

Consultation on Roles of Religious Communities Protecting Children Affected by Violence and Conflict

**Washington DC
June 21, 2011**

Summary Report



Religions for Peace 

 **Search for
Common Ground**

unicef 

USAID

INTRODUCTION¹

On June 21, 2011, the Washington Network on Children and Armed Conflict (WNCAC), UNICEF and *Religions for Peace* convened a day-long consultation at Search for Common Ground offices in Washington, DC, on the roles of religious communities in protecting children affected by violence and conflict. Search for Common Ground is one of the conveners of the WNCAC along with USAID's Displaced Children & Orphans Fund.

Participants included members of religious communities, personnel of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and US government agencies, other child protection practitioners, and academicians. The day's events included an open meeting of Washington Network during the morning, with presentations and a discussion related to a multi-year partnership between UNICEF and *Religions for Peace* (see box below), and an afternoon consultation with a group of invited guests who discussed critical issues on how to strengthen engagement with religious communities for child protection. The agendas for both the morning and afternoon sessions are included in Appendix 1.

UNICEF and *Religions for Peace* multi-year partnership

The June 21 consultation took place in connection with a multi-year UNICEF and *Religions for Peace* partnership that aims to strengthen the capacity of religious communities, particularly inter-religious mechanisms, to protect children affected by conflict, and UNICEF's and other child protection actors effectiveness to work together in partnership with religious communities.² This collaboration has been motivated in part by the recognition that many religious communities share core beliefs and values consistent with children's rights. Indeed the convergence of the beliefs of different religious faiths have significantly influenced the international consensus about what rights should be considered fundamental and universal. Religious communities are also uniquely positioned through their values, moral authority and extensive networks to ensure the well-being of children.

The following pages include highlights of the discussion from the day.

¹ This report was developed by John Williamson, Stephen Hanmer and Michael Hayes with inputs from Saji Prelis, Malia Robinson and Jacqueline Ogega. The views expressed in this report are those of the participants as presented by the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the United States Government, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Search for Common Ground, or *Religions for Peace*.

² See summary report of March 2010 consultation on "Conflict, Child Protection and Religious Communities" for an overview of key issues on work between child protection actors and religious communities.
http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Summary_Report_of_Consultation_on_the_Role_of_Religious_Communities_to_Protect_Children_affected_by_Conflict.pdf

KEY THEMES

I. Language, identity and roles: finding a starting point

There was wide agreement that while religious communities and child protection actors can learn much from each other, such exchanges have generally been quite limited.³ It was also recognized that religious traditions that have shaped societal ethical standards and the rights-based orientation of child protection actors have deeply held values and norms, many of which are similar. It was noted, for example, that the word “spiritual” is mentioned four times in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Also, the content of international rights instruments were strongly influenced, implicitly or explicitly, by the values and norms of the major religions which have helped to shape shared ethical standards. It was suggested that these shared values and motivations provide a starting point for effective engagement.

Participants also recognized neither religious communities nor child rights and protection actors are homogenous, and that failing to recognize differences within either category could lead to misleading, if dangerous generalizations. There was also agreement that both groups tend to have their own particular terminologies and that this can contribute to difficulties in understanding each other. One observation was that religion and human rights each involve systems of belief that prescribe certain kinds of action and proscribe others.

a) Language of Child Rights and Child Protection

The terminology of child rights and child protection is informed by relatively recent developments in technical and legal concepts, perspectives, and meanings. The technical nature of this language often confuses and alienates those who are not familiar with the terms. There is also diversity of opinion and practice among those in the child protection community that at times creates disagreements among practitioners. Also, religious actors may not be familiar with the human rights frameworks that influence the language and concepts of child rights and protection actors, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Another observation was that a child rights framework, by itself, while important, may not provide an adequate basis for taking action for children, particularly in an emergency where needs exceed resources. This is because human rights are not hierarchical, so they don't provide a basis for setting priorities.

b) The Language and Roles of Religious Communities

Religious communities have their own respective terminologies for describing their roles in child protection and wellbeing. The influence of religion plays out not only at community levels, but also importantly at family levels. This makes religious communities potentially important partners for those concerned with child protection.

One critique that some religious communities make of a child rights approach is that human rights frameworks do not balance rights with responsibilities (which in many cases are culturally

³ In this document, the term ‘child protection actors’ refers to non-religiously affiliated international organizations, NGOs and networks. Child protection organizations affiliated with religions are included here under the term ‘religious communities.’

defined). It was noted, however, that the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is an exception and does include children's responsibilities as well as their rights.

It is also important to recognize that the language of religious communities is informed by ancient religious texts and centuries of theological debate. Human rights concepts are very recent by comparison. There is not always a perfect fit between the religious texts and a child protection approach.

Because of the depth of experience of religious communities in crafting messages to influence their members, potentially, they can be effective partners in advocating changes to improve children's safety and wellbeing. Religious communities often approach children's needs as part of a whole (family, community, etc.) as opposed to the compartmentalization of a child-centered focus. In addition, justice and dignity may resonate more with some faith communities than rights, so it may be appropriate to introduce rights as a way to achieve justice and dignity.

II. Academic and Practitioner Critiques of Child Rights

Recent ethnographic field research in Sierra Leone has revealed important local perspectives on the ways that the concept of child rights is playing out in communities attempting to recover from conflict. During recent ethnographic research described by a participant, many people responded with passionate contempt for the mention of "child rights." Some said that NGOs had taken their children away from them by promoting child rights. This reflects the top-down manner in which child rights has been introduced and promoted, without adequate consideration of local practices relevant to children's safety and well-being. The study found that in some cases children have gone to the police in response to a grievance with a parent, and in at least one case identified by the study the father had expelled the child from their home as a result. Parents reported feeling powerless, betrayed, embarrassed, or angered by this public process. Adult and child community members have pointed to child rights campaigns as the cause for this radical shift in traditional approaches to problems and say the concept of child rights has seriously undermined traditional family and community support mechanisms.

Another participant discussed some examples from her recent research on child rights education, which was also done in Sierra Leone. Her findings revealed similar community anger and hostility towards the concept of child rights. She found that community members blamed child rights because it violated local and traditional processes of justice and imposed a new system of Western-conceived human rights without addressing individual responsibilities. On the other hand, she also said that some of the most marginalized children viewed rights as their most important asset or tool for power. She noted that in West Africa traditional understandings of achieving "person-hood" require fulfilling your obligations. However, international NGOs have undermined local avenues to obtaining "person-hood" by introducing child rights that do not include obligations. She suggested that one way to understand the situation is to recognize that in the West the concept of human rights is the visible tip of an iceberg resting upon an extensive set of concepts and beliefs and that transporting only the tip of the iceberg into a new social context with its own set of underlying concepts and beliefs can result in problems.

Both studies recognized that the concept of child rights has been imported into a society its own justice system, supported by its values and traditions. In Sierra Leone there was less resistance to gender rights than child rights. Little effort was made to ensure local ownership or harmonization

during this process. It appears that practitioners have given inadequate attention to the unintended negative consequences the approach to promoting children's rights that has been taken has had on children and children's social ecological support through family and community. However, it was also pointed out that "child rights" has become a container for all the frustrations of aid and development.

III. Individual and Collective Challenges for Religious Communities and Child Protection actors

a) Religious Communities

Untangling religion, culture, and politics presents a complicated web of dynamics. Change can happen when there are multiple views and voices looking for solutions. To be fully realized and embraced, solutions are not likely to come from outside a society, but from the inside.

i. Entanglement of Culture and Religion

Some rights-based practitioners claim their concerns are often interpreted as cultural imperialism. In some cases religious communities have played key roles in changing practices, such as female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C) and other harmful practices related to gender. It was mentioned that anthropological work by Sally Engle Merry might offer a hopeful perspective on the roles of religious communities regarding gender issues. As with FGM/C, there are other harmful traditional practices that have become enmeshed with culture and, rightly or wrongly, are seen as having religious sanction. Examples include corporal punishment and domestic violence. The most effective collaboration happens when there is both space and time for dialogue that recognizes and defines shared, overarching goals for children. Culture may validate harmful practices, but thoughtful engagement that advances consensus can be strengthened through key stakeholder partnerships and engagement with those who stand in the way of abandoning harmful practices to children.

ii. Proselytizing

Some religious believers feel that they have sacred responsibilities to share their beliefs, Where the provision of assistance is involved, however, there is the complicating issue of a power differential that can be an inducement to those in need to accept or at least profess acceptance of the beliefs of those with resources. Also, although the large majority of faith based NGOs have policies against proselytizing, in practice, these are not always observed.

b) Child Protection Actors

Given differences in language and perceived differences in values, some child protection actors are uninterested or unwilling to explore possibilities for collaboration with religious communities. Also, operational pressures to respond to donor requirements, including short timeframes, influence the behavior of child protection actors, contributing to a culture that is driven by requirements of project design and implementation and inadequate attention to listening and learning. A consequence is that religious communities may see such practitioners as ignorant and arrogant when they fail to understand local perspectives and capacities. Time and space for a thoughtful approach of engagement with local communities is often inadequate and

may be completely ignored in emergencies. Too often the result is an effort to impose change, rather than engaging communities in a meaningful process that they own. With a focus on timelines and technical analysis, practitioners may fail to ask community members what they see as children's needs and what the community has been doing traditionally to protect children. Professionalizing the approach of child protection actors requires looking for "natural helpers" at the local level. Many of these could come from religious communities.

One barrier to improved dialogue is that too few in the child rights and protection community acknowledge that there is failure in listening to local religious groups and to recognize "local wisdom" and practices of communities. In many instances, child rights and protection actors take a deficit approach, focusing on what is lacking in local communities (e.g. no "child protection committee"), instead of recognizing what is being done in the community. Accomplishments, capacities, and assets may be overlooked. Ignoring local knowledge and perspectives suggests neo-colonialism. This issue is important but challenging in emergencies where there is severe time pressure to take action. Another barrier to effective exchange with religious communities can be the inaccurate operating assumption of international NGOs who see their perspective as more objective than that of religious communities.

There was also discussion about the risks associated with promoting unrealistic expectations for the fulfillment of human rights in the absence of the capacities to do so. Sudan was mentioned as a context where promoting child rights could result in backlash and eventual harm to children if rights are not realized.

The following were questions raised for further consideration:

- Will improving technical standards for child protection work change the culture of failing to listen to religious communities and other local actors?
- Would it be possible to proactively address these listening problems as specific skills?
- How can child protection actors find allies within religious communities to advance the fulfillment of rights and advocate for social change in a context where a religious community sanctions certain child rights abuses intentionally or unintentionally?

One suggested next step that was discussed was finding ways to strengthen partnerships with academic institutions that include both secular and religiously-affiliated programs, such as those with peace and conflict studies (for example, encouraging religious training schools (e.g. programs at Georgetown and Columbia and progressive seminaries) to include child protection in the curriculum).

c) Shared challenges of Religious Communities and Child Protection actors

Both religious communities and child protection actors can unintentionally do harm by focusing too much on specific ideological or moral imperatives and too little attention to realities on the ground. Both need to keep the "Do no harm" principle in focus. It is also important for both to recognize discrepancies between their respective standards of practice or teachings, on the one hand, and what is actually done, on the other.

Both religious communities and child protection actors face challenges in documenting what is working well among the things that they are doing, and what is not. Both sets of actors risk

guiding their engagement with a “silo” approach, which can result in simplistic, ineffective responses and reduce the opportunities for learning. A narrow focus can result in influential stakeholders and actors not being included in critical decision-making., which can lead to further entrenched positions as a backlash of being ignored.

Some questions that that were raised included:

- How do child rights and protection actors and religious leaders get beyond pontificating to each other as if each has the only valid perspective?
- What constitutes manipulation on from either side (proselytizing vs. neo-colonialism)?
- How can there be genuine communication (avoiding self-censorship) in the context of extreme differentials in resources between practitioners who intervene and religious groups in beneficiary communities?

In some conflict environments both child rights and protection actors as well as religious communities are marginalized or silenced by political forces, so how can their voices be heard?

It was discussed on the importance of looking for opportunities for engagement and integrating into each other’s worlds. This could include religious actors within child protection initiatives (e.g. the Child Protection Working Group) or child protection actors within religious structures/initiatives can seek to identify areas of collaboration.

Annex 1: Schedule and Agenda

10am-12pm- Public Presentation and Discussion

Stephen Hanmer (UNICEF Civil Society and Parliamentary Specialist), Jacqueline Ogega (*Religions for Peace* Women's Mobilization Program Director), and Malia Robinson (UNICEF and Religions for Peace Consultant) will share findings from the project to date and facilitate a discussion around some of the following issues (presentation will be around 15-20 minutes followed by an interactive discussion):

1. What are the current roles played by religious communities (including inter-religious mechanisms) in the protection of children affected by violence and conflict?
 - What are religious communities concretely doing?
 - What works well?
 - What does not work well?

2. What can be done to strengthen the role child protection actors and religious communities (including inter-religious mechanisms) to protect children?
 - What knowledge, skills, and attitudes do religious communities need to more effectively protect children?
 - How can child protection actors more effectively engage religious communities? (e.g. what knowledge, skills, attitudes do child protection actors need to have)
 - What are some of the challenges/opportunities in achieving effective partnerships between child protection actors and religious communities

12pm-1pm Lunch (for small consultation participants)

1pm-5pm Small Participant Consultation

Interactive conversation addressing some of the above issues (if relevant) and including the additional below issues:

1. How to tease out violent practices that are essentially based in culture/tradition, but have a religious "overlay" or association.
2. How to openly and constructively address the misuse of religion in harmful ways, and/or the harmful practices that are condoned by some religious traditions?
3. How can religious communities and child protection actors better work with religious communities (e.g. knowledge, skills, attitudes, tools needed)

A multi-religious approach will also be explored to address some of the above issues.

Annex 2: List of Attendees for Small Consultation

1. Nicole Behnam, Sr. Technical Advisor for Child Protection, World Vision
2. Jordan Blevins, Advocacy Officer and Ecumenical Peace Coordinator, National Council of Churches
3. Beth Englander, Director of Special Programs, US Conference of Catholic Bishops
4. Stephen Hanmer, Civil Society and Parliamentary Specialist, UNICEF
5. Jessica Lenz, Consultant
6. Katherine Marshall, Visiting Professor, Department of Government, Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University
7. Fasiha Qadri, Lawyer and activist
8. Jacqueline Ogega, Director, Women's Mobilization Program, *Religions for Peace*
9. Malia Robinson, UNICEF and *Religions for Peace* Consultant
10. Saji Prellis, Director, Children and Youth Programs, Search for Common Ground
11. Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed, National Director, Office for Interfaith & Community Alliances, Islamic Society of North America
12. Michael Wessells, Professor, Program of Forced Migration, Columbia University
13. John Williamson, Sr. Technical Advisor, Displaced Children and Orphan's Fund, USAID
14. Michael Hayes, Consultation Rapporteur, Psychosocial and Child Protection Consultant

Annex 3- Huffington Post Article written by consultation participant Katherine Marshall describing some of the issues discussed at the meeting. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-marshall/the-rights-of-children_b_885759.html

The Conflicted Role of Religion in the 'Rights' of Children

Posted: 6/30/11 02:12 PM ET

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by all world nations EXCEPT Somalia and ... the United States. The United States signed the treaty but ratification prospects are dim, in part because of the concerns of religious conservatives. These center on the possible overriding of American laws by international ones, questions about whether the Convention might challenge homeschooling and the paramount rights of parents versus their children.

But leaving the mysteries of American politics aside, the question of child rights came up in a fascinating discussion last week in Washington, where the focus was on religion, children and violence.

UNICEF is among the leaders within the bevy of United Nations agencies that truly appreciates the vital and positive role that religious leaders and institutions play in protecting children. Almost every faith tradition -- Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and so on -- puts children in a special place. But when it comes to practical matters there are plenty of differing perspectives and traditions: What is best for orphans? The merits and demerits of corporal punishment? The authority of parents versus the state?

There are large and clear areas of common ground on which to build. When the central topics of fighting against the use of child soldiers, assuring that children are cared for when families become refugees, and fighting outright abuse of children are at issue, there is not only common cause but common passion that links secular and faith-inspired advocates of children. Drawing far more on the lessons of good practice and looking more systematically to the rich experience of faith-linked groups that work with children and families is a doable and important proposition.

But without cultural sensitivity, efforts to promote the rights of children can backfire. Insensitive campaigns can create a backlash against the core objectives of protecting children. For example, teaching children that they have rights without taking into account the context and what that means in practice (for example, what recourse they might have) can raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled. Parents and teachers may react negatively if they believe that the rights of children mean their own rights are eroded. And rights and responsibilities are inextricably linked so talking about one without the other is a recipe for misunderstanding and trouble.

Examples of a backlash against unqualified use of child rights language focused on Sierra Leone, where so much focus is going to children after the terrible conflicts there. Reintegrating child soldiers and helping to address the pain and suffering families have suffered is a demanding, all-hands job. What is ironic is that the problems often stem from over-enthusiasm: excited local officers who find the language and ideas of child rights so inspiring that they become ardent preachers, or children who have never had any possibility to dream and hear a new concept that offers them an unimagined future.

There are some important lessons to learn here. The language and concepts of human rights are truly a gift of progress. But they are not something that can be taken for granted. In many parts of the world, human rights are seen as western and, for some, rooted not in universal principles but in Judeo-Christian ethics. Their universality is something that needs to be a focus in our globalized world and will mean a constant refinement and sensitivity. And second, setting out an ideal is a long way from translating it into practice.

Making child rights into something that helps the children who need them most means hard, collaborative work by often unlikely partners. The faith-linked groups that may themselves cringe at the language of child rights are among the partners we need most to overcome the hesitations that stand between our ideals and the future reality of a world where children are both cherished and protected, challenged and cared for.