Participation of adolescents in protection: dividends for all

Anna Skeels and Monika Sandvik-Nylund

In order to keep children and adolescents safe, and improve their chances of living fulfilling lives, we need to listen and respond to their views and opinions on matters that affect them.

Based on the information currently available, some 47% of UNHCR’s global caseload is thought to be children and adolescents under the age of 18. In some refugee camp settings, in particular in East and Horn of Africa, children and adolescents constitute the majority. As this reality is not always reflected in the way things are done in terms of protection, new means are being tried out for communicating with children and ensuring their meaningful participation in order to contribute to their protection.

The right to participate has been described as an ‘instrumental’ right within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) i.e. the route to accessing all other rights, including protection. Whilst humanitarian organisations are delivering protection responses in displacement situations around the world, the extent to which these responses allow or include the participation of children and adolescents is unclear. However, adolescents view, experience and communicate about their protection concerns differently from adults. They often lack access to adult decision-making processes and face barriers to their participation. Alternative participatory methods are needed that target them specifically and that seek to address the power differential between adolescents and adults.

Participatory assessments are an important part of UNHCR’s Age, Gender and Diversity policy – reflecting the idea that for protection interventions to cater to populations in all their diversity, we need to understand and seek the views of all, including children and adolescents. In a recent UNHCR consultation on child protection involving over 250 children and adolescents. In this regard. This had not been anticipated in any way as a common theme for refugee adolescents.

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Alongside protection concerns raised and solutions suggested, other dividends from using a more participatory approach with adolescents were clear. Firstly, what emerged in terms of protection information was different from what would have emerged using more traditional approaches. For certain adolescents some of their protection concerns cannot be expressed verbally – it takes different methods to bring them out. Adolescents may draw, annotate and display posters on loneliness and feelings of depression but may not wish to talk about these subjects. For responding agencies, laying out pages of different drawings, showing the same protection concerns again and again, can produce a greater impact than merely summarising what adolescents have said.

Furthermore, these more participatory techniques fostered greater opportunities for personal and social development of adolescents. They also seemed to contribute to their feelings of self-worth and control over their own lives, both critical for their psychosocial well-being. This is because deliberately creating a friendly, supportive and comfortable environment to put adolescents at ease enables them to interact with their peers safely. Less formal, game-based methodologies can give adolescents a chance to ‘play’ and a gradual build-up of activities and the recognition of skills and achievement – for example through feedback or presentation of certificates – can increase adolescents’ confidence and self-esteem.

Thirdly, the choice of methods reflected an awareness of the power imbalance between adolescents and adults and helped to build relationships between them. Keeping adult presence to a minimum (no parents, teachers or others ‘in charge’) and the absence of ‘observers’ help adolescents feel comfortable and more in control. Adolescents are able to ask questions, get responses and access information that is pertinent to them and...
Being young and out of place

their lives in a setting that is supportive. Agency staff members are able to hear about the specific protection needs of adolescents and to build a rapport with them, increasing both staff motivation and their skills for working with adolescents in the longer term.

There is also an argument that a more participatory approach is inherently more ethical – it allows young people to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for and respects their rights. An ethical approach is also about ensuring, for example, appropriate and accessible information, informed consent, choice, respect and feedback as part of the participation process. It also encompasses the imperative to ‘do no harm’ – close management of and support for discussion on protection issues and an awareness of the increased risk of gathering vulnerable adolescents together – and the intention to work towards positive change.

Adolescent participation in protection can affect the way they are viewed by parents, staff and other community members. Recognising adolescents as having knowledge, skills and ideas to share counters stereotypes of this age group, who are often considered problematic or a challenge. Furthermore, parents and other adults commented on the change in mood and sense of achievement of adolescents on leaving the workshops.

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Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents can be found at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ffe4af2.html

The views and perspectives of children during these consultations fed into a new UNHCR Framework for the Protection of Children available at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fe875682.html

Young and separated from their families in eastern Congo

Gloria Lihemo

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. 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 tralers 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.”

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