

Young and separated from their families in eastern Congo

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As well as suffering the obvious side-effects such as missing parental affection and guidance, unaccompanied displaced youth also suffer from being stigmatised by some members of the host communities.

About 62 youths aged between 7 and 22, all separated from their families, are currently living within a church community in Ango town in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.¹ Some live with foster families, others by themselves in tiny shelters they have constructed on land offered to them by the church. Most have had no contact with their parents since they fled. They live on piecemeal information on the whereabouts and status of their families which they receive from traders or through radio communication from a police post in Ango. “Mostly we only receive information when a family member is either sick or dead,” says 18-year-old Patrick who has been living in a foster home in Ango for over a year.

In late 2011, there were an estimated 471,000 IDPs in Orientale Province in eastern DRC. Of these, some 321,000 were in Haut and Bas Uélé districts, having fled their homes in fear of atrocities – killings, mutilations and abductions – by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). They have sought refuge in places such as the town of Ango which is now home to an estimated 20,000 people, of whom 12,000 are IDPs or former IDPs. The vast majority have very limited access to potable water, food, seeds to cultivate, shelter and health care. Insecurity, remoteness and a very poor road network have left Ango’s population marginalised from humanitarian assistance.

When the youths first arrived in Ango, some knew vaguely of relatives who live in the area; for others the only connection was a church community similar to one they knew back home. Through the church community and an NGO working there, the

young people were placed within foster families, some of whom were already stretched to their limits and unable to feed their own families.

Given the protracted nature of the conflict, reunion with their families seems improbable. In the meantime, their lives hang in limbo, a continuous struggle for survival. They have developed coping mechanisms, grouping together with others in a similar situation and

In 2010, 19-year-old Anumbue Bipuna watched as the LRA killed her father and several other people in her village of Sukadi. Many people were abducted and the village was pillaged by the rebels. She managed to escape to the west with her three younger brothers and her three-year-old cousin. When they arrived in Ango, about 80km away, they discovered that their mother had fled north to the Central African Republic. They have not seen her since, although on a few occasions they have managed to contact her by radio.

As the eldest, Anumbue has been forced to take on the responsibility of running her family of five. She is not only the breadwinner but also has to instil discipline among the younger ones and supervise whatever work her brothers can do to bring in extra money, all the while taking care of her young cousin who now looks to her as her mother. To be able to wear all these hats, she has had to sacrifice her ambitions and drop out of school. “My only focus now is my siblings. I cannot think about my own education now – I have to put them first,” she says. “I teach them to fend for themselves. They might find themselves alone one day and need to know how to survive.”

tied to the religious community because of shared religious faith, and they seek mentors within the church community for guidance. The church leaders help settle disputes and intervene on their behalf when there are tensions among them or with the host community. The church leaders are not in a position, however, to maintain overall responsibility for them.

Aside from the strain of feeding extra mouths, foster families already have children of their own and have now taken on three or four more, usually adolescents, who need proper mentoring and guidance. Patrick says his adoptive mother treats him like her own son, and ensures he stays in school and that he conducts himself with decorum. Others are just left to learn how to behave from others around them.

Disadvantaged

The responsibility of putting food on the table or paying for school rests squarely on the young people's shoulders. They may manage to get day labour jobs but they receive a lower wage for the same amount of work than members of the host communities, and there is great competition for the work. Some are forced to perform hard labour in exchange for accommodation and food, or are simply asked to leave by overburdened host families.

Displaced youths are forced to take on adult responsibilities to survive the new circumstances they find themselves in. Most employment opportunities available require hard labour like construction or cultivating fields which obviously favour the boys. Girls have fewer options for work, often ending up with tasks such as making palm oil or chopping wood to sell in the market and they do not earn as much money.

As a result some of the displaced girls are exposed to prostitution and manipulation both from among the IDP community and by members of the host community. Despite awareness campaigns on safe sex and the dangers of prostitution, they have adopted this lifestyle for lack of a viable alternative source of income, exacerbating further their risk of abuse, unwanted pregnancies and premature marriages.

Oscar Musi Sasa, president of the IDP committee in Ango, concurs that girls are often preyed on for sex. "I have seen girls who are as young as 12 years old already being solicited for sex. They are forced to give themselves to boys as it has become their means for survival," he says.

Land in the area is passed on from generation to generation, so the chances of host families passing on their land to 'foreign' children are slim. Ownership of land to cultivate provides a sense of identity as well as a means of livelihood. Some of the youths that have lived among the community for a long time have managed to be allocated some land to cultivate. Fear of LRA attacks, however, means that people are reluctant to travel far from town and so reduces the amount of cultivable land. IDPs often end up with less fertile



Unaccompanied displaced youth in Ango town, DRC.

fields. In some instances, after some have managed to successfully cultivate crops, members of the host community have claimed ownership of the harvest.

Sidelined by humanitarian assistance

Although a few humanitarian organisations assist displaced people in Ango with, for example, free health care or assistance in paying school fees, the displaced youth are neither adults nor married and thus do not fit the criteria set for vulnerability of beneficiaries and do not qualify for distribution of food or seeds to plant.

Bas Uélé territory is an insecure zone and the major donors are emergency rather than development donors, while the interventions required by these dislocated children are developmental rather than emergency. While these youths benefit from certain levels of humanitarian assistance – including access to food distribution for those within foster families, access to health care, psychosocial assistance and education – longer-term solutions that can help curb the threat of sexual exploitation as well as offer them possibilities for a better future could have negative repercussions, such as more minors voluntarily separating from their guardians to benefit from such interventions.

Although their current living conditions seem difficult, they believe the situation is even worse in the refugee camps where their parents are in the Central African Republic. Torn between the prospect of being reunited with them or staying in Ango where they have a chance to find work and attend school, most prefer to stay. "Life might not be the best here but I am still in my own country. I cannot imagine living as a refugee in another country," says 23-year-old Jean-Pierre.

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1. This article is based on interviews with 23 displaced youths aged between 7 and 22 years who have been separated from their parents. The views expressed here are drawn from their comments as well as those of foster families, church leaders, the president of the IDP committee and some NGOs working with this community.