



# Meeting the needs of internally displaced children: training and capacity building of agency personnel

by Angela Raven-Roberts

*IDP children in  
East Timor*

Throughout the 1990s, national and international humanitarian agencies faced a number of challenges in developing their response to the needs of countries and communities affected by armed conflict, massive displacement and the deliberate violations of human rights. Developing adequate human rights and humanitarian instruments and principles to ensure the protection of these communities has been equally as important as the development of appropriate programmes in health, nutrition, food security, education and livelihood enhancement to ensure their well-being and economic longevity.

The special protection and assistance needs of children affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and forced internal displacement have been the subject of several reviews, UN resolutions and calls to action from a large group of diverse NGOs, academic institutions and child-centred activist organisations. 'Mainstreaming' a child perspective into the policy and

programme sectors of humanitarian and development organisations is becoming as important as the measures to incorporate a gender perspective into the workings of various organisations. However, there still remains the challenge of how agency personnel, officials and extension workers of national ministries are to be equipped to do this and what standards of practice and systems of accountability should exist to ensure quality and appropriately designed programme strategies and actions.

Internally displaced children forcibly removed from their homes due to either war or natural disasters have been displaced from both their cultural and natural environments. They are subject to hunger, malnutrition and a lack of shelter and access to health and educational services. When not living in squalid IDP camps, they are often forced to seek refuge among populations who may be equally poor and whose environment may not have adequate services and facilities. This may cause resentment and discrimination

against newcomers, which could result in violence to these communities. Children in these communities are often exposed to sexual abuse, forced labour and other forms of intimidation and exploitation. Many may have lost their families and, as orphans or unaccompanied minors, be forced to live and fend for themselves or be taken into dubious fostering arrangements where they are used as cheap labour in return for meagre food, shelter and protection. Unaccompanied children and youth in these unprotected environments are also subject to exploitation by predatory institutions such as militias, criminal gangs and traffickers who capture, cajole or blackmail them into working for them.

Since the 1990s, through research and practice, NGOs and others working in the field of humanitarian crises and forced displacement have accumulated a wide range of experience and knowledge in response to the needs of children in these situations. This work can be grouped under two

general headings - one referring to the protection needs of displaced children and the other to their material assistance needs. These also encapsulate the types of training and sensitisation required for personnel working with children.

### Protection of children

The protection of children encompasses the laws and instruments that exist to ensure the rights of children as well as their actual physical security and safety. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are two of the most comprehensive treaties for the protection of women. These instruments support the claims of children in a range of situations *vis à vis* their right to food, shelter and education, as well as protection from exploitation, trafficking, forced labour, sexual slavery and other forms of violence, abuse and discrimination. A number of new protocols and legislation have been accepted internationally that also have direct relevance to internally displaced children, including laws on the use of child soldiers, protection against human trafficking and new labour laws.

Personnel working either for national institutions or international humanitarian organisations should be fully cognisant of these protocols and understand how they inform and enhance the work of their agency. All too often in emergency situations staff are recruited hurriedly and are not given even basic training in these instruments or their relevance to their work or, importantly, in agencies' codes of behaviour for relating to children and unprotected minors. Recent cases of sexual abuse by refugee camp workers, peacekeepers and staff of humanitarian agencies attest to the importance of ensuring that these protocols are widely disseminated and enforced.

It is equally important that national institutions and counterpart agencies be given the benefits of training and dissemination of these codes and principles. Agencies often assume that, because a country has ratified or signed up to a convention, it is common knowledge throughout the country they are working in. In many multi-lingual societies, for example, national laws - even if they refer to

children and incorporate elements of the Convention of the Rights of the Child - may not be available in local languages, and administrators, police, judicial services and others at a more local level may not be aware of them. Creating opportunities for shared training and dissemination of these policies is a good way of building the capacity of national institutions and helping them fulfill their own obligations under international law.

### Material assistance needs

Internally displaced children have specific health, nutrition, educational, psychosocial and other physical and material needs. Agencies have learned over the years the importance of implementing basic emergency health-care in situations of displacement that prevent excess mortality. Measles vaccination, prevention of cholera and dysentery through provision of good water and sanitation programmes, and implementation of income-generating and livelihood protection programmes have become standard practice for many agencies working in the context of massive displacement and armed conflict. Personnel have to be skilled in a number of specific technical sectors such as education, health and child development as well as being attuned to the specific cultural and political characteristics of the context in which they are working. As agencies experiment with more creative ways of meeting these needs - such as addressing the mental health needs of children - they may increasingly require staff to develop language skills or use anthropological techniques to develop culturally appropriate responses and to gain closer interaction and knowledge of the communities with whom they are working.

Staff working in humanitarian agencies whether directly or indirectly working with children need to be aware of the wide range of protection and assistance needs that internally displaced communities and their children face. Managers and programme directors need to know how to implement appropriate life-saving as well as livelihood-supporting programmes and where to seek advice and resource to help them in these efforts. Staff need to know how to conduct needs assessments, nutrition and health surveys, food security and vulnerability analysis and other forms of community needs analysis as well as

how to monitor the impact of their inputs and programmes. These skills require quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies. Staff also need to understand the different debates, codes and standards that have been established to ensure proper implementation and accountability of humanitarian programmes. As organisations such as the SPHERE Project<sup>1</sup> seek to develop and disseminate these kinds of codes and standards, it is important that those working specifically on children's issues develop, disseminate and adhere to the same kinds of codes and standards.

### Training initiatives

A number of organisations such as the Save the Children Alliance, the International Rescue Committee, UNICEF and others have developed training modules and packages that address many of these issues. At the same time several universities in Europe and North America are now offering specialist courses in humanitarian assistance, which include child-related programmes. There is still much to be done and developed, however. The discourse of 'children in armed conflict', 'internally displaced children' or 'children in humanitarian crises' is, of necessity, multi-disciplinary. The challenge remains to bring these fields together effectively as well as to influence other policy discourses regarding the issue of armed conflict, forced migration and displacement. A further challenge remains to develop these same programmes in Southern universities where the scarcity of resources for higher education often results in lack of attention for specialist programmes such as children and human rights. The development of these institutions could help provide key resource centres and help create a new cadre of local agents of change who could help governments to develop policies and legislation for meeting children's needs.

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1. See [www.sphereproject.org/](http://www.sphereproject.org/) and also p55 of this FMR.