

Strengthening the response to displaced children

by Nils Kastberg

Ron Gilting/Still Pictures

Today, an estimated 20 million children are displaced by armed conflict or human rights violations.

education. In addition, legal 'invisibility' may leave IDPs susceptible to arbitrary actions and unable to seek help or protection from local authorities.

Efforts have been made in recent years to strengthen the international response to the internally displaced, primarily in relation to institutional and operational coordination. Among these are the development of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement¹, a comprehensive collection of legal standards and norms applicable to IDPs; the adoption by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee of a policy paper on Protection of IDPs²; the development of Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Separated and Unaccompanied Children; and the establishment of an IDP Unit within the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)³.

Key elements in UNICEF's response to displaced children

Children who are refugees or IDPs face many of the same challenges and risks: discrimination, the breakdown of or separation from their family, physical injury and psychosocial impact, violence, abuse and exploitation, and other violations of their rights. At the same time, there are important differences in their status, related mainly to the legal and institutional mechanisms in place for their assistance and protection. Humanitarian organisations

School for displaced children, Liberia.

Forced to flee their homes, often travelling great distances to escape enemy fire, these children are the most frequent victims of violence, disease, malnutrition and death. In the chaos of flight, these boys and girls may become separated from their parents and families and thus exposed to far greater dangers. Adolescents have special needs because they are especially vulnerable to forced recruitment, abduction, trafficking or exploitation, and for girls sexual violence and rape are risks. In many cases, 'temporary' displacement often extends well over a decade. In such cases, children may spend their entire childhood in camps.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the impact of displacement - whether internal or across international borders - on families and children. This article considers some of UNICEF's recent experiences in working with displaced children.

Refugees and IDPs: risks and challenges

The 1951 Refugee Convention sets the standards for the treatment of refugees and the obligations of countries. Although the international community has taken responsibility

for their welfare, primarily through UNHCR, refugees often face terrible hardship, danger and suffering. Frequently perceived as outsiders, they may suffer harassment and discrimination. Language barriers may limit children's access to education and lack of accepted certification makes employment difficult for parents. The mobility of refugees is sometimes restricted by host country regulations. Poverty awaits most in the long term, after they lose land and property as well as many legal rights. In their precarious existence they may endure a range of human rights abuses, including incarceration and exclusion from schooling.

Because the majority of conflicts over the last decade have been within rather than across national boundaries, the number of IDPs - those who are forced to flee but remain within their own national borders - has been increasing sharply. Although governments are primarily responsible for the welfare of those who are internally displaced, they may be unable or unwilling to offer them assistance and protection. The internally displaced, separated from their normal support systems and often without identity papers, may be unable to obtain food, water, shelter, health services and

must be cognisant of the implications of these challenges and differences as they work to assist and protect refugee and internally displaced children.

Using the Convention on the Rights of the Child as its starting point, UNICEF strives to ensure that children displaced under emergency conditions have the same rights to survival, protection, and development as other children.

assessment is a particularly undervalued area of activity

UNICEF's work for displaced children does not, of course, take place in a vacuum. The support of its partners, both governmental and non-governmental, local and international, is critical in ensuring the success of UNICEF's efforts to support and protect children. Inter-agency collaboration to address the needs of refugee children is essential. In 1996, UNICEF and UNHCR, key partners in this area, outlined their collaboration in a memorandum of understanding covering issues such as refugee education and protection of refugee children.

Young people have the right to express their views and to participate in decisions affecting their lives. The participation of displaced young people is a critical element in successful project design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation. Beyond the immediate impact of improving programmes, the participation of young people is also a major contributor to rebuilding their self-esteem, increasing their sense of efficacy and, ultimately, to aiding their empowerment. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, UNICEF has supported the establishment of a youth-to-youth support hotline in which young volunteers, supervised by a professional, have been trained and are available on two toll-free lines to provide information and psychosocial support to other young people over the phone. This kind of approach builds upon the strengths of young people themselves and helps them improve their own coping skills while supporting their peers.

Creative solutions must be pursued in order to address many of the challenges of displacement, as routine approaches and solutions are likely to fall short for these children who are either constantly moving or facing the threat of moving again, and who may be deliberately targeted by govern-

ments and armed groups. Nor are displaced children part of a homogenous or historical 'community' so community-based approaches will need to be adapted accordingly. To address such factors in Georgia, for instance, UNICEF and UNHCR supported a mobile campaign for child rights to educate children and communities on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the first half of 2001 alone, the campaign travelled from village to village in Eastern Georgia educating 6,700 children about their rights.

Advocacy

Effective advocacy should be built on accurate information. It may include regular reporting on the conditions of the displaced; making displaced communities themselves aware of their rights; mobilisation of partner organisations; advocacy at the highest political levels; and ensuring that organisations working with the displaced community specifically consider the rights of children. One example of effective advocacy around children in armed conflict is the growing integration of children's concerns into Security Council resolutions and statements. The most recent Security Council resolution on children affected by armed conflict calls upon all parties to armed conflict to "provide protection and assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons, the majority of whom are women and children....".

As part of an inter-agency effort, UNICEF is working closely with the IDP Unit to support training at country-level on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The training is both an advocacy initiative to raise awareness of the needs and rights of the internally displaced and a capacity-building exercise to support governments and country teams in developing a stronger overall response to IDPs. The training package includes specific consideration of the capacities and vulnerabilities of children and women.

Assessment

Of the many different activities needed to protect and support children, assessment is a particularly undervalued area of activity. It is often during the assessment stage that key decisions affecting the rights and well-being of children are made, for example, decisions about which activities are most critical for children

during and after displacement, or where activities should be targeted to reach the most children at risk. The early and ongoing availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data is essential to inform these kinds of decisions.

Assessment, monitoring and evaluation activities are the foundation of sound programmes as well as the basis of effective policy and advocacy. Good assessments should call attention to situations or issues that may lead to displacement, such as inter-ethnic clashes or nationalist rhetoric. They should also systematically incorporate protection concerns and involve the participation of displaced children as far as possible. In 2001, for example, the situation of children in camps in northern Uganda for the internally displaced was assessed to obtain in-depth knowledge of specific factors affecting the rights and development of children and adolescents. The assessment made recommendations on the issues of abducted children, children orphaned by AIDS, and child abuse and exploitation.

Care and protection

The restoration of basic social services is critical to respond effectively to displaced children. Access to maternal and child health care (including the prevention of malnutrition and childhood diseases such as measles and polio), schools, water and sanitation, cultural activities and recreation help not only to save lives but also to restore a protective environment for children who have been uprooted. The establishment of child-friendly spaces in camps for refugees and IDPs is providing integrated care for children in a number of humanitarian crises. [See article by Suba Mahalingam on page 22.]

Displaced girls and boys are particularly vulnerable to all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, rape and recruitment into armed forces. UNICEF promotes the concept of children as a 'zone of peace' as a general approach to children in armed conflict situations. Periods of cease-fire or 'days of tranquility' have been used to facilitate access to basic social services for children. This year, UN agencies and their partners have been able to carry out successful National Immunisation Days for polio eradication in Somalia, DRC, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Afghanistan, among others. In the DRC, the UN assisted

national education authorities in negotiating the delivery of state exams to rebel-held areas in the country. This allowed students in all parts of the country to sit for state diplomas. Where political will exists, conflicts need not be an obstacle to fundamental development imperatives such as the right to health or education.

Birth registration and the provision of basic identity and registration documents are an important element in helping to prevent violations of the rights of displaced children. Without identification, children are vulnerable to under-age recruitment by armed forces, may be unable to take advantage of educational and health services, and are at risk of losing their citizenship rights. In Colombia, a cooperative programme by UNICEF, Colombian government agencies and ECHO created 'registration brigades' to enable internally displaced children to regain identity documents. The one-stop registration programme was organised in multiple sites to overcome transportation difficulties faced by displaced families. People were also helped to register at border areas, to prevent their temporary movements across national boundaries from complicating registration requirements.

The preservation of family unity is a general principle when working with displaced children, as the family is the most effective unit of protection and assistance for children, especially very young children. Family reunification is also among the most important activities for children who have been separated from their families, and can help restore normalcy in a way that few other activities can.

When providing assistance to children, efforts should be made to recognise and take advantage of entry points to reach children. International and non-governmental organisations may be able to use traditional entry points for assistance, such as education and health, in order to promote activities in newer, less traditional areas such as protection, psychosocial support and recreation, and to combat gender-based violence. In Cambodia, UNICEF, World Education and the Ministry of Education operate a successful

mine risk education programme through the school system in the most affected districts. The programme has reached more than 81,000 children, including both in-school and out-of-school children, and 12,500 adults. It has since been expanded to include HIV/AIDS awareness as another component of risk education. In Indonesia, in 2001, UNICEF and USAID supported the establishment of a computer training centre at the Maluku Library in Ambon for high school youth from both Muslim and Christian communities. The Library is situated in a neutral area in Ambon and provides a rare venue for children from both communities to interact with each other and learn and play together.

Protection and assistance must be seen as mutually reinforcing actions. Traditionally, the focus has been on providing assistance to 'vulnerable' groups such as children; however, the international community is increasingly cognisant of the need to ensure that the populations they seek to assist are also protected from further human rights violations and threats to their safety. For internally displaced and refugee children, who have been driven from their homes because of human rights abuses, protection must be a fundamental part of the international humanitarian response.

Because the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced and refugee children are so interlinked, displacement must be addressed as part of a broader humanitarian and

development strategy. Humanitarian organisations and donors alike require a better understanding of the ongoing nature of many displacement crises and needs, the long-term impacts on children of even relatively short episodes of displacement and the specific protection dimensions of displacement.

Conclusions

Among the major areas of response to displaced children are assessment, advocacy, care and protection. UNICEF's experience demonstrates that flexibility, partnerships and innovation are required in all these areas. Assessments must be flexible enough to address repeated waves of displacement and incorporate a broad range of protection and assistance issues. Advocacy must be sensitive to the specific risks and challenges facing displaced children and must involve a range of partners at local, national and international levels. Finally, innovative and flexible approaches are needed for the care and protection of displaced children, including approaches that are grounded in a comprehensive, integrated and long-term response to displacement.

Nils Kastberg is the Director, Office of Emergency Programmes, UNICEF. Email: emops@unicef.org

1. See www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/principles.htm

2. See www.idpproject.org/UN/IASC/ProtectionPolicyPaper.pdf

3. See www.reliefweb.int/idp/

Teaching children to avoid landmines, Cambodia

