



“Emerging Trends, Challenges and Good Practice for Engaging Children in Humanitarian Crisis Situations”: Meeting Notes, March 17, 2011

**Please note: The opinions expressed in WNCAC meetings and reflected in these notes are those of the individual participants and are not endorsed by the WNCAC, which provides an open forum for exchange among those concerned with children affected by armed conflict.**

The WNCAC held its first meeting of the year on March 17, 2011. Keynote speakers were Anita Malley, Internal Displacement and Protection Advisor at USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA); and Dr. Pamela Young, Senior Basic Education Advisor at Plan International USA. Following brief introductions by all participating members, John Williamson gave a quick overview of the network, describing its purpose. Continuing, Saji Prelis discussed the format the meeting would take, highlighting the roundtable nature of the meeting, which would be prompted by pivotal questions raised by both speakers and the end of their respective presentations.

### **Presentations:**

**Anita Malley** highlighted some of her experience in the field. Children’s issues fall under the protection portfolio in OFDA, which addresses the needs of vulnerable populations. The OFDA provides grants to NGOs to deliver the necessary assistance on the ground. Key points made during her presentation are as follows:

#### **HAITI, GENERAL OVERVIEW**

- Children in humanitarian crises are extremely vulnerable. The presentation focused on Haiti in particular, a crisis situation where children’s needs were very high profile
- Following the earthquake, responses were *ad hoc*
- Children’s needs were extremely varied as they faced such issues as the deaths of family members and teachers and collapsed schools and homes. Some children were separated from their family entirely; therefore, there was need for a *broad* range of assistance.
- Children needed specific support aside from provision for basic material needs *Child Friendly Spaces* were an approach that was widely used.
- *Gender-Based Violence* was widespread. It had been a serious problem in Haiti prior to the earthquake. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

#### **ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE CHILDREN- Good Practice and Challenges**

- Children separated from families, unaccompanied children
  - One response to these children has been a process of *tracing and reunification*

- Started by UNICEF, they have successfully organized the approach with a hotline and call center; and geographic divisions of responsibility for documentation, tracing, and reunification among participating NGOs.
- Challenges included:
  - How organizations and individuals could identify separated and unaccompanied children and
  - Having no way to determine how many children were separated or unaccompanied.
- As of January 2011, only one third of the children identified as unaccompanied had been reunited with their family or relatives.
  - A key impediment to reunification has been a common belief in Haiti that children's needs might be better met by someone other than the family, who might have more resources. Consequently, many families refused to take their children back.
  - This raised the question of whether organizations should consider incentives to encourage families to take their children back and, if so, what was appropriate.
- Restavèk Children
  - Family reunification and placement in Haiti was complicated by the tradition of children being used as restavèks. Such children are placed by their own family with another family that is supposed to provide for their material needs and education in return for the children's doing domestic work, but many such end up being exploited as child slaves.
  - One risk is that a child placed with a family for care might be used as a restavèk
  - A challenge is that there is no easy way to identify restavèk children, as they are more than likely being kept at home/sheltered.
- Children in Residential Care, "Orphanages"
  - Children in Haiti staying in an "orphanage" often are not orphans and have one or both parents living. Their placement may be due to the idea that others can provide more adequate care than their own impoverished family.
  - In general, orphanages are largely unregulated.
  - They have been established by churches and individuals.
  - While the approach of institutional care has significant inherent shortcomings, other concerns arose concerning abuse, exploitation, and inadequate care further intensified by crowded facilities and poor living conditions.
  - It was a challenge to ensure that children received acceptable physical/material care and assistance through relief assistance (i.e. food distribution, sanitation, etc.)
  - Key Responses → UNICEF together with the Haitian government agency responsible for orphanages conducted an assessment of conditions.

- When they found an orphanage in need, they would distribute food, water, and other assistance as possible.
- The US Government developed a list of orphanages in need of assistance, compiled through information from the assessment visits in Haiti as well as phone calls made from Congressional offices, organizations, and other concerned parties in the US. Consequently, institutions most closely tied to the U.S. tended to receive the most help.

#### USAID RESPONSE

- While it recognizes that orphanages are not the best approach to caring for children, OFDA focused in Haiti on supporting orphanages affected by the earthquake because there were urgent needs that could not otherwise be immediately addressed.
- It is designing a program to meet such basic needs such as clean water.
- The program has been underway for about a year, with the question remaining as to whether or not the assistance provided has reinforced an inappropriate a system that is not good for children.

#### CHOLERA

- Reports show that children were affected at a higher rate, with higher fatality rates, especially among disabled children
- Many NGOs on the ground running treatment centers, which has resulted in the problem of children being abandoned at the centers.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*In reference to how organizations can be prepared for the next disaster, reflecting on what has happened:*

- How do we identify most vulnerable children?
- Once identified, how do we best meet their needs?

**Pamela Young** of Plan International USA was the next presenter. Her focus was on children and youth participation throughout the process of humanitarian crises. She began with a brief overview of the organization, and its use of child and youth-centered development and rights-based approaches. Key points are as follows:

#### OVERVIEW

- A focus on the importance of children and youth participation gives an inside view on the experiences of C&Y and on their abilities to take an active role in decision-making and problem solving
- C&Y are able to help identify and solve problems.

- In Haiti, Plan carried out a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, in partnership with UNICEF, working with focus groups identifying what they felt was truly important. This included consulting C&Y.
- She showed a video highlighting the story of a teenage girl and her family in Bangladesh, who together with other C&Y helped their community to develop ways to address issues related to flooding.
- In El Salvador a Civil Youth Protection Committee was established.
- Ivorian Refugees in Liberia were assisted to develop peer-to-peer approaches to help each other learn.
- Hart's Ladder of Participation is a tool that has been used in planning children's participation.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do we engage children in a participatory manner?
- And how do we do so in a way that minimizes risk?

### Discussion Topics

Many times the most vulnerable children are living with families, so how do we identify them?

- There is a need to create systems that are flexible and responsive.
- There is a strong need both to build assistance from the top and work from the bottom-up in order to be the allies of children on the margins.

Reflecting on Pamela's questions how is it possible to minimize the risks of engaging with children in emergencies?

- Pre-engagement before crises is something many organizations can learn from
- Reflecting on the Asian Tsunami, outside NGOs took time to arrive, while local NGOs were already engaged and talking action.

How do we manage the involvement of local vs. outside organizers?

- In Haiti, international child protection actors arrived with resources as well as knowledge and experience concerning what needs to be done to address urgent child protection issues. The capacities of local organizations and the government, already limited, were further undermined by the disaster, but they had extensive local knowledge about issue and problems in Haiti that they had been working to address. Local actors felt marginalized by international child protection agencies. How can these two realities be accommodated in an emergency? How is it possible to move quickly and appropriately while working effectively with people on the ground? One solution is supported to be coordination clusters, but these tend to be focused on expatriates, at least initially.

Looking at the Disaster, Risk, Reduction (DRR) perspective, how can we think through the process, how can we ensure that locals are engaged in a dignified manner while engaging with outside organizations?

- There needs to be a real push to ensure that what we are doing is working.
- Government capacities should be developed so that during future crises emergency disaster can be dealt with at the local level.
- DRR makes the point that we need to determine how to work intentionally with local faith communities.
- It would be interesting to see where work with faith communities has been successful, looking at best practices.

How can best practices be promoted while being sensitive to local perspectives, which may advocate other approaches?

- When emergencies hit it is chaotic, so some patience is necessary to take into account what has been learned previously and apply it, while keeping in mind the reality that the response will not be perfect.

What are some key challenges and risks, especially in conflict areas?

- Exposure to crises makes children vulnerable, so the issues of protection, safety and security are fundamentally important.

How do we engage children when there are cultural constraints to doing so?

- It is important to recognize situations that can put children at risk.
- Training and awareness raising are necessary to determine what is possible and appropriate.

How can the participation of the affected population be facilitated appropriately, taking into account the psychosocial impacts of the disaster?

- There is a need to give attention to caregivers' needs during a crisis in order to benefit their children.

### **Resources:**

- The Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/Default.aspx?tabid=720> is a network facilitated by UNICEF under the UN cluster system. In 2008, it initiated an effort to improve skills among those who address child protection issues in emergencies, and this works was further motivated by experience in Haiti, where it proved difficult to recruit in a timely way personnel with the appropriate technical and language skills. The CPWG has developed a *Child Protection in Emergencies Competency Framework* (<http://onerresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Protection/Documents/Child%20Protection%20in%20Emergencies%20Competency%20Framework.pdf>). More recently, it carried out a scoping exercise and prepared a report, "Addressing Capacity Gaps in Child Protection in

Emergencies.” Recently the CPWG issued a call to academic institutions to submit statements of interest in the development of a program to issue an advanced certificate or diploma regarding child protection in emergencies John Williamson ([j.williamson@mindspring.com](mailto:j.williamson@mindspring.com)) offered to send relevant documents on request, since these are not available on the web.

- Mike Wessells conducted a very good interagency review, *What Are We Learning about Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms?: An Inter-Agency Review of the Evidence from Humanitarian and Development Settings*  
[http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/children/pdf/Report%20Community%20Based%20Child%20Protection\\_provisional%20draft.pdf](http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/children/pdf/Report%20Community%20Based%20Child%20Protection_provisional%20draft.pdf)
- PL109-95 has established a website that provides statistical information on highly vulnerable children at the global level. It also provides country-level information on the US Government-funded programs of twenty offices within seven departments and agencies that are addressing needs among vulnerable children:  
<http://www.hvcassistance.org>
- The following resource was identified after this meeting, but is an important report from Save the Children on children’s participation in conflict-affected settings. The report can be downloaded by going to:  
<http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/content/library/documents/global-report-adult%C2%B4s-war-and-young-generation%C2%B4s-peace-childrens-participa>