

*A Conference on Girl Mothers in Fighting Forces and Their Post-War
Reintegration in Southern and Western Africa*

April 12 – 18, 2005

The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center
Bellagio, Italy

CONFERENCE REPORT

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BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

A conference on *Girl Mothers In Fighting Forces and Their Post-War Reintegration in Southern and Western Africa* was held at the Foundation's Bellagio Center, Bellagio, Italy, from April 12th through 18th 2005. The event was supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, financial support from the USAID-funded Community Resilience and Dialogue Project in Uganda, and a grant from the University of Wyoming. The conference was organized and facilitated by Susan McKay, Professor of Women's and International Studies, University of Wyoming, and Malia Robinson, an independent consultant of child protection and psychosocial programming. Maria Gonsalves and Miranda Worthen assisted the organizers during the conference. A total of 17 invited participants representing program, policy and research perspectives attended the conference. A listing of participants and organizers is found in Appendix 1 to this report.

The conference was intended to provide an opportunity for those directly involved with the demobilization and community reintegration of girl mothers in African conflict situations to explore the existing research and share their practical experiences, with the "luxury" of time and space for reflection, discussion, sharing and creating possibilities—program ideas, policy recommendations, a research agenda, and a scholarly publication. It was hoped that the conference would contribute to the improved capacity of Africa-based practitioners in documentation, analysis and program enhancement.

Conference Goals and Objectives

The overall goals of the conference were to:

1. Create space for reflection, analysis and sharing of experience of the work of supporting girl mothers who were involved in armed conflict in southern and western Africa.
2. Synthesize learning to date on the situation of these girl mothers and their children and identify knowledge gaps.

Objectives of the conference were to:

1. Share country-specific approaches to identifying these girl mothers and working with communities to enhance community capacity to assist them.
2. Develop concrete responses to the challenges addressed, in the form of program and policy recommendations, programming and research proposals.
3. Establish relationships and connections for collaboration and continued networking.

Participants were grateful for the time together and the opportunity to share their ideas, concerns, and work processes with others. Many noted in their evaluations that they do not have the time for such reflection in their work environments. We held some vigorous discussions and debates both within the full group and during small group interactions that focused on issues of practice, research, and policy. The peaceful and comfortable setting of Bellagio was, not surprisingly, extremely conducive to these interactions.

The conference began with participants giving presentations to the entire group about girl mothers, their situations, and what is being done on their behalf in the countries represented. Presentations were made of the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola and Sudan. There was also a presentation from the UNICEF east and southern Africa regional office on its priorities, from the USAID Displaced Children and Orphan's Fund on the concerns from a donor perspective, and from the UNICEF West Africa regional perspective. (Copies of all the presentations were provided to participants and are not included herein for the sake of space.) These presentations were then discussed to further elicit knowledge about we know about girl mothers, drawing out key themes. Over the course of the six days, we identified *how little* we actually know about these girl mothers and, even more so, their children. What we are presently best able to synthesize are knowledge gaps that exist and contrasting points of view about how to approach working with girl mothers and their children.

Because so little is known about girl mothers and their children, we were unable to work on approaches and “best practices” since few presently exist. Instead, substantial discussion occurred from the perspectives of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers about knowledge gaps, articulation between policy, research, and practice; we had substantial debate about HOW (conceptually) to address the problems that arise in working with girl mothers and their children. The debate needs to move now to a practical level whereby we articulate how specifically to work with these girls.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that work with girl mothers must be done at the community level if they are to be assisted appropriately and optimally. Thus communities must be mobilized, prepared and supported. However, given lack of experiences and knowledge in working with girl mothers, we did not get to the practical level of identifying how to work with them within the community context. Instead, we developed some common understandings of the issues and themes and aired our varying perspectives about how best to approach these girls. Also, practitioners who work with girl mothers discussed their difficulties in working effectively with them. To produce program, policy and research recommendations, groups worked around identified themes. The results of group work in terms of issues and questions raised and recommendations are found in this report.

Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to develop relationships with colleagues involved in the same work, and to look at possibilities for cooperation. They expressed commitment to maintaining contact with other participants, and some plans for collaborative work were developed. For example, groups of participants from Uganda and Sierra Leone planned to work together when they returned home, to share conference learning with other child protection workers, and develop specific projects to bring more attention to girl mothers and their children. Initial discussions about research possibilities were also begun.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, April 13, 2005

The first day of the conference began with welcome and introductions, and an overview of the conference background and objectives. Participants were asked to express their expectations, as well as their concerns about the conference, and these are summarized as follows:

Participant Hopes and Expectations

- Learn things here that are relevant to on-going work in our region
- Broaden perspective to gender and children in context of DDR rather than just mothers and children and discuss gender based violence.
- Would like to learn from other contexts – from what other people have done.
- One or two clear ways of how to join up with others in the room to do research; clear pilot project to undertake; partnership.
- Sharing experiences.
- Identify gaps – issues we are not currently addressing in our programs – using this meeting to start addressing them.
- From donor perspective – learning which kinds of programs are worth supporting.
- Learn from research that has taken place or what people are planning
- To establish a team of people who really care and can share information with each other; share what is working and what is not working so that we have a network around the issue of girl mothers.
- To examine what protection norms work in war and post-war contexts. Why do they continue? Can we use these as a base? Local norms.
- Challenge of balance – girls affected by conflict vs. girl mothers; how do we balance our focus? This is an essential challenge of community-driven processes – making sure things are not over-looked, to keep in mind balance as we discuss specific subject and to remember the counterpoint.
- Through sharing, to know how girls from other countries become girl mothers. In Uganda, they are abducted and taken to the bush – elsewhere too?
- Clear project ideas and partnerships to carry out specific research projects.
- Learn how child protection norms can be adapted to our realities in the field because we often have specific age limit understandings – who is a child and who is not? To hear from the others how they make connections to the expectations when dealing with the reality.
- Provide a space to rejuvenate, to step away from very busy and challenging lives to find a space to think, read, meditate, discuss as well as to laugh and, hopefully, if we achieve that, go back to work with more energy and new insights.
- We are all coming from different backgrounds – but our voices coming together can be used to effect changes in government policies.
- To get practical pointers and indicators around rehabilitation programs. What works and what doesn't work.

Participant Concerns or Fears

- It's important that those coming from regional offices can demonstrate practically and pragmatically how this can translate into action. Feel something concrete. Practical outcomes.
- We'll come out with recommendations that are sound but that donors won't go with. Lack of follow-up.

Time was given on the first day for participants to finalize their presentations, and the first two presentations were given, focusing on the situation of girl mothers in Uganda and Sierra Leone. Both of these presentations were developed after consultation with girl mothers in the respective countries and put forward statistics as well as the views and voices of girls themselves.

Thursday, April 14, 2005

Presentations continued with the remaining country presentations in the morning—DRC, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Angola. These were followed by policy presentations by UNICEF eastern and western Africa regional offices, and the USAID Displaced Children and Orphan's Fund.

After the presentations and question and answer periods, there was a plenary summary of key themes and issues that arose in the presentations. These mainly took the form of questions, with some context-specific examples but no clear consensus on answers. These issues are summarized below, being loosely categorized into general themes for the sake of organization.

Relationships

The complexities of girls' relationships with their children, the fathers of their children, and their families were constant themes in the presentations. There was discussion around infanticide, and differing perspectives and experiences shared—evidence that girl mothers have killed their children intentionally, not wanting them; that girls have left children behind while fleeing, thus rendering the children vulnerable; and that girls love these children even if they are born out of sexual violence, and protect them. Questions remain about how to understand these relationships, when does infanticide occur, what motivates it, and which children make it home through reintegration programs?

The relationship that girls have with the military men who father their children and may consider themselves "husbands" is also complex. Some girls want to remain with these men after leaving the fighting forces. What influences these decisions? What are the social influences, such as the social and cultural norms defining marriage and lineage, and family attitudes, on these decisions? Do we make assumptions that these are all bad relationships, and can we always offer them better possibilities? What are the issues for the boy fathers and male parents?

While most reintegration work with children associated with fighting forces focuses on reunification with parents or extended family, the situation of girl mothers and their children can be very different. What came out in the presentations is the fact that many of the girls either choose to be, or end up living on their own with their children. More analysis is needed to understand why this is, and what the nature is of their relationships with their parents and other family members. Some report that it is due to rejection by the family, though there is anecdotal information that it can be a

choice made by the girls, perhaps because they no longer see themselves as children, having assumed adult responsibilities as combatants and mothers, they now wish to continue living independently. How does this affect our work to promote their social reintegration, which may be operating from a different model than the norm?

Rejection

The issue of rejection of the girl mothers and their children by family and community was a recurring theme in the presentations and discussions. What became apparent is that there is no single cause for the rejection, and the reasons may be complex. Some assume that this occurs because the family no longer cares for the girls and their babies because of their situations, but experience shows that it is not as simplistic as this. There may be cultural and social norms that stigmatize the girls because of their involvement in violence or unsanctioned sexual relations. There may be very real economic pressures on the family to provide for additional members with the return of the girls and their children. It was noted that families and communities also have concerns for their own safety when the girls come home, as they may be pursued by their military male partners, or become targets for reprisals in the conflict. In order to promote successful reintegration, the causes of possible rejection need to be understood in context.

All of these factors would also need to be looked at in terms of context—whether or not it is post-conflict reintegration process or one during active conflict.

Roles & Identity

There are many layers to the question of identity—how girl mothers' are perceived by their families and communities, by the organizations working to assist in their reintegration and, importantly their own self-identity. We consider them part of the larger group of children associated with fighting forces, or affected by armed conflict, but often they do not see themselves as children, but rather as mothers and adult women. This raises a question as to how to maintain a child rights focus and perspective in this work without trying to re-socialize girls to be something they no longer want to be. How to support the girls in being girls and being mothers?

During country presentations, references were made to the fact that often these girls are considered by their communities to be violent, problematic and inappropriately sexually active upon their return. How do these perceptions shape their reintegration process, as well as their self-identity? Do these perceptions become a self-fulfilling prophesy? The girls may also be perceived to be simply victims of sexual violence and abuse; however there is evidence that in some cases girls make choices to become pregnant as a means of protection from fighting on the battlefield or being forced to have multiple sexual partners.

In terms of establishing a role and identity for girl mothers in the community, the different variables that influence their “acceptability” were also discussed. From one perspective, economic self-sufficiency has been shown to establish the girls in the community, even changing perceptions of her as marriageable. It was noted, however, that economic factors were not the only ones, and there are cultural and social values that need to be considered, as well.

Choice

The role of agency and choice in the lives of girl mothers, and particularly in the reintegration process arose as a theme. As previously mentioned, girls may have been making choices to be with men, or to be pregnant, and these may have served to protect them in some way. In the process of reintegration, how do those assisting girls recognize the choices that the girls have already made, and ensure that they are offering them opportunities to make informed decisions and choices for the future? Can we presume to offer them anything better than their current situation?

Approaches

During the conference, perhaps more discussion was devoted to how to approach promoting the reintegration of girl mothers and their children than any other. On the one hand, it was noted that separating out a specific category of child (i.e. girl mothers) was not useful, as any more focused interventions should be based on vulnerability, not a generic category of child. The perspective was also put forward that the category of girl mothers does present particular vulnerabilities and challenges in programming. A complex process exists of casting a broad net and yet being responsive and proactive to reaching out to specific cases that need it.

The tension between targeted vs. “broad net” approaches was also examined with regards to research, which can demand a more specific focus. Criticism was voiced about highly specific academic research; however some agreement emerged that some broader research on children, or girls affected by conflict, could draw out specific issues related to sub-groups such as girl mothers.

In terms of program interventions, the question was raised as to how to practically work with girl mothers. Should they be treated the same as all girls in the community? In some presentations, girl mothers reported that this is how they wished to be viewed. But do they have particular needs that warrant special attention? Should they be integrated into general programming, or should there be special projects for girl mothers? There was consensus that conventional DDR programs have not met the needs of girls and girl mothers. The interesting point about visibility was raised—that DDR processes are high profile processes. However, in many cases, girls and girl mothers prefer to remain low profile or less visible; therefore other processes need to be developed to promote their demobilization and reintegration.

In drawing on examples from presentations, the point was also made that promoting the reintegration of girl mothers requires a broader focus on social change, constructing new realities for girls and their children in social and cultural systems that may not always emphasize their best interests.

Some examples were provided in presentations of how different methods and technologies are used in the work to promote reintegration, such as music in reconstructing identity (it was also mentioned that it was used in military recruitment) and videotaping to facilitate family reunification.

Donor Priorities vs. Practical Realities

Donor funding priorities also influence programming and research priorities. While a lot of funds are for general child DDR processes, greater difficulty would occur in seeking specific funds for a group such as girl mothers. On the other hand, an over-specificity of funding for particular activities may have limited usefulness. Ways to creatively address particular concerns need to be sought in the

broader, well-funded programming. A suggestion was made to integrate issues of child mothers with the larger issue of HIV/AIDS, where there is a high likelihood of obtaining funding.

Time frames for funding, programming and evaluating imposed by donors are also of concern in this programming. In some of the high profile contexts, large amounts of money are “dumped” in short periods of time, and the question arises about how to provide quality programming with this set up.

Artificial Divide of Research, Policy and Programming

Areas of tension between research and programming arose in the discussions, and it was pointed out that in some ways an artificial dichotomy was developing; importantly, a bridge between researchers and practitioners should exist. Discussion emphasized practitioners’ need for indicators in their programming and assistance that researchers could provide in developing those. Practitioners want something more than simple evaluation, applied research is of much interest to them, and they do not always see the value of academic research.

Friday, April 15, 2005

The morning session began with a presentation by Susan McKay about researching girls and girl mothers. Some areas emphasized were the importance of research in improving the way we practice, moving beyond basing what we do on anecdotal information, researchers and practitioners working as teams, and addressing knowledge gaps through research. Research can influence policy which, in turn, can affect practice. Many challenges exist to conducting credible research. Some of these are: gathering accurate data, securing funding, ethical issues, and analyzing findings within the larger politico-economic system. Presently, no systematic studies exist about girl mothers. Both practitioners and researchers need this information.

After the presentation, small group and plenary discussions focused upon research issues related to girl mothers. Small groups focused on the following: what research on girls associated with fighting forces and their children would be useful for practitioners; practical ways of linking research and practitioners; approaches to research.

A key area identified was tension between not overly targeting a specific group and yet having a specific research focus. We discussed how research collaborations might work (for example, researchers with long-term ties to an organization but who is still outside the organization, forming research partnerships between academics and practitioners, evaluation and field-driven research compared with basic research). Another focus was the availability of research literature for practitioners and academics and the flow of information between groups, which often is inadequate. Besides applied research, the importance of comparative macro level research was identified as important. Academic research that is conceptual and abstract can seem irrelevant to practitioners; yet, academics read and think about theory and then use it in an applied context. An example given was the concept of identity and how identity can influence child soldiers in their communities. One participant pointed to the complicated relationships between researchers, donors, and those on the ground. Dialogue and negotiation between needs of researchers and practitioners were suggested as important as is helping staff develop research skills.

Caring for the Caregivers

A session entitled *Caring for the Caregivers* was held Friday afternoon. The intent was to address the very real concerns of stress and burnout in the work with girl mothers. Participants were put into groups and given two questions to discuss. Groups then met back in plenary and shared the highlights of their discussions. The questions were as follows:

1. What are the issues affecting the well-being of persons working with girls and their children?
2. What are some effective responses to support these people and promote their well-being?

As for the first question, the major issues affecting the well-being of persons working with girls and their children identified were: safety, burnout, frustration with the complexity of their problems, knowledge gaps and budgetary limitations.

The issue of safety was stressed—assisting children who may have harmed the community can bring about repercussions on staff. Sometimes the children themselves can threaten the safety of the staff. Of particular concern to staff working with girls and girl mothers is the often threatening presence of the military “husbands” of the girls who may demand to see their “wives” and create a dangerous presence in centers or offices. These men may actually believe that the staff have taken their “wives” away and threaten them with violence.

The workload for caregivers and others working with girls and their children can be overwhelming, both physically and psychologically. The complexity of the work exacerbates the feeling of exhaustion and frustration. A variety of factors induce stress, such as hearing the terrible stories from the children and not having solutions to their problems. National staff, themselves, are likely affected by the conflict so have their own concerns; international staff are often disconnected from their support systems at home.

Participants acknowledged that there are some particular challenges in working with the girls and their children as they are family units who often have no connection or desire for connection to other family members (parents, siblings, etc.). The work is not necessarily similar to that with other “children” because the girls have adult responsibilities and mindsets. Helping the girls mediate and negotiate the relationships with their parents, as well as the fathers of their babies can be complicated and frustrating.

In contexts in which a lot of girls and their babies have come through programs, staff members admit feeling unprepared for the work in terms of not having adequate knowledge of or training in specific issues such as reproductive health and early childhood development. The need for additional support and training were identified.

Finally, both groups stated that funding for programs for girls, girl mothers and their children is inadequate; a sense of being under-funded for the population requesting support is constant which frustrates staff and can give children the perception that the staff do not want to help them.

While the opportunity for discussion was directed at addressing the problems, a few suggestions were offered for effective responses to support staff and promote their well-being. It was agreed that staff care needs to be an integral part of program design, not an add-on. It begins at the time of induction, which should be a thorough process for preparing new staff for the challenges they will

face. Capacity issues should be addressed through training and good supervision and should include recognition, feedback and constructive feedback, and opportunities for processing experiences -- including emotional content). Working and living situations should be kept separate, so staff have a break with time to relax must be afforded. Programs should have emergency preparedness plans considering the safety issues presented in the work and environment. Programs need to partner and work in cooperation with others, recognizing that no one program can meet all of the complex needs of the population.

A fundamental question was posed in the discussion, and that is: *what drives us to continue the work?* The response was that the work is a vocation, a service—we don't do it for money or rewards. The job is a calling that can also help give meaning to the suffering that we have felt and that we witness

Saturday April 16, 2005

At the beginning of the day, we went over key themes that had emerged about girl mothers. These were:

1. Relationships: girls relationships with families, communities, and staff; staff relationships with girls
2. Identity/Roles: girls' sense of self as wives, children, mothers; how do we see them?
3. Choice: validate girls' decisions, offer options, and create opportunities for them
4. Health: their (physical) health needs and (psychological) meaning for future
5. Approach: recognize that girl mothers are a discrete group who also fit into many other categories and maintain awareness of girl mothers' needs; support them in meeting their needs without adding to their burdens

Following brief discussion of each theme, participants gathered in dyads to identify core questions related to the themes. These *key questions* were raised by participants:

- How can child protection norms be developed before war starts in order to reduce the incidence of these sorts of things happening? How can peace occur without justice?
- How can one work with children when they've entered (a force) to protect themselves? Many times children go into the armed forces to escape other abusive situations.
- What is the role of research in questioning policy and programming assumptions that might break the established programming mode for girl mothers affected by conflict? Girls aren't fitting the programming we have already. So how do we re-examine that?
- What are the dynamics of relationships and their consequences for girl mothers or their families? Bush husbands may have more influence on girls' choices than their families.
- Cultural perception of who a girl is and who a child is versus the Convention on the Rights of the Child – if, culturally, sex is a transition between child and adult, then what sort of resolution can we bring between these two ideas?

- What sort of health problems are we talking about for girl mothers? Is it just girl mothers who have problems or all the people who have been with the fighting forces?
- How can we determine what we have to offer to these girls to help them make choices?
 - What information do girls want and need? When can they hear this information? How can we obtain reliable information?
 - If you believe in the choice of these children, what does it mean with regards to the other children in the community?
 - How can girl mothers make informed choices without being influenced by the practitioners and other people around them? What sort of environment would help them make the best decisions? What steps can we (as practitioners, organizations, service providers, etc) take to help create an environment where girls can make informed decisions? There are so many people acting on them, and not many choices that are actually available. Can we alleviate short term pressures to help girls think in a longer term and make decisions related to the longer term? There are different environments (in an ICC, in communities, and others), how are choices made differently in different locations?
- How do we get an understanding of the value that girls and their communities place on DDR and how do we maximize the resources that are available through DDR?
- What steps can we take to change this discourse? We have to monitor the changes that are taking place and the programming we're doing, but how do we feed it back up the policy, funding channels to alter the investments that are being given to the programs?
 - Emphasis on monitoring can pull the focus away from the girls, so how do we put it back towards them – keeping it in the community despite that not meeting the requirements/desires of the donors/policies/programs, etc?
 - How do we demonstrate the value of community-based work when it doesn't fit within the constructs of known evaluation methods?
- How can agencies make sure that child welfare committees in the community remain engaged even after the agencies have left?
- What interventions work in the reintegration process that can serve as a model and reduce the long-term follow-up?
- What is a possible model for collaboration that we can experiment with as a way to answer the questions that have arisen related to donors, researchers, and agencies?
- Where and what are the existing opportunities within the current policy development where a gendered approach and methodology can be strategically integrated to ensure more attention to girls associated with the fighting forces?
- Where are the current research opportunities to integrate greater attention and focus on girls associated with the fighting forces?
- How can we use training tools and capacity building to enhance the skills of practitioners to ensure more effective approaches to integrating gender issues into DDR work and child protection?
- Knowing full well that the girl mother issues are forgotten ones, should research on girl mothers be specific or broad based?
- Should relationships be a research agenda?
- How can we involve other practitioners to address relationship issues (leaders in the communities, etc.)?

- Is there is a growing phenomenon of single mothers? If so, in what contexts? And what are the ways that this will impact communities and families in the future and what are the dynamics that have led to this situation? And what is the role of the fathers in all this?

For the remainder of the day, participants met in small groups with a focus on *policy, programming* or *research* to further discuss the key themes that arose from the presentations and plenary discussions, and the questions developed in the previous exercise. This group work continued on until the next day.

Sunday, April 17, 2005

On this final day of the conference, the small groups formed the previous day finalized their summaries of key issues and recommendations. The following summarizes the output of each of the groups as presented in plenary on the final day of the conference.

Key Issues and Recommendations for Policy, Research, and Practice

Research

This working group discussed conducting research within the context of a project supporting the reintegration of girl mothers. The group proposed several models, actual experience as well as the “ideal,” and it is described as follows:

At the beginning and throughout the project cycle, there should be a process of participant action research. Policy research can also inform programs and vice versa. At the beginning of the project, bring in an external researcher(s) to bring scientific rigor into the overall M&E process. The researcher would help design/conduct assessment, baseline, set up the M&E system and train national staff so that they can effectively carry out the M&E tasks within the project. Internal technical support can be accessed for the mid-term review. The external researcher/team that helped with the beginning of the project can also be brought back to assist with the end-of-project evaluation/impact assessment. It might also be possible to retain this person/team for a set number of days of technical support each year to, for example, review M&E plans, and provide additional skills training. During the course of the project there may be a variety of lines of inquiry that arise. External researcher(s) (not necessarily those who do M&E/impact assessment) can be brought in for those discrete efforts.

The group also made the following recommendations for research efforts that would contribute to practice:

1. Research into the role and effectiveness of post-war traditions and rituals for girl ex-soldiers, as well as an annotated literature review.
2. In terms of informing evidence-based practice, research on resilience factors contributing to post-war reintegration of girl ex-soldiers, with a focus on how to practically facilitate such attitudes, behaviors and social processes, and including the development of process and impact indicators for measuring interventions.
3. A cross-country, longitudinal research on the reintegration of girl ex-soldiers and their children, looking at factors such as rural/urban, mothers/non-mothers, with control groups.

4. Research on the constructs of childhood regarding the roles of girl ex-soldiers.
5. Research on the efficacy and usefulness of DDRRR processes for child soldiers.

Policy

1. Shift from disarmament and demobilization to the Rs and, better still, community based child protection strategies.

This is the ideal end state, it is likely that we'll be working with DDR frameworks for sometime but we would like to start to move away from the framework as it does not work for girl children/young women and their holistic well being.

Community based child protection strategies should be similar for children regardless of participation in conflict or not. However, given the interface with conflict, we need a statement of what norms and practices we believe community based work should be aiming at.

Policy shift: Start interagency dialogue at headquarter level; develop statement that articulates the need to shift away from a (dysfunctional) framework which does not help many girls and the move to a community based analysis of child protection needs and responses/duty bearers. This should identify action points about what the alternative strategies might be when there is no conflict, during conflict and after conflict.

Opportunities to begin this dialogue:

- SC UK global Child Protection meeting next month
- Manuel Fontaine at UNICEF to dialogue with UN DPKO
- UNICEF consultation May 10th to 12th
- Marie de la Soudière to discuss with NGOs in US

This process should be replicated at regional level, at country level and local level.

Develop an inter-agency policy statement on child protection work in conflict affected situations. Based on evidence about how DDR fails children, we recommend:

- Use existing documents as evidence – SC S and SC UK Sudan 'We Told them So', Chris Robertson reports of workshops Sudan, Lynne Cripe and John Williamson evaluation of USAID funded work in Sierra Leone, recent work in Liberia
- Commission studies which take control groups to look at if/how DD positively or negatively affects children; for example Sierra Leone children who escaped RUF vs. those who came through formal DDR and same in Uganda (also important to question does centre based rehabilitation work?)
- Examine cases which may not have been documented in that light and see what the impact was (Angola, where there was no child DDR)
- Look at what children have to say about DDR and reintegration in particular e.g. No Place Like Home (SC UK Sierra Leone), Sudan workshops
- Develop indicators around what (re)integration actually means and work back to examine what programmes should be.

This is outside of the need to shift the DDR construct to a majority emphasis on RR – release and reintegration from a community-based approach. The issue of children/girls associated with armed groups needs to be nested within child protection work at the community level broadly. This captures for example the linkages and harmonization with work on sexual exploitation and violence and separated children. This moves to a community based analysis of child protection needs and responses/duty bearers -- one that reflects the socio-cultural dynamics of the community.

Community-based children protection strategies are rooted in what we expect to achieve for children regardless of participation in conflict. We need an inter-agency policy statement on the norms and practices entailed in community based child protection work.

Policy documents needed: More clear guidelines on how to do community-based work with communities and war affected children. What should child protection work look like, with particular reference to girls and their needs, at community, national and agency levels? Includes statements of norms and standards for services and approaches (though approaches and standards need local flexibilities):

Norms – how communities should/did view children (girls and their children) and how programmes should address programming for children.

Standards – what minimum standards do we believe should be applied (needs flexibility for local adaptation) to war affected children (boys and girls) and children who have been part of armed groups, what special standards need to be applied to specific groups of children (e.g. girls with their own children)?

Approaches – outlining community and integrated approaches to the well being of all vulnerable children but taking into consideration the needs of specific groups of children. Approaches also include articulation of mechanisms of work to be from the community level “out” to levels such as local associations, NGOs, etc. and not just our approaches reaching “in” to the community level. This needs to be articulated in a way that increases the investment and prioritization of this work by donors. This means not waiting for the DDR funding stream to be part of the picture and link with some of the ongoing dialogue about humanitarian action and funding being “life saving only” and thus not education, livelihoods, psychosocial, etc....

2. Common dialogue and policy statements acknowledging the role of abuse and harm to girls and reviewing care and protection strategies that may be alternative to family reunification or extended family placement.

Interagency dialogue on harm and abuse of girls and the impact that this may have on girls making choices to join forces.

Use UN Study on Violence to highlight the links between domestic and community violence and abuse to girls choosing to join the forces and how having participated in the armed forces makes girls more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence both in the forces and afterwards: UNICEF East and Southern Regional Office and UNICEF West and Central Africa Office and Save the Children Alliance.

Lobby for policy within our own organizations to adapt programmes/policy to listen to girls (with or without babies) and find ways to give them the opportunity to define their own care and protection needs outside the armed forces.

Could look at DFID model for south Sudan and the way in which U\$30 million was allocated for women and children in Angola.

3. In the given working environment we have to work with the DDR constraint/construct, so need to address how to ensure programming/funding framed within the DDR process incorporates girls who are war affected or who have been in the fighting forces/armed groups

We want to achieve a state of play where the removal of children from armed forces is a de facto priority and does not wait for formal DDR processes (this has a particular impact on girls who are less likely to pass through formal DDR). And where funding and programming for children who leave armed forces without passing through DD is given due consideration in support to programmes:

- Dialogue with donors at national and international levels
- Ongoing dialogue with UN structures which shape Missions (Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program)
- Dialogue with national structures which define DDR priorities
- National and local training of agencies that implement child protection and child DDR projects to ensure a good understanding of the gender considerations for children who have been affected by armed conflict or in armed forces and groups

This requires an articulation for donors on the shift in funding from bulk on DD to Rs; so we are dealing with RRRDD and not DDRRR in formal processes. And need to share proposals and communication with donors which moves the emphasis.

Documents to influence these processes:

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Separated Children
- UN Interagency IDDRS document on Child DDR
- New literature on child soldiers
- New literature on girls and armed conflict

Programming

This group formulated key questions relating to improved programming for girl mothers (and their children) in the reintegration process. Further discussion is to take place in field settings.

1. What sort of health problems are we talking about for girl mothers?
 - Life skills – interpersonal relational skills
 - Reproductive health – HIV/AIDS, VCT, family planning
 - Child care - motherhood

2. What information do girls need and want?
 - Must provide info when girl is at a transit/reception center:
 - What can center provide for girls and community for decision-making?
 - For how long can center provide support?
 - Link girls to services – Education, health services
 - Provide info about bush husbands
 - Provide awareness of rights
 - Must support girls during decision-making process:
 - Services of social workers
 - Create environment that allows girls to make informed decisions
 - Help girls become aware of roles of community networks: Institutions, religious leaders, etc. – those who support reintegration process
 - Help girls become aware of amnesty/DDRRR processes so they can choose to participate if they feel it is in their best interests

3. What interventions work in the reintegration process can serve as models and reduce long-term follow-up?
 - Involvement of community in various stages of programming; Community must be involved in project cycle
 - Focus should be on community need-driven projects

4. How can we use training tools and capacity building to enhance the skills of practitioners to ensure more effective approaches to integrating gender issues into DDR work and child protection?
 - Acquire new skills from other organizations
 - Peer education – crash cross-community education learning from other successful programs = bridging gap b/t programs and creating confidence
 - On-going trainings and debriefings so that they may cope with challenges that arise in work
 - Seek technical support from ex-pats to promote incorporation of gender issues into DDR

5. How can we involve other practitioners to address relationship issues?
 - a. Define roles of various practitioners – roles clarified to girls
 - b. Practitioners should be aware of their own roles and respect boundaries of roles
 - c. Create awareness among girls of roles of agencies and centers providing assistance
 - d. Sensitization to community so that community realizes work is a collective responsibility = team spirit can be realized
 - e. Build confidence of girl mothers in contribution practitioners make to process
Practitioners will help mediate relationships among girls and their parents through counseling, etc.

Follow Up and Next Steps

On the last evening of the conference, participants discussed the possibilities and opportunities for follow up t the conference. No agreement was reached on a specific, formal next step; however general interest was expressed in maintaining the relationships developed through communication (primarily e-mail) and possibly some joint projects.

During the week, participants from Uganda and Sierra Leone had already made plans for some specific follow-up activities in their respective countries. They will convene fora to present what they learned during the conference and seek to bring together other actors in partnership to further address the issues of girl mothers.

UNICEF will share the issues raised in this conference at several upcoming meetings and with UNICEF Burundi which will be carrying out an analysis of girls in the DDR process. Save the Children in Liberia has a planning session immediately after the conference and will incorporate into its work plan themes and issues that were raised.

Some interest was expressed in joint research that would be more fully developed at a later time.

Appendix 1

Participant Information

| <i>Girl Mothers in Fighting Forces and Their Post-War Reintegration in Africa</i> The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center April 12 – 18 2005 | | | | |
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