because “what happens during childhood has such a crucial influence on the future well-being as an adult,” (Schweiger 2019:290). To gain a better understanding of the complex real-life situations and experiences of children living in South Africa and how it connects with the concept of vulnerability, we have to analyse the particularities of their daily living situations. This is exactly what the authors of the different chapters in this book do: Each one analyses a certain aspect of the diverse living realities to which some children in South Africa are exposed to and that may play a role in their vulnerability: violence, poverty, child support grants, male circumcision, child marriages, corporal punishment, racism, stigmatisation, FASD, LGBTIQ+ children and LGBTIQ+ parented families.

The chapters of this book should be read with cognisance of the influence of two broad perspectives on the living realities of South Africa’s children: The global world and their local worlds.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE LIVING REALITIES OF SOUTH AFRICA’S CHILDREN

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Reflecting in a theological ethical way about children and their living realities in South Africa, we first have to consider the fact that South Africa and its children are part of the bigger globalised village which influences the South African society, the lives of our children, and their everyday living conditions. It is, therefore, necessary to begin this section with a reflection on the impact of the globalisation process on children and their vulnerabilities before we can consider the local

realities. Maybe the 2020 global pandemic caused by the coronavirus (Covid-19) will have a huge influence on the globalisation process and its impact on children, as we know it at the time of writing this chapter. The pendulum may sway to much more emphasis on localisation in world relations than on globalisation. But it is impossible to foresee the future and therefore, this reflection can only be based on what is currently known. For this reason, the reflection starts with perspectives from the important trilogy on the globalised networked and information society by the eminent Spanish born sociologist Manuel Castells (2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

According to Castells (2010c) the globalised network society of the 21st century leads to the exclusion of children in many ways, endangering their lives and making them vulnerable. Castells (2010c:164) even expressed the opinion that although children were abused and victimised through all the ages, they suffer even more in the 21st century because of the exploitive dynamics and influence of the global network society and economy. His observation is that

there is something different in this beginning of the Information Age: there is a systemic link between the current, unchecked characteristics of informational capitalism and the destruction of lives in a large segment of the world's children. Their suffering has become part of the global system in which they are living. (p. 164)

Castells (2010c) elaborates on this, stating:

At the roots of children's exploitation are the mechanisms generating poverty and social exclusion throughout the world ... With children in poverty, and with entire countries, regions, and neighborhoods excluded from relevant circuits of wealth, power, and information, the crumbling family structures break the last barrier of defense for children. In some countries ... misery overwhelms families, in rural areas as in shanty towns, so that children are sold for survival, are sent to streets to help

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out, or end up running away from the hell of their homes into the hell of their non-existence. In other societies, the historical crisis of patriarchy brings down the traditional nuclear family without replacing it, making women and children pay for it. (p. 164–165)

Indeed, the daily living realities of many children are threatening their lives, well-being and healthy development. The marginalisation of children, also South Africa's children, by the globalised network society of the 21st century, confronts us with many theological ethical challenges. Some of them are clearly formulated by Wall (2010):

What assumptions, for example, make invisible the ten million children around the planet who die every year of easily preventable diseases and malnutrition? This number is equivalent to almost two Nazi Holocausts every year, or ten 9/11 terrorist attacks every day. Similarly, what systems of belief permit the worldwide growth in recent decades of children's sex trafficking, sweat shops, and soldiering? Why do children everywhere enjoy narrower human rights than adults? Why, despite greater awareness, does gender discrimination in every society continue to distort children's cultures, educations, and families? What structures of social understanding enable global mass media to manipulate children's lives and thinking in a more invasive way than ever before? (Loc. 33-36).

The above challenges identified by Wall from a Northern America perspective is just as applicable to the situation of the South African society and its many children. South Africa's children are in many ways exposed to these global powers and its negative influences on children's lives. But South Africa's children are not only exposed to global forces. They are also exposed to many challenges originating from the local situation within South Africa. These challenges will become clearer when we look deeper into the local realities to which they are exposed.

A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Looking at the local South African context, Smit (2016:3) broadly identified three “social and political contexts” in South Africa in which children experience that they are “not always welcome and welcomed.” According to Smit (2016:3-4), these three contexts are:

- inhospitable households which may create feelings of abandonment
- risky and even dangerous communities which may endanger their lives
- violent societies which may threaten their lives.

Growing up in such environments where they are vulnerable, children do not experience just hardships and suffering. They are also robbed of one of the most fundamental requirements for developing into a mature, well-being human: the ability to trust (cf. Smit 2016:1-41). About this trust Kofi Annan (in Johnson et al. 2013) once said:

There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace. (p. 1)

But we lost this sacred trust (cf. Johnson et al. 2013:1). In this regard, Smit (2016) declares:

Children and young people read in their communities and their everyday life-contexts all kind of signs and messages warning them to beware. They learn not to trust to survive, in order to protect themselves. They internalise these codes and messages. They socialise in ways that heed these claims and warnings ... They lose hope ... because they experience the worlds in which

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they live as not dependable, reliable, trustworthy, reassuring and welcoming. (p. 2)

The message not to trust anything or anyone is conveyed to South African children in many ways. Therefore, it is necessary to uncover the realities which can let them feel that they are unwelcome in our households, our communities and in the South African society at large, and may convey the message to them that nothing is trustworthy. It is these realities that the authors of the different chapters in this book uncovers. These chapters give voice to the children of South Africa to express their struggles and vulnerabilities as a population group and as individuals, to gain a better understanding and insight into the life conditions they are exposed to and the messages these conditions convey to them. To reach this goal, statistics regarding different aspects of children's living realities in South Africa are used. Using statistical data to give voice to children has some challenges of its own.

THE USE OF STATISTICAL DATA

For many a year, children were in general, not used as a unit of statistical observations (cf. Qvortrup 2005). The standard way central statistics bodies functioned in presenting national data were to rather use individuals and households as their statistical unit, leading to the exclusion of children. Although this situation has improved through the publication of child-focused statistical reports by more and more countries, and/or the inclusion of sections about children in current statistical series, as well as growing global reports with a focus on children, there still seems to be a lack of child-centred analysis with regard to all the factors that cause their hardships, and of integrating all these available statistics into an integrated holistic view.

The opinion of the South African Child Gauge 2019 (Shung-King et al. eds. 2019:214) is that, although South Africa is privileged to have a supply of many good reports containing useful data on many issues,

these reports do not focus on children and is not of much use for those who want to improve their understanding of the living realities of children. Despite this situation, the authors of the report add:

‘Child-centred’ data does not only mean the use of data about children specifically. It also means using national population or household data and analysing it at the level of the child. This is important, because the numbers can differ enormously depending on the unit of analysis. For example, national statistics describe the unemployment rate, but only a child-centred analysis can tell how many children live in households where no adult is employed. National statistics show the share of households without adequate sanitation, but when a child-centred analysis is used, the share is significantly higher. (p. 214)

Another challenge is that these reports tend to use different age intervals for their reporting systems and different time frames to report on. For example, Children Count, a project of the Children’s Institute at the University of Cape Town, works with a definition of children as all persons aged 0-17 (Hall 2019b:n.p.). The same definition is used by the South African Child Gauge 2019. Statistic South Africa (cf. Stats SA 2019:10) works with a different approach and present their statistical data with the age intervals of 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19. Certain statistics are also only available for teenagers or adolescents and not for younger children. The result is that some of these statistics are incongruent and thus it is difficult to compare them with each other.

Using **only** statistical information to draw a picture of the situation of children can also be a dangerous act. The numbers can only vaguely express the reality of children’s hardships and suffering, and cannot tell the real truth of their daily living conditions, the many threats that endanger their lives, their exploitation, their feelings of abandonment by and mistrust in the world around them, their experiences of being unwelcome and not being welcomed in their households, communities and the South African society. Moreover, numbers can become impersonal. Statistical analyses can objectify

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children and hide their faces to such an extent that we may become detached from them and the living realities of their suffering. This is one of the ethical challenges we face when we reflect in a theological ethical way on the lives of South Africa's children on an aggregate level: to become immune to the flesh and blood behind the statistics, not to hear their weeping and cries of desolation. Therefore, we have to take serious cognisance of an article written by the Old Testament scholar Brueggemann (1994:383) in connection with Genesis 37:34-35; Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:18 and his call that adults, like Rachel, should remember the vulnerability, the suffering, the plight of children, and weep about it: "We weep – and remember – perhaps enough to make a difference." To notice children's vulnerabilities, their suffering and plight, their fears and their weeping and to start weeping about their suffering, weeping with them, may be the first step towards living according to a responsible morality towards them.

In light of the above, it is important that we reflect on the question: How can we as Christians, as the church, as local communities and as a society live morally responsibly towards the vulnerable children of South Africa? Can we restore the sacred trust? (cf. above 'A local perspective'). It is impossible to answer the question about our calling in detail within the confinements of this chapter. Therefore, only some broad theological ethical lines, which need further reflection, can be discussed in the next section.

OUR CHRISTIAN CALLING AMIDST THE LIVING REALITIES OF SOUTH AFRICA'S CHILDREN

AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF GROANING AND VULNERABILITY

To weep about and with the children is a deep theological ethical value. It is part of our Christian vocation to remember them and their suffering, their plight and vulnerabilities and to take it to heart. We have to be

a “groaning church” (McCarthy 2005:24), lamenting with the Psalms, reflecting our distress over the current conditions as expressed in the many vulnerable children of South Africa and all their vulnerabilities. According to McCarthy (:26) Augustine asserts about the Psalms: “If the psalm prays, you pray; if it groans, you groan.” Reading the Psalms, it seems that a dominant voice in the Psalms is inarticulate groaning. “Like the expression of other deep emotions, however, the groaning of the Church resists certain definition: it possesses a quality that Augustine calls *ineffabilis*” (:26). McCarthy (:27) opines that Augustine, through his exegesis of the Psalms, “actively appropriates for the Church the groans which resound throughout the psalter and indicates that, by lamenting with the Psalmist and reflecting deeply and continually on that affect, the Church comes to learn what it is, comes to be what it is.” Living a life of weeping and groaning before God, and in the world, about the children’s vulnerabilities, their suffering and plight, is part of being who we are as children of God.

This same emphasis on groaning comes to the fore in Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 8 we read:

²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Paul states it clearly: All creation is groaning. All the vulnerable children living in South Africa are groaning. Groaning for things to change in their lives. Are they groaning with hope? Or did they

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perhaps, with the loss of sacred trust, lose all their hope? Paul explains the relation between groaning and hope with a striking picture. Wright (2004) explains Paul's words in a gripping way:

At the centre of this remarkable passage is one of his most vivid images of hope: that of birth-pangs. The whole creation is in labour, longing for God's new world to be born. The church is called to share that pain and that hope. The church is not to be apart from the pain of the world; it is to be in prayer at precisely the place where the world is in pain. That is part of our calling, our high but strange role within God's purposes for new creation. (n.p.)

The church in South Africa cannot stand apart from the pain and suffering of the many children in South Africa. Our calling is to be present with them. In our prayers, in our groaning, in our groaning with them, a groaning which cannot be expressed in words. And this groaning is not a mechanism to escape the living realities of the children around us. We cannot groan if we have not stepped into their everyday living realities. We have to sit down with them, listen to their stories, see their realities, experience their hurt and pain, sharing their vulnerabilities, becoming vulnerable ourselves.

This is the place where we can meet each other: in our vulnerabilities. It is not so easy, because we struggle to admit our own vulnerabilities. Even to ourselves. Many of us do not want to be seen as vulnerable. But we cannot escape it. According to the universal view of vulnerability discussed above, all people are vulnerable. In this regard, Brown (2015:Loc. 257) made a profound statement: "Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage." It takes courage, the courage of the Holy Spirit to become powerless and vulnerable and to go into the world of vulnerable children, knowing that it will make yourself vulnerable. For me it sounds like the Gospel, as expressed in Philippians 2:

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (ESV)

Our salvation became only possible through Christ Jesus who made himself vulnerable by stepping out into the world and emptying himself to the point of his death on the cross as an expression of the love of the vulnerable God (cf. Placher 1994) for this world. Part of our calling today, is to follow in the footsteps of the vulnerable Jesus into the world of the vulnerable children in South Africa. In solidarity with the vulnerable children, we have to express “the style, mode, and attitude of brokenness, empathy, softness, and humbleness” (Koopman 2008:241).

Does the Church have the ability to take up the values of groaning and vulnerability, and act morally correct towards the vulnerable children of South Africa? Are congregations able to admit their own vulnerabilities, implement groaning for the vulnerable children of South Africa in their liturgies, in their small group meetings, even in their church council meetings, and all other aspects of their life together? Are they able to welcome the vulnerable children into their midst as Jesus did it (Mt 18:1-5; 19:13-15), and let the vulnerable children experience and feel that they are welcome in our churches, our houses, our communities, in our world? Do the members of the local churches in South Africa have the ability to move into the world of the vulnerable children in the townships, in the informal settings, in their homes, not in the first place to distribute handouts, but to be with them and learn from them and encourage their own agency amidst all the vulnerabilities they are exposed to, or are carrying already? Is

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it possible for local congregations to develop a culture and ethics of groaning and vulnerability? Or do we experience moral vulnerability to such a degree that we cannot groan and be vulnerable in our daily living situations for the sake of the vulnerable children of South Africa?

Deep theological ethical reflection on the above challenges is important in the church as an institute, in congregations, in our homes, and in our own individual minds. The challenge before us is to develop an “ecclesial ethic of care for all children” (Jensen 2005:xii). On institutional (synodical) level, some churches in South Africa are already in numerous ways involved in ‘ecclesial care’ for the vulnerable children in our midst. But much more can be done to broaden it to local churches and to our communities. It is important to remember that this care should always be “dignifying care – care that is nonpaternalistic and that respects and supports another’s self-determined agency” (Mackenzie et al. 2014:13).

To enhance such efforts, it may be a good starting point to revisit our Anthropology which is so much affected by rationality, autonomy, and independence (Koopman 2008:244). In this regard Koopman declared:

True humanity is not defined by independence and rationality, but by the willingness to enter into relationships with others. In this relationship with the other, you do not discover a replica of yourself, as Aristotle taught. In the interaction with the other - in the communion, in the relationship - I find my essence and being. I receive my being from the other. We receive our existence out of the hands of the other, and my existence is meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me. (p. 245)

In the process, we also have to revisit our Theologies of Childhood. As indicated above, our views of childhood have a huge influence on our understanding of vulnerability in relation to children. Theologies of Childhood is a growing field of study that should get more attention in South Africa. Churches should do research on their

members' views of children, which usually have different conceptions of childhood influenced mostly by cultural factors, how it influences the ministry in the congregations, and if and how it should be changed to a more theological sound view.

As mentioned above, the vulnerability of children is not only innate vulnerability. It is also situational or social vulnerability. Sometimes these vulnerabilities are systemic and will not change unless the systems creating it, change. Where it exploits children, the church should acknowledge the unjustness towards children. These situations call unto churches and congregations to take up their public responsibility and address these systems. Sometimes such actions are called advocacy: To speak out on behalf of exploited and marginalised people who do not have a voice, such as the children, to promote justice for them. This is an action that we do not undertake just for practical reasons. There is a clear theological rationale for advocacy on behalf of the marginalised throughout the Bible (cf. Sloane 2012). "It is, perhaps, most obvious in the great prophets of the Eighth Century BC, who were commissioned by God to voice God's revulsion at and rejection of Israel's and Judah's sin and injustice. They, clearly, were authorised advocates of God's concern for the poor" (Sloane 2012:184), which surely included the poor children. We have a God-given responsibility to "use our voice in line with God's purposes – especially God's commitment to justice" (:184; cf. 186).

But sometimes the situation causes so much harm, pain, suffering and hopelessness, breaking down the human dignity of children to such an extent that churches have to pay special attention to them. Reading the chapters of this book, it crosses my mind: Is it not perhaps such a time, a time that the churches in South Africa have to pay special attention to all the vulnerable children and stand alongside them in the public square and speak out against the powers of injustice that enhance their vulnerability?

GOD IS IN A SPECIAL WAY THE GOD OF THE VULNERABLE CHILDREN

It happened in the past that churches in South Africa stood up for the vulnerable people in our country. One such an example is the Belhar Confession. In 1982, the then Dutch Reformed Missional Church, now part of the Uniting Reformed Church in southern Africa, drafted the Belhar Confession amidst all the vulnerabilities and suffering they experienced under the apartheid system. Originally written in Afrikaans, the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (n.d.) translated it into English. As part of this important document they confessed:

1. **We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. **We believe**
 - that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
 - that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;
 - that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
 - that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
 - that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and locks the path of the ungodly;

- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

Can the Confession of Belhar be applied to the situation of vulnerable children in South Africa in 2020? Some people may immediately reject such a possibility. It was, after all, written as a rejection of the ideology of apartheid based on inhumane and unjust convictions more than 30 years ago. But when you look more closely at this confession, there are a few principles imbedded in it which have a wider relevance than just for the context in which it was written, and are also still relevant today to address the exploitation of children by the forces of globalisation and the unjust global system, as well as the new post-apartheid local system that struggles to address their needs. One of the important principles is the strong emphasis on the human dignity of all people. If you read the chapters in this book, it becomes clear that the human dignity of children is not acknowledged in all

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spheres of the South African society. Therefore, the Belhar Confession can be seen as an urgent call for the restoration of the human dignity of all children living in South Africa.

Although there is in the confession a special emphasis on the poor, it does not necessarily mean that children are excluded. In his study on the poor in the Gospel of Luke, Bosch (2011:137) observed that when Luke “gives a list of people who suffer, [he] either puts the poor at the head of the list (cf 4:18; 6:20; 14:13; 14:21) or at the end, as a climax” (as in 7:22). He draws the conclusion that “[a]ll who experience misery are, in some very real sense, the poor” (:137-138). Koopman (2016) commented on this view as follows:

The poor, therefore, seems to be an all-embracing category for those who are in various ways the victims of society - for those who lack every active or even passive participation in society. This marginality comprises all spheres of life, and it makes people feel helpless. The poor, therefore, refers in the first instance to the materially poor, but also to other forms of misery. (p. 250)

Therefore, when the Belhar Confession uses the word ‘poor’ it can be interpreted in the same way. The implication is that ‘poor’ may include the vulnerable and suffering children of South Africa.

Right from the beginning, the Belhar Confession was severely criticised by some people for the inclusion of the formulation “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” (cf. Belhar Confession above). Smit (1984) convincingly argued that this belief has a firmly Biblical base. Koopman (2008) confirms this view by stating:

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the theme of God’s special identification with suffering people runs like a golden thread through scripture. This theme is not being referred to coincidentally. It cannot be ignored. Neither can it be countered with other evidence from scripture. This vast biblical evidence

shows that this theme has to do with the heart of the Christian faith. (p. 248)

It seems that in the light of the above discussion it can be confessed that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the vulnerable, exploited, harmed and wronged children. God's identification with the vulnerable children comes also to the fore in Jesus' teaching to his disciples in Matthew 18:5: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." According to Placher (2010:Loc. 2697), "[t]he distinctive thing about children was their lack of any rights." They had no status in the first century Mediterranean world. They also had no legal protection (:2837). "In the Aramaic that Jesus was presumably speaking, the same word (*talya*) can mean either 'child' or 'servant'" (:Loc. 2699-2700). Children were equal to slaves. The implication was that when you welcome a child, you are actually welcoming the most vulnerable person in the society. It was with this lowest, the most vulnerable in the society that Jesus identified himself with. This is also true for our world: Jesus meets us in the vulnerable children around us. If we do not welcome the vulnerable children into our lives, we are also not welcoming Jesus into our lives.

Furthermore, the Belhar Confession (see above) states explicitly: "God helps ... orphans" and "that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans ... in their suffering." It is clear that the Belhar Confession is very relevant for the plight of the vulnerable and exploited children living in South Africa today.

There cannot be any misunderstanding: The Belhar Confession calls on us to act in the interest of the vulnerable children around us. In this regard, Grobbelaar (2012) stated:

Although it can be argued that the church is not harming children by giving theological justification to an unjust system, as some churches did in the days of apartheid in South Africa, it may be true that the church is contributing to the exploitation of children by not standing enough on the side of the wronged and suffering children of this world and by not witnessing enough against all

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the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm many children. (p. 65)

Perhaps it is time that the Churches in South should accept a 'Belhar Confession' that states clearly that we stand with God on the side of the vulnerable children of South Africa. Possibly, a part of the Belhar Confession can be reformulated as follows (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:66):

We believe

- that God, in a world full of injustice, exploitation, and wrongdoing regarding children, is in a special way the God of the vulnerable children;
- that the church must stand by children in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice done to children, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged children; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm children.

Do we believe it?

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