Case Study of the Care and Protection of Separated Children in the Sinje Refugee Camp, Liberia

by Miatta Abdullai, Edwin Dorbor and David Tolfree

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Executive Summary

This study was a joint initiative between Save the Children UK, who wished to undertake a "lessons learned" exercise in respect of their work with separated refugee children in the two camps in Sinje, and the Save the Children Alliance initiative "Care and Protection of Separated Children in Emergencies" (CPSC) which was keen to undertake a case study of this very interesting experience. The fieldwork for the study was undertaken during a short and intensive period by two Liberian members of SC UK staff and the CPSC Research Coordinator. Considerable emphasis was placed on the active participation of children and of foster carers throughout the study.

Much of the work with and for separated Sierra Leonean children in the Sinje camps in Liberia results from the initiatives of the refugees themselves, who formed a Child Welfare Committee to undertake a range of child protection functions, and the association of Concerned Carers, a less formal organisation of foster carers. Both worked closely in conjunction with the Camp Management Committees. When Save the Children became involved, as partners of UNHCR, in child protection work, they decided to work in close cooperation with these refugee structures. They also helped in the formation of Boys' Clubs and Girls' Clubs. As a result of intensive training, empowerment and capacity-building which these various groups received from SC UK, they were able to take on the majority of tasks in child protection; these included work with separated children, most of whom had been spontaneously taken in by foster carers, though some were living in self-care arrangements. Young people themselves are playing an unusually active role in child protection within the communities. The role of SC UK staff has evolved to the point where the main emphasis is now on supporting these various community structures and dealing directly only with the most serious protection cases.

Fostering is a widespread phenomenon in Sierra Leone: it is not, however, directed primarily at children who have become accidentally separated from their own families, but rather reflects an arrangement between families which involves the exchange of labour, the provision of discipline, education and training outside of the family, and a complex system of patronage. It was striking to find, in Sinje, that the experience of fostered children ranged, at one end of the spectrum, from a good quality of care and protection and a high level of integration into the foster family, to a neglectful, exploitative and abusive experience at the other. Foster parents seem to be motivated by a range of factors, ranging from a humanitarian or religious concern for children, to a desire to have a child to assist the family in its various domestic and economic activities. It is clear that as a result of the work of the Child Welfare Committee and the Concerned Carers, there has been an overall improvement in the care and protection of fostered children, but that a continuing form of monitoring and support is essential if the needs and rights of separated children are to be met.

Many fostered children were very conscious that they were treated differently from other children in the household, especially with regard to work, disci-

pline and in some cases the opportunity to attend school. A focus group conducted with the biological children of foster carers revealed a startling picture of their discriminatory attitudes towards fostered children. Paradoxically, the case study also reveals that some foster carers have "claimed" the child, even to the point of changing his or her name: while some of these children appear to be well-integrated into the family, this phenomenon of quasi-adoption raises serious questions about the child's right to a name and identity, and about the prospects for family tracing and reunification. Despite the sensitisation and training that foster carers have received, which has included a strong emphasis on the fact that fostering does not attract any additional material resources, it seems common for foster carers to expect some form of recompense from the child's own family. This fact seems to lie behind their reluctance to encourage the child's reunification unless they themselves are actively involved in the process. In some cases, carers actively impede the process.

Many separated young people – especially those in their teenage years, and those with a history of involvement with fighting forces in Sierra Leone – have opted for a self-care arrangement: many expressed a negative perception of fostering and they valued the financial independence that self-care allows. On the other hand, their sense of isolation was sometimes profound, and it is clear that they greatly appreciate the support and advocacy which members of the Child Welfare Committee provide. The work of the Boys' and Girls' Clubs is also highly significant in integrating them into the wider community of young people. Despite SC UK's attempts to involve older youngsters in their Accelerated Learning Programme and in skills training, it is clear that livelihood issues emerge as highly significant. Teenage girls, especially those in self-care, seem to have little choice but to make money through commercial sex.

Save the Children's work in Sinje is especially interesting not just because it works primarily with and through these various community structures, but also because it attempts to integrate its work with separated children into a broader child protection strategy. In turn, this more "horizontal" strategy for separated children necessarily integrates with the work of other agencies – e.g. those providing education, vocational training, support to people with disabilities, livelihood programmes etc. The approach avoids isolating separated children as a "special category"; nevertheless, and despite the fact that the approach has strongly emphasised the community's responsibility for separated children, fostered children still tend to see themselves as "Save the Children's children".

Abbreviations Used in this Case Study

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ALP	Accelerated Learning Programme
CCs	Concerned Carers
CMC	Camp Management Committee
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDTR	Identification, Documentation, Tracing and Reunification (of separated children)
LRRRC	Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SC UK	Save the Children UK
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

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Grateful thanks are also due to members of the Child Welfare Committee, the Concerned Carers, the Girls' Clubs and the Boys' Clubs and the Camp Management Committees in each of the two camps. The researchers would also like to thank all of the separated children, foster carers and the many other members of the refugee community who gave generously of their time during the fieldwork. This study would not have been possible without their active cooperation.

Chapter 1

Background and Context

Sierra Leone has experienced civil war since 1991, when an attempt was made by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and Liberian fighters loyal to Charles Taylor to overthrow the elected President Momoh. The war was complex, going through several distinct phases, and was characterised by the recruitment of children as fighters by both sides, and by an unprecedented level of brutality on the part of the RUF. The rape of women and children and the amputation of hands were hallmarks of their strategy of terrorising civilians. Large numbers of people – possibly as many as half of the country's population – became internally displaced or sought refuge in neighbouring countries, and many children became separated from their families, either accidentally or as a result of being abducted by the RUF.

Sinje is a town in Garwula District, Grand Cape Mount County in Western Liberia. It is about 80 kilometres from Monrovia, the capital, with a good connecting road. Prior to the influx of refugees from Sierra Leone, the town had a population of about 2000 people, and there are now approaching 9000 refugees in the two camps close to it. The refugees arrived there in two main groups, settling in the respective camps.

The first main influx of refugees occurred in July 1997, with Save the Children UK (SC UK) beginning its programme there the following year. By this time the refugees had already taken the initiative to form a Child Welfare Committee[1] (CWC) in order to respond to some of the serious child protection issues that had emerged, including exploitation and abuse (including child sexual abuse), and early and forced marriage. Also as a result of the refugees' initiatives, an informal organisation of foster carers known as Concerned Carers (CCs), had been formed. At first the SC UK programme consisted of little more than identifying and documenting separated children as part of a regional family tracing and reunification programme. Gradually, however, they became more engaged with the Child Welfare Committee in responding to a broader range of child protection issues and in supporting the significant number of separated children; most of these children had been absorbed spontaneously into foster families. A significant minority were living alone or in small, self-supporting groups: this arrangement is referred to in this case study as "self-care", the term which the young people themselves use, though some organisations refer to "child headed households".

Meanwhile, in 1998 SC UK began its work in the refugee camps in Vahun and Kolahun, in the north-west of Liberia. Here they faced a volatile and unstable situation, with significant numbers of former combatants, including children as young as 12, mingled among others who had fled the conflict. There were many unaccompanied children, requiring work to place them in foster families, as well

1 The tasks of the CWC will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4, and a history of the organisation, written by one of the founder members, can be found as Appendix 1.

as work in identifying and documenting separated children. SC UK deployed teams of social work staff working directly with these children in the communities. Because of increasing insecurity, the refugees in Vahun were relocated to Kolahun and subsequently, when Kolahun came under attack, the refugees were moved again to a transit centre in Tarvey, where they stayed for about 3 months. It was there that SC UK extended its work and began to work with young people in Girls' and Boys' Clubs, responding to some of the particular problems faced by adolescents, many of which stemmed from their experience as combatants. Exploitation and sexual health issues were high on the agenda.

In November 1999 these refugees were relocated to Sinje, where they formed what is now known as Camp 2. The Child Welfare Committee was invited to extend its work to the new arrivals, and the blending of the two programmes built on the broad child protection role taken on by the CWC in Camp 1 and on the work of the Boys' and Girls' Clubs which had started in Tarvey.

The evolution of the programme will be discussed further in Chapter 7 (7.1).

Currently there are 2161 refugees registered in Camp 1, and 6757 in Camp 2. Each camp has its own Camp Management Committee (CMC), comprising elected leaders from each block, with additional representation from both women and the Girls' and Boys' Clubs. Most of the day-to-day running of the camps is in the hands of these committees, under the overall supervision of the representative of the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC). UNHCR have a small office which is not continuously manned, with two staff visiting on a regular basis, along with other staff as necessary.

The refugees share a broadly similar culture with the host country society. Most are Muslims but there is a significant minority of Christians, both Roman Catholic and various evangelical denominations. There are mosques and churches in the camps.

SC UK's programme at the present time will be described in Chapter 3. However, this case study is not just about the work of this organisation: it is also about the initiatives and endeavours of the refugees themselves, supported by SC UK.

Chapter 2

Research Process and Methodology

The fieldwork for this case study was undertaken by the three researchers during a 12-day period in November/December 2001: in addition, material derived from a previous visit by the CPSC Research Coordinator was also incorporated. It was thanks to the efficient organisation of Save the Children staff, of the Boys' and Girls' Clubs and of the members of the Child Welfare Committee that it was possible to condense the fieldwork into this short but intensive period.

Most of the data gathered during the fieldwork was derived from group discussions which were pre-structured and sometimes involved PRA techniques and other exercises, including ranking, drawing and drama: games were also played with the children. Care was taken to constitute groups with a reasonable gender balance, while the children were usually separated into age-banded groups. Group sessions were held with the following:

- Members of the Camp Management Committee in Camp 1 and in Camp 2
- Members of the Child Welfare Committee
- Members of Concerned Carers
- Representatives of the Boys' Clubs and the Girls' Clubs
- Foster carers
- Children from foster homes – two groups of older and younger children
- Children living in self-care arrangements
- "Biological children" of foster carers
- Representatives of other organisations working in the camps
- Representatives of the camps' religious leaders
- Current Save the Children staff in Sinje
- Former SC UK staff members in Sinje

We tried, but were unable to meet with UNHCR, the Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement commission and representatives of SC UK's Accelerated Learning Programme and Skills Training Programme. Various informal interviews and discussions were conducted with members of the Child Welfare Committee, present and former Save the Children staff members, foster carers and young people themselves.

A review was undertaken of all the available documentation of the programme, and the fieldwork was preceded by a search of the anthropological information on fostering in Sierra Leone, especially among the Mende people.

A Reference Group was convened for this study: it included representation from Camp Management Committees, the Child Welfare Committee, Concerned Carers, Boys' and Girls' Clubs and Save the Children staff. This group met at the outset of the study and again at the end: its purpose was defined as:

- To assist in the planning of the research
- To assist in the event of any problems being encountered during the research process, either by the researchers or by any other party
- To have the opportunity to comment on the draft case study

An initial meeting was also held with representatives of the Boys' Clubs and Girls' Clubs: the aim was partly to gather data but this also served the purpose of discussing the study with them and seeking their views on the conduct of the research. A number of their ideas, as well as those of the Reference Group, were incorporated into the design of the study.

Two members of the research team work for SC UK in Liberia, and though they were not based within the Sinje programme they both had some first hand knowledge of it and knew some of the young people through workshops etc. For this reason the team were not perceived by respondents as being detached from the programme, and therefore great care was taken to explain the nature of the study and to make it clear that it was independent of the programme and would lead neither to programme changes nor to additional or changed resource allocation. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, expectations were raised and requests for resources were made, which were referred to programme management. One way in which we defined our role was that it is akin to that of a student who is here to listen and learn and to pass on that learning to others in other countries: it was not to judge, evaluate or make changes in the programme. At the end of one focus group discussion with foster carers, they reminded us of our "student" role, and jokingly suggested we should be paying school fees!

With groups of children, a variety of methods were used to enable the young people to develop and share their own concepts and categories, rather than respond to adult questions. Drama and drawing were used, and an extremely useful exercise (which we also did with some groups of adults) was to get them to list the characteristics of "good/successful" and "not good/unsuccessful" foster care. In general we found the children to be forthcoming and articulate – no doubt partly reflecting the mobilisation work that has been undertaken with young people in the camps.

The practice was adopted of providing a drink and a snack to any group which took part in meetings or focus groups taking more than about one and a half hours. This was seen as a gesture of thanks and not as an incentive.

In this case study, quotations are given in italics: we have recorded the exact words used in Krio, or, if they spoke in Mende, the translation provided by the interpreter.

Chapter 3

Save the Children's Work in Sinje

Save the Children work in Sinje as partners of UNHCR. The present Acting Team Leader described their work as falling into four sectors:

- Family tracing and reunification
- Child protection
- Education
- Child participation

In practice, these are not now to be seen as separate sectors but rather as components in an integrated programme, with the last of the four a cross-cutting theme. The Child Welfare Committee are involved in all aspects of the work, and in turn their members work closely with the Children's Clubs and the Concerned Carers.

The family tracing and reunification work (IDTR)is undertaken by members of the Child Welfare Committee, in conjunction with both the Concerned Carers and SC UK's Community Workers. They identify separated children, using community structures, and document them for tracing. They also document families who have lost a child. Information is passed to the regional data base which then links separated children with family members seeking a separated child. They also receive tracing requests from other parts of the region and undertake tracing and verification work in the camps.

The child protection work has two main aspects: first, awareness raising within the camps in the areas of children's rights, sexual abuse and exploitation, issues concerning separated children and so on. Second, they respond to situations in which children are not being adequately protected: the main area for concern is abuse and exploitation, especially sexual. Reported incidents are investigated, in conjunction with other community structures, referring the matter, as appropriate, to the Camp Management Committee, who in turn may need to liaise with UNHCR and the LRRRC.

The care and protection of separated children, whether in foster homes or in self-care, is seen as part of this protection work.

The educational work of SC UK has two components: they run an Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP), which aims to enable children whose education has been disrupted, or who have had no education, to re-enter mainstream schooling. Second, they provide "life skills training" which is perhaps better described as vocational training in the areas of bakery, soap-making, metal work, agriculture and arts and crafts. SC UK provides an element of business training, together with start-up grants to enable trainees to set up in business. The ALP runs in the mornings, the skills programme in the afternoon, enabling young people to attend either or both programmes.

Child participation is seen as running throughout their work. The Acting

Team Leader described this as "involving children in decision-making". Perhaps the most striking illustration of this work was the inclusion of four young people on the Camp Management Committee and the involvement of young people in various aspects of camp life such as food distribution.

SC UK operate a general policy of not providing material support to separated children, though in the past they have provided such things as footwear for separated children, locks and lanterns for young people in self-care. A notable exception to the general policy is emergency medical treatment. Local hospital services are free but if transport is needed they can provide this, together with food for the child and the person who accompanies the child in hospital.

Save the Children's strategy of working primarily with and through the various community structures has been supported with a programme of training workshops for members of the Child Welfare Committee, the Concerned Carers, the Camp Management Committee and the Boys' and Girls' Clubs. These have contributed immensely to the their capacity for appropriate intervention and have included the following:

- Good Child Care Practices and the Importance of Children's Reunification. Purpose: to improve childcare practices and discuss the importance of separated children's reunification.
- Prevention of Family Separation Workshop. Purpose: to build capacities of people involved in the CWC, CC, CMC, children's structures and partner NGOs in skills and techniques in preventing family separation.
- PRA/Child Participation Workshop. These were held in three phases: the importance of children's participation in community development and capacity building; identifying and analysing problems affecting them; and initiating relevant activities that address those problems.
- Theatre For Development Workshop. Purpose: to help participants develop skills in facilitation, negotiation and advocacy in relation to issues affecting them.
- Sub-Regional Cross-Border Children's Participation Workshop. Purpose: to identify and discuss key information needed to ensure effective reunification

Most of these training workshops lasted for a week. Other workshops included Child Protection, Mass tracing and Sexual and Gender Based Violence. All of these workshops were vital in raising participants' awareness, developing their knowledge and skills and building their capacity to take an active part in the range of tasks and activities that they were taking on.

Chapter 4

Community Structures in the Camps

The Camp Management Committees

After the original refugee group came to Sinje, they suspended their traditional leadership structures, including the role of the Paramount Chief: instead they instituted a more democratic Camp Management Committee. Each block elects its own leader (usually male) and in addition the women elect the Mammie Queens, a women's organisation (which they had in Sierra Leone) which also provides a representative on the CMC. More recently, young people's representation has been secured by the inclusion of two boys and two girls from the Children's Clubs (as explained below) who are elected by their membership. They have voting rights on the Camp Management Committee. The CMC elects its own chairperson.

The CMC occupies a very central position in the child protection work of the camp. The members provide both focal points and the principal authority in each block, and they have an essential coordinating function for everything that happens. Members of the Child Welfare Committee and of the Concerned Carers, as well as SC UK staff, undertake their work in close cooperation with them.

It is clear from discussions with the CMC members that the training they have received, from SC UK and others, has been hugely significant in shaping their sense of responsibility not only for child protection but for responding to problems such as those of youth offending, where they appear to have a concern not just for the victim but also for the offender. As one member of one of the CMCs told us:

> *We constantly do sensitisation and counselling in the community*

CMCs are an important tier in the judicial system, with block leaders administering justice and mediating in disputes in relatively minor cases, referring more serious ones to the traditional court, made up of the CMC Chair (or Chief) and the members, who in turn can remit cases to the Liberian courts where necessary.

The Child Welfare Committee

The formation of the Child Welfare Committee was an initiative of the refugees themselves. Under the initial leadership of one young man, a small group of refugees became aware of a number of serious problems affecting young people in the camp during the period immediately after their arrival in Sinje in 1997. The principal problems observed were those of teenage pregnancies, the early and forced marriage of girls, rape and sexual abuse and exploitation, and the problems of young people in conflict with the law. In addition there was a problem of the re-recruitment of former child soldiers. There was also an awareness of the fact

that many children, especially girls, were not attending school.

Members of the Child Welfare Committee told us that it started without the facilitation of any external body and without any outside support. It did not reflect a similar structure in their communities of origin in Sierra Leone, but was simply a response of concerned individuals to some of the problems they observed. The initial membership included educated people, including teachers, and also people with little or no education: personal qualities and attitudes were seen as more important than formal education. The membership has changed considerably as the organisation evolved since 1997.

With the second major influx of refugees in 1999, the Child Welfare Committee was established in Camp 2. A significant step in the evolution of the CWC was the request by SC UK for them to assist in the task of identifying separated children. Initially SC UK staff undertook the documentation work, but gradually the CWC became more involved in this task. Various training opportunities have been provided to the CWC, who gradually took on additional responsibilities. At its peak they had 48 members with a representative in every block. Their role as volunteers, with an increasing burden of work, led to a serious decline in their numbers and a drop in their morale; this culminated, early in 2001, in their reduction to only five in number, covering both camps.

Despite, and partly in response to this decline in numbers, they were eventually constituted formally, in June 2001, as a community-based organisation acting as a partner to SC UK. It was decided that they should be paid a modest stipend, and this helped to achieve a gradual increase in numbers. At the time of this study, they were eight in number, with three additional people acting in a voluntary capacity. Of mixed genders, these people act as Children's Rights Monitors who undertake a range of tasks and responsibilities.

A fuller picture of the history of the CWC, written by one of its founder members, can be found as Appendix 1.

Members of the Child Welfare Committee explained that though they have no clearly defined relationship with the Camp Management Committee they see themselves as having a mandate from that body, with whom they work closely and to whom they refer more serious cases such as severe child rights violations, problems with youth offending etc. Such matters are then dealt with by the CMC in accordance with customary laws, or Liberian law as appropriate.

One of their members defined their role now as

> *A community-based organisation, formed by a group of refugees to cater for the community, children and especially separated children*

while another told us that

> *The major objective is to protect children and advocate for them*

Specific tasks are delegated to them by SC UK, who, as partners of UNHCR, have particular responsibility for child care and protection in the camps. Members of the CWC now identify and document separated children and assist in family tracing and reunification activities in the camps. They monitor and sup-

port separated children, in foster homes and those living in self-care: they work with foster carers to provide support, mediate in the event of difficulties and arrange new placements for children requiring family care.

Members of the CWC spoke of having "special talks with fostered children", seeing them apart from their foster carers where appropriate. It was interesting to hear how they approach the difficulties in monitoring what is actually happening within the foster family: one of their members illustrated this by saying

We ask indirect, thought-provoking questions

and another referred to the sensitivities involved in raising difficult issues within the family

You can't just pounce on what you find

With foster children and their carers, they work closely with another important structure in the camps, the Concerned Carers.

The Concerned Carers

The group first started in 1998 as a result of the initiative of one male refugee. A member explained the reason for forming the organisation:

We saw children in camp whose parents not here, no good caring

They discussed the issues and consulted with Save the Children: they formed themselves into a group of volunteers, in order to identify themselves and find ways of helping children. They received training from SC UK in child care and protection issues. They had a separate identity from the Child Welfare Committee and a somewhat less formal structure, but they have always worked closely together. They cover both camps with separate structures in each.

They undertake a range of tasks with foster children and their carers. They hold informal meetings with young people – e.g. with teenage girls they discuss family planning issues, prevention of pregnancy, forced and early marriages. They advocate for children who are being badly treated or taken advantage of. They have provided training in hairdressing for older separated girls who were selling sex, and for boys. They are involved in protection issues for separated children, for example in responding to allegations of abuse or exploitation, again in conjunction with the CWC. They coordinate with the CWC regarding foster children, visiting foster children twice a month and also informally. They provide practical help, for example in accompanying children who go to hospital to advocate for speedy treatment. They visit schools to monitor children's activities.

They are involved in identifying separated children in foster care, identifying new foster carers when a child is in need of a new family.

They also take on a broader role in encouraging children generally to attend school.

The Boys' Clubs and the Girls' Clubs

In each of the two camps there is a Boys' Club and a Girls Club.

The idea of the Clubs started in Kolahun in 1998. Community workers employed by SC UK identified the need for these children to come together to have a collective view of issues affecting them: in particular there were many boys and girls who had been combatants, mostly in the RUF, the main rebel group in Sierra Leone, who were presenting many problems. They had difficulties in integrating in the camp, displayed aggressive behaviour and were frequently in conflict with the law. In response to this, SC UK first initiated a Boys' Club. Initially the focus was in sporting activities in order to get them engaged in purposeful activity: then they began to address issues of child protection, and skills training was requested by the boys, and this was provided by SC UK.

A Girls Club was started in Tarvey, the transit camp. The focus of the Girls' Club was initially mainly on issues of sexuality – STDs, sexual exploitation and abuse, forced and early marriages and teenage pregnancy. After these refugees arrived in Sinje, in 1999, the idea of the Boys' Club was restarted and the Girls' Club continued, and these were extended to Camp 1 housing the original refugee population in Sinje.

At this stage, the clubs were supported and stimulated by SC UK staff, with a broadening focus on children's rights and a range of other issues affecting young people. In 2000, PRA/child participation workshops were run by SC UK with the clubs, and as a result of this, they gradually evolved in the direction of becoming more self-directing and participative, and by the end of 2001, the clubs were run entirely by the young people themselves.

These workshops also targeted young people in the host community: this partly reflected the need to involve other children in preparation for the UN Special Session on Children. They were invited to join in the Boys' Clubs and Girls Clubs but subsequently decided to form their own Girls' Club: as yet there is no Boys' Club in the town.

The Structure of the Clubs

Each club has a chairperson, vice-chairperson, general secretary and social secretary. In addition, each block in both camps has a block leader, referred to as an Advocate. These Advocates are appointed (not elected) by the clubs on the basis of their level of understanding of the role and the issues of child protection and participation, and their ability to speak out and to command the respect of other young people and adults. Within the Girls' Clubs, there is also a Kwemee[2] Club, catering specifically for pregnant girls and teenage mothers. Girls have to leave the club once their children are two years old. The Boys' Club and the Girls' Club in each camp has a representative on the Camp Management Committee, with full voting rights. The Clubs elect these representatives.

2 Meaning a lactating mother

There are three types of meetings:

- Weekly meetings are held on a block basis
- The Boys' Club and Girls Club also meet as a total group within each camp, also on a weekly basis
- A general meeting involving all members of both clubs in both camps is held weekly.

The general meeting discusses issues derived from discussions held at block and camp level.

The Activities within the Clubs

Much of the activity of the clubs centres around campaigns on issues such as "Saying No to Arms", STDs and HIV/AIDS, contraception and sexual and reproductive health issues, child rights, child protection and education, especially for girls and the "Say Yes for Children" campaign. During 2001, one aspect of the focus on child rights consisted of preparation for the UN Special Session on Children. These campaigns involved collaboration with the Camp Management Committee and NGOs in order to facilitate sensitisation of the community, targeting young people in particular. Young people in the Clubs also organise sports and cultural activities.

Of particular interest with regard to child protection is the advocate role of block leaders (and other members, especially the Club officers). They offer support to each other and to other child members of the community, especially in areas such as young people in conflict with the law, forced and early marriages, child abuse and exploitation, lack of access to basic services and medical issues.

Although separated children are not specifically targeted by them, they do have a particular awareness of the potential needs and problems of this group. They defined their role with separated children as helping to identify them, monitoring their well-being, encouraging them and liasing with the Child Welfare Committee. A meeting between the researchers and representatives of the clubs revealed some examples of their work with fostered children: these will be considered in Chapter 7 (7.4).

Chapter 5

Separated Children in the Sinje Camps: Children in Foster Care

At the time of the fieldwork for the case study there was a total of 170 registered separated children[3] in the two camps: in addition, 9 had been found to have parents in the camps, five have been formally reunited with their families across the border and a further five returned to Sierra Leone on their own in the hope of reuniting by themselves. Of the 170 children, some reunification work is in process. Additional separated children are being identified – either for the first time, having been with foster carers but not documented, or in situations where foster carers repatriated leaving the child behind. A third category consists of children who have to leave their families (including foster families) because of a breakdown in relationships or in the event of serious abuse or exploitation.

Of this total number of separated children currently in the camps, 102 were with foster parents, and of these 60 of these were boys and 42 girls. The table below is based on information obtained from the Child Welfare Committee and shows an analysis by age and gender:

Number of Children in Foster Care by Age and Gender									
0–5		6–12		13–18		Above 18		Total	
m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f
0	0	20	22	34	17	6	3	60	42
0		42		51		9		102	

Number of Children in Self-Care by Age and Gender									
0–5		6–12		13–18		Above 18		Total	
m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f
0	0	0	0	30	6	16	6	46	12
0		0		36		22		58	

It should be noted that these figures show a slight disparity as compared with the total numbers of separated children provided by SC UK as given in the first paragraph above.

It is interesting to note that the gender disparity increases with age: hence there is an almost equal number of boys and girls in the age range of 6–12, but above this age boys outnumber girls by a ratio of exactly 2:1. There will some further discussion of this fact in Chapter 7 (7.2).

3 Young people over the age of 18 are included if they were registered for family tracing prior to reaching the age of 18, or if they are still requiring protection after this age.

Young people representing the Girls' and Boys' Clubs defined separated children as those not living with their biological family, but excluded children whose parents had arranged for them to live with another family. The second part of this definition is significant in a culture in which it is very common for parents to arrange for children to live with other people, relatives and unrelated persons, for various reasons and for various periods of time: the young people specifically excluded these young people from the category of separated children.

They defined fostering as a child living with a family which is not their own and not a relative. It is also important to note that significant numbers of foster carers are single adults.

The majority of foster carers in Sinje took in the child spontaneously, without the facilitation of any outside person or body. Some "arranged" placements have been made, either by SC UK community workers (especially in the Vahun and Kolahun camps), or (more recently) by the Child Welfare Committee, and more especially by the Concerned Carers. These "new" foster families are sometimes referred to as "appointed" foster carers, though in practice there is no sharp distinction between "spontaneous" and "appointed" foster placements.

Where a child presents as needing a new foster family (for example, in the case of the breakdown of a fostering), identifying an appropriate family is the responsibility of the Concerned Carers. In most situations, their first approach is to consider an existing carer, but on occasions they seek a completely new family: sometimes this reflects the child's own stated preference, sometimes a family who know the child offer to become carers and sometimes a completely new family is approached. The Concerned Carers assess the suitability of the prospective carers in conjunction with the Child Welfare Committee. They do have a set of criteria, though these are not defined formally as policy or procedure: the CWC mentioned the following:

- The number of the children in the family
- An interest in children
- Information on the family from community leaders, neighbours etc.
- Ensure that the child fully participates
- The background of the carers
- The carers' capacity to support the child – food etc.
- They talk to other child members of the household

Fostering in Sinje does not take account of legislation or Government policy or procedures derived from either Liberia or Sierra Leone.

Fostering as Seen by Foster Carers

A focus group discussion with a group from Concerned Carers, and another with a group of foster parents enabled us to build up a picture of fostering from their vantage point.

Motivation for Fostering

The majority of foster children were "picked up on the road" by their carers, but the reasons for doing so, and for continuing to foster, were varied. When asked about their motives, most carers gave humanitarian or religious reasons:

> *I was sorry for the pikin*[4]

> *We have a sympathetic feeling in us*

Some referred to religious reasons – one Muslim referred to taking in a foster child

> *For greater rewards*

In some cases, the carer already knew the family:

> *The child's mother died just after giving birth: the mother was my friend and out of sympathy I took care of her child*

Many foster carers referred to others (but not themselves!) being more selfishly motivated: many referred to the need for the child to work for them in the home and one referred to people who sent their fostered child out into the bush to work. There was also a reference to a foster father who took in a fostered child in order to marry her.

Sometimes these humanitarian and selfish motives ran side by side. One foster parent talked of taking a child "out of sympathy" but later let slip that he needed a foster child to help take care of his own younger child.

Another major aspect of foster carer motivation is that we came across a number of references to carers who wanted to "claim the child", including two cases in which the child's name had been changed to their own. One foster carer referred to her "adopted child" and another said that "the child is part and parcel of the family". This was a significant finding which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 (7.6).

Gender Roles

We asked the group of foster carers to try to define the roles of the foster mother and foster father, though several in this group were single parents. Although it was generally agreed that the foster mother has the main caring role, one foster father talked about his role in

> *Counselling the boy and encouraging him in skills training*

It was also agreed that men have the main responsibility for making decisions, for material provision and in providing control (especially for older foster chil-

4 Pikin means child in Krio

dren). It was suggested that some separated children will not listen to or take advice from women.

Children's Behaviour

Many foster carers referred to the behaviour problems presented by their foster children, and this was confirmed by members of the Child Welfare Committee:

Separated children used to give us a hell of a time

Children living with foster families don't respect them

In some cases if was clear that foster carers worked with these difficulties in a very tenacious manner: one foster mother said that she had been divorced because of the foster child, feeling that she could not reject him. Another told us

I don't sleep because of the problems

Clearly this is an area in which the support of the Child Welfare Committee and of the Concerned Carers is vitally important: surprisingly, however, some foster carers still tended to look to SC UK for more direct support with such difficulties.

Family Dynamics

With regard to peer relationships among the children in the family, the foster carers gave us a picture in sharp contrast to that obtained both from foster children and from biological children, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The almost unanimous picture was one of sibling relationships no different from the normal family:

You wouldn't notice the difference

Sometimes own children are worse than the separated children

The children don't say "You're not my brother"

Children's very different perceptions on this issue will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Fostering, Repatriation and the Longer-term Future

One of the themes discussed with foster carers was the longer-term future of the children if family tracing and reunification are not successful. Not surprisingly there was universal agreement that if repatriation occurred they would take the foster child with them. However, there have been a few cases in which returning foster carers left the foster child behind.

If the natural family is not found even in the longer term, there was agreement that the children could remain with them:

They will for ever be our children and be with us

In the event of the child wanting to get married, again they indicated that he or she would be treated as other children:

I do it for my children so I do it for him

Whether such statements reflect the reality or merely good intentions it was impossible to determine.

A strongly-felt issue articulated by foster carers was their disapproval of foster children being reunited with their family without their own involvement, as the following quotation exemplifies:

It is important for foster carers to meet the parents so that the parents know that the carers have been doing something for them

There was clearly an expectation of some material form of expression of gratitude, in accordance with the cultural norms of fostering in Sierra Leone. This important issue will be discussed further in Chapter 7 (7.7).

What Makes for Good and Successful Fostering?

We invited a group from Concerned Carers to explain the main characteristics of good or successful fostering, and of bad or unsuccessful fostering. They came up with the following list for good or successful fostering:

- The child attends school
- The child is given regular meals
- The child receives discipline and is under good control
- There will be no differences in the treatment of foster children and biological children
- The child will be introduced to traditional farming systems
- The foster carers will pay attention and try to understand the child's problems
- The foster carers will know the child's views and the child knows the foster carers' views
- The foster carers will find out about the child's biological parents
- The foster carers will make the child look good in public
- There will be a good relationship and love between the foster carers and the child's parents
- The children will retain their love for their own parents
- The child should know his or her own parents
- The carers will continue to cooperate with family tracing efforts after repatriation

- It is more likely that successful fostering will have started when the child was small

For bad or unsuccessful fostering, the following list was made:

- The foster carers do not want to know about the child's problems
- They do not want to know about the child's feelings
- The foster carers will always want to discourage the child about his or her own parents
- The child does not attend school
- The child does a lot of work in the home
- Lots of differences will be seen between the foster child and the biological children in the family
- The foster child's clothing will be poor
- The child will not have opportunities to play
- The child's name may have been changed so that he appears to be part of the family: this is particularly bad for a Muslim child
- The foster carers will not continue to cooperate with family tracing after repatriation
- They may leave the child behind when they repatriate
- The foster child would not know about the property of the foster carers and would not benefit from inheritance
- The foster carers might force the child to marry
- The carers will not expose the child to anything good

A similar exercise was conducted with a group of foster carers (not part of the CCs) and they produced lists which were substantially similar, if slightly less comprehensive.

It was clear from our discussion with the Concerned Carers that foster families in Sinje covered the full spectrum from very good to very bad. We took up this theme with a group from the Child Welfare Committee, and asked them to rank foster carers, on a continuum from very good/successful to very bad/unsuccessful, in order to see how they would perceive the distribution of foster carers currently: to do this we drew a straight line on a large sheet of paper, and using 100 stones to represent the total number of foster children, asked them to distribute them along the continuum.

They chose to create seven categories that could be labelled as very good, quite good, moderately good, average, moderately bad, quite bad and very bad. The results were as follows:

Very good	Quite good	Mod. Good	Average	Mod Bad	Quite Bad	Very bad
30	9	8	33	7	6	7

When we asked them to indicate how the picture was when they first started their work as a Child Welfare Committee, the rankings were as follows:

Very good	Quite good	Mod. Good	Average	Mod Bad	Quite Bad	Very bad
30	9	8	33	7	6	7

By comparing the two rankings it is apparent that, from their perception, there has been a dramatic improvement in the situation overall. Since they began their work, about 10% of the fostering situations have been so bad that they have had to arrange for the child to be moved. A Child Welfare Committee member also commented that

90% have interest for children but because of conditions they treat them bad

It seemed from our discussions with foster carers that the majority understood the importance of the child maintaining links, where possible, with his or her own family, and of working towards reunification. But it was also striking that some others were relating to the child in a way which excluded the natural family; while this may have been associated with a high degree of integration of the child into the family, it does raise some significant issues.

This phenomenon of foster carers "claiming the child" and other important themes emerged from this discussion with the Concerned Carers: in particular, integration of fostering and family tracing work, issues about the long-term future of the child if the family repatriates, or if the natural family is not found, issues concerning the name and identity of the child and the role of the Concerned Carers in the overall protection of separated children: these will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Fostering Outside the Camps

The researchers came across one example of a refugee child placed with foster carers outside of the camp. This girl had been raped and threatened and had become stigmatised in the local community, hence the perceived need to place her outside of the camps. A Liberian family in the local community was found for her.

Fostering as Seen by Children

During the fieldwork for this case study, the research team conducted two group sessions with foster children – one for children aged between 6 and 12, and one for those over 12: each was a mixed gender group.

With the older children, an exercise was undertaken to compile a list of the characteristics of good and bad fostering – the same exercise as was done with the Concerned Carers and the foster parents. It is instructive to compare this list with those produced by the latter two groups: there is a remarkable agreement on

the main criteria of good and bad foster care, with both groups emphasising the quality of care, educational opportunities, the absence of discrimination between fostered and biological children, the importance of maintaining the child's own name and relationship with his/her own family. While the foster carers, not surprisingly, refer to the importance of control and discipline, young people have some emphasis on relationships with the other children in the foster family. This latter point is worthy of some detailed discussion, and was graphically illustrated for us when we met with a group of "biological" children of foster carers, who painted a vivid picture of their discrimination against the foster children and the generally negative feelings harboured towards them. This point will be taken up again at the end of this chapter.

With the younger foster children, we asked them to produce drawings depicting some aspect of their lives with their foster families. From the discussions that followed, and from our debates with the older foster children, some clear themes emerge, mostly reflecting negative aspects of foster care. At this point it is probably important to acknowledge that the children clearly tended to associate the researchers with SC UK, which may have biased their responses towards negative issues. On the other hand, the children seemed to express, both verbally and through visual means, a disarming honesty.

On the other hand, there were some clear expressions of a positive experience of foster care:

The foster carer I am living with they send me to school and encourage me to continue. Sometimes when I come home my clothes are clean and I meet food at the house to eat

I play football every day

When my foster parent is smiling and playing with me, it makes me happy

The last of these quotations comes from a young child who does not attend school on distribution day as he has to collect the family's rations. This brings us to the long list of negative experiences, which are analysed below.

Foster Children's Experience of Work

Although not a dominant theme in the focus group with older fostered children, the younger children had a great deal to say on this topic when asked about the things that made them unhappy:

When I go to fetch wood in the morning and I get late for school

When I am working I do the work alone while my foster mother daughter is sitting doing nothing

Sometimes my foster parent will tell me not to go to school and when I stay home I do all the work

When the Imam is calling for early morning prayer they wake me up to fetch water but they don't wake the other boy up

It was clear from our discussions with them that what they resented was not the fact of working as such, but rather that they had a burden of work far in excess of other child members of the household.

Discipline and Punishment

In discussions with fostered children about discipline and punishment, a picture emerged somewhat similar to that concerning the work pattern of fostered children, with particular resentment being expressed at being treated differently from other children. Some referred to being beaten by foster carers, but this seems to be seen as generally acceptable, within limits, within this culture:

They beat us if we do wrong

Sometimes they don't give us food … They tell everyone in the community not to give us food

When the biological children do wrong they threaten punishment but they do not give them punishment

What came across from the children was their resentment not of the fact of being disciplined or punished, but rather the discrimination which they felt in relation to other children in the household.

Other children said that biological children will just be told not to do it again, or they will be threatened to go without food, but later the parent relents. Another theme was that of foster children getting the blame:

Before things were OK but of late it is not easy for me. Whenever things go wrong in the house I am blamed for it, while the biological children go free

Foster Children and School and Vocational Training

A number of foster children referred to their lack of educational opportunities: most significant is the fact that some do not attend school while others in the family do:

We are three living in the house. One is older than me and one is younger than me. I do the work but I don't go to school. I want to go to school so that I can be happy

This little girl made it clear that the other children in the foster family do go to school.

For the older children we met, education appeared to be less of an issue – which may, of course, reflect the particular composition of this small group. One

boy, however, referred to his experience of training in tailoring, but regretted that his foster carers did not help him to set up in business.

Abuse

In the two groups of foster children with whom we worked, we came across one reference to an abusive situation:

> *I was living with a foster carer, the man he gave me L$85[5] to sleep with him but I refused the sin: at the time he was encouraging me to get married to another man. I refused both so he decided to put me out*

Foster Children's Name and Family Identity

We came across two examples of children whose family name had been changed to that of the foster family, but the meaning attached to this by the two children was markedly different:

> *When we were in Kolahun my foster carer changed my name to JB as she did everything for me, giving me food, washing my clothes and allowing me to play. But since we came to Sinje and I decided to take my father's name, which is my original name JD she has changed her attitude towards me and she is not giving me any support*

> *For me if I am with my foster parent and they are good to me I don't mind changing my name to my foster carer, but if my foster carer is bad to me I will not allow to take my foster carer name*

When we invited the older children to consider the characteristics of good and bad foster families, one point to emerge was the importance of encouraging family reunification. Another issue to emerge was the importance to foster children of retaining contact with people from their own home area. These issues are discussed further in Chapter 7 (7.6).

Longer-Term Care Issues

With the older foster children, we raised the question of how they saw their future if they were unsuccessful in finding their own families.

> *After repatriation if I don't see my parents any more and my foster carer is good to me I will take them to be my real parents until I can fend for myself*

> *After repatriation if I don't see my parents any more and my foster carer is not good to me, I will run away and go to another place*

5 Equivalent to a little more than US$2

Clearly the second of these young people was keeping his options open, and another said that he would try to find relatives in Sierra Leone.

We specifically asked how they viewed their marriage prospects if they remained with their foster families: the following prediction seemed to receive the agreement of the group:

> *If my foster carer is in favour of the idea (of marriage) and the person, she or they will give me all the support. If it is the opposite, they will disown you and don't give you any support*

We also raised the delicate issue of inheritance: it was clear that they had no expectation of inheriting from their foster families:

> *I will look for my own property because the foster carer has his or her children who will take those properties*

> *If the foster sister or brother wants to give me some of the property, I will accept it*

We wondered whether those children who were being "claimed" by their foster carers and whose names were being changed, would be treated in the same manner as their biological children.

Discrimination and "Foster Sibling" Relationships

The broad theme of discrimination emerged particularly clearly in relation to foster children's burden of work which they (particularly the younger children) saw as discriminatory.

When we met with a group of adolescents in self-care arrangements, we asked them why they preferred this to fostering. Their answers indicated a generally negative perception of foster care:

> *I prefer self-care than living with foster carer because of the way the foster carer gives people hard work*

> *Foster care no good care*

The theme of discrimination emerged strongly from other children in foster homes. We convened a workshop group for "foster siblings" – the biological children of foster parents, and the information revealed by this group was both graphic and shocking. After detailed explanations and a warm-up game, we invited them to prepare and perform a drama depicting a scene in a family in which there are parents, children and a foster child. After a couple of "false starts" they performed a drama which unlocked some extremely interesting issues.

The children spontaneously in their drama, and then in their discussion, painted a picture of unashamed and quite profound discrimination and marginalisation of the fostered child. They certainly seemed to be speaking from per-

sonal experience. With an effort, and prompting from us, they could identify and empathise with the foster child. But the overall impression was of them being a part of the discrimination and exploitation. They clearly indicated that it was appropriate for them to beat a foster child if he or she were younger. We asked them if they prefer a younger or older foster child: most prefer a younger child because if the child did anything wrong they would be able to beat him/her.

> *I would like for the foster child to be small because when they are small I can have control to beat them*

Some preferred an older child so that he or she could do work and buy things for them:

> *I would like my foster brother or sister to be older because the person will help to buy me clothes*

For the younger foster children, being treated differently was a source of considerable unhappiness. This theme also emerged in our discussions with the older foster children:

> *At first my foster carer did everything for me, but of recent she does nothing for me. I have to find my own food, clothes, shoes and other things. But she does these things for her children*

As has been described and illustrated above, discrimination appeared not only in their burden of work, but also in the way they were disciplined and sometimes blamed for things they had not done. Another source of tension appears in the form of children being made aware of the fact that they are foster children:

> *Where I stay my foster carer tries and gives me food and sleeping place, but her daughter is always insulting my biological mother. Even if her mother talk to her about it, she becomes enraged and wants to fight me*

It is all too easy to underestimate the importance of "foster siblings" in the lives of foster children. These peer relationships have great potential to create tensions and conflicts: conversely, there may be great scope for involving other children in the family in order to maximise their potential for supporting foster children and enhancing their well-being. We did find some glimpses of more positive attitudes towards foster children as the following quote illustrates:

> *Sometimes my mother refuses to give my foster sister food and talk to her. I usually call her aside and give her some of my food. If my mother finds out she becomes mad at me*

This long section has considered fostering from the children's point of view. Many themes emerged which are quite disturbing, some of which will be taken up and discussed in Chapter 7. It is, of course, difficult to assess how far it is

appropriate to generalise from the relatively small number of children involved in group discussions during our fieldwork. It is quite possible that bias may have crept into the selection of children by the members of the Boys' and Girls Clubs, and by members of the Child Welfare Committee who helped us to arrange the group meetings.

However, what is significant is that many of the themes and issues to emerge from our discussion with young people also arose in our discussions with members of the CWC and with the Concerned Carers. Further research, probably in the form of surveys, would be needed to reach a much larger sample of foster children in order to assess how prevalent some of these concerns are. What our work does reveal, however, is that foster care in Sinje is highly variable in quality, and that the care and protection of potentially vulnerable separated children by their foster carers ranged from very good to overtly exploitative and abusive. It is also clear that many – almost certainly the majority – of foster children are treated less favourably than the other children of the foster carers. This emerged clearly from our discussions with children and was confirmed by adults working in the camps: for example, a Christian pastor told us that fostered children are distinguishable by their poor clothing, lack of foot-wear and by the fact that they tend not to be in school.

Chapter 6

Separated Children in the Sinje Camps: Children in Self-Care Arrangements

Of the approximately 170 separated young people in the two Sinje camps, about 58 were in what they themselves described as "self-care": Save the Children UK staff tended to refer to them as "child headed households". About 45 of them were living alone; the remaining 13 were sharing, in groups of 2 or more. Many of these young people had been members of the fighting forces in Sierra Leone, and some had partners in the camps.

We asked them what they understand by self-care: the following quote sums up their responses:

Me living by myself and doing everything for myself

We asked them why they prefer to live in self-care rather than foster care: as already indicated in the previous chapter, they had quite a negative perception of fostering, referring to the burden of work carried by foster children and the risk of getting blamed for things they had not done. But the main reason for their preference seems to be financial independence: whatever they earn they could keep for themselves:

(In foster care) *you always give them your money after hustling, but if you are alone your money is for you*

This also seems to be a major reason why most prefer to live alone rather than in groups, though privacy is probably another reason for this. It may be surmised that some of these young people have had extremely negative experiences of living with others (especially those who have been associated with fighting forces): hence they may be unable, or unwilling, to entrust themselves to family-based care. A lack of trust in others may also be a reason why so many of them chose to live alone. One boy said that some of his friends have "bad ways", implying that living in a group could lead him into trouble: another said that it is OK if you have good friends.

One, however, referred to the psychological problems in living alone:

If you live alone you are discouraged

He went on to say that he constantly thought about his problems and about his family. Generally they saw serious disadvantages in this self-care living arrangement, the main themes being a sense of isolation, the disadvantages of not having a parent figure to support and speak up for them, and livelihood issues. They spoke of having no-one to care for them if they are sick or have to go into hospital, and they talked of people taking advantage of them. A boy illustrated

the sense of isolation they feel by recounting an incident: on an occasion when he was away from the camp, the immediate community were informed of the day when the toilets and wash room were being cleaned, so he was absent for this event. People reacted with anger and told him in no uncertain terms that he must not use the facilities as he had not helped to clean them. Other examples included situations in which they were in trouble, or in conflict with the law: they have no parents to report to, so the matter is referred straight to the chief, or the young person is taken to court for immediate judgement. There is no-one to mediate or refer to as a responsible adult. They also spoke of getting blamed for things they had not done.

One of the important aspects of the Boys' Clubs and the Girls' Clubs is that they help to integrate young people in self-care with other children in the camp. This may be seen as especially significant for those who have a history of involvement with fighting forces in Sierra Leone.

Another problem raised by the group of young people in self-care was that many of them do not have identity cards. Initially UNHCR refused ID cards to people who were not adult heads of households. Eventually they agreed to their provision to young people in self-care, but many have not received them despite having submitted photographs. This problem particularly affects the boys, who tend to be more mobile outside of the camps: they spoke of having to pay bribes at check-points when they were unable to produce ID cards. Similarly, some of them said that they do not have ration cards.

Livelihood emerges as the major source of their difficulties, and we noted a marked gender difference in this regard. They all agreed that the refugee rations amount to about half the amount of food required to survive. The boys seemed to be able to make a living reasonably easily: one boy whom we met individually undertook skills training in soap-making and was making an adequate living by making soap in bulk and travelling around villages in the area to sell it. Others seek work away from the camps, on farms or in mines. They spoke, though, of exploitation, for example when employers refused to pay them at the rate agreed in advance. Even for the boys, a major dilemma is that it is difficult to both attend school or vocational training, and make a living. One boy told us that he attends school one day a week and works for the remaining days: not surprisingly he failed to pass his examinations. Another told us:

If I get money I can go to school

For some young people who must work to make a living, the timing of school and vocational training may be a problem.

When we raised the question of how they would survive when they return to Sierra Leone, one boy told us

I don't know nothing

But the same boy went on to tell us that he would find small jobs and find a small room to stay in. Generally the impression was that boys were quite independent and resourceful.

For the girls, making a living is much more difficult, with some of the girls also taking care of a child, and many of them drifting between relationships with different men. Most seem unable to make a living through petty trade even if they had attended skills training, and obviously have less access to the local labour market than boys. They seem to survive by begging money from others, or selling non-food items they had received through distributions. Although this was not openly discussed with the young people themselves, we were informed that many of them can only make a living through commercial sex; and while they have received good and appropriate education in avoiding unwanted pregnancy and avoiding health risks, we were concerned that many seem to have little choice but to sell themselves for sex.

SC UK's Livelihood Assessment[6] also drew attention to the fact that female-headed households in Camp 1 were particularly vulnerable to food and livelihood insecurity, and it particularly highlighted the vulnerability of single and adolescent mothers and their apparent reliance on selling sex. While SC UK has placed considerable emphasis on making skills training available to these girls, and in supporting them in setting up small business, our impression is that very few of them are actually succeeding, and that this is leaving some of them highly vulnerable. The issue of livelihoods will be discussed further in Chapter 7 (7.8)

Surprisingly, though, the girls spoke generally of being treated with more respect than the boys in self-care, and they gain more sympathy, often being able to beg small amounts of money when boys would be refused.

One factor which emerged most clearly from the focus group with these young people was the central role that the Child Welfare Committee Monitors play in supporting and advocating for them – to an extent much greater than for foster children:

> *At first we did not have anyone to speak for us but nowadays the CWC always talk for us*

One boy referred to an incident in which he stole something and was caught: remarkably, the Child Welfare Committee Monitor paid the money back. It is clear that members of the CWC offer them strong and tenacious advocacy and support. In some situations, however, the desire for independence also showed through:

> *When we are in trouble people-way, we won't link with the CWC, you have to face it yourselves, you have to pay for it*

6 SC UK (Liberia) (2000): "Food Security, Livelihood and Childhood Nutrition Assessment, Sinje Refugee Camps 1 and 2", Monrovia, SC UK (draft version).

Chapter 7

The Key Issues to Emerge from the Study

This chapter aims to draw together and analyse some of the key themes and issues to emerge from this study. First we offer some thoughts on the evolution of SC UK's programme in Sinje and then we examine the concept of fostering as a means of securing the care and protection of separated children. We then examine the role of community structures in implementing a child protection strategy and the next section looks specifically at the role of children themselves as active agents in child protection. Next we consider the integration of work with and for separated children into a broader child protection strategy, and in the following two sections we discuss issues of children's identity and sense of belonging, and the relationship between fostering and family tracing work. Finally the importance of a joined-up, multi-sectoral approach to child protection is considered.

The Evolution of SC UK's Programme

Roads to interesting places rarely go in straight lines and the child protection work in Sinje is no exception. The present programme owes a great deal both to the initiatives of the refugees themselves, and to SC UK staff who have changed their *modus operandi* in the light of changing circumstances, needs and opportunities.

The coming together of the two groups of refugees (as described in the introduction) combined two rather different approaches, though each one was, in a sense, slightly paradoxical. On the one hand, the original work in Sinje (Camp 1) simultaneously combined what was originally a narrow and quite traditional family tracing (IDTR) programme with an exceptionally important initiative by the refugees themselves to address some of the child protection issues in the camp: these involved, but were not solely addressed to, separated children. The team, who came down from Tarvey, was operating in more of an "emergency mode", with a greater emphasis on direct work with children. However, they were also working with and through community structures, and their work included the early initiatives with the Girls' Clubs and Boys' Clubs. Although this originally started as adult-directed work, the idea evolved, after the move to Sinje, into something more akin to a movement, in which the empowerment of young people to take responsibility for themselves and for the running of their clubs was a major feature. The term "club" is, perhaps, a little misleading, and may detract from the considerable significance of the contribution which young people are now making, not only to child protection within their immediate social environment, but to the life of their communities as a whole. This theme will be discussed further in section 7.4 below.

The combining of these two rather different work cultures within SC UK was not without its tensions and difficulties. Indeed some tensions within the programme are still to be observed, and partly reflect some of the paradoxes inherent in the work: while great emphasis has been, and continues to be, placed on the community's ownership of its separated children, (language which the Camp Management Committees themselves now use) these children refer to themselves as "Save the Children's Children". There are demands from both children and foster carers for more material assistance, and while an acquiescence to such demands might well serve to reinforce the perception of SC UK's ownership of responsibility for them, the lack of an adequate response to the livelihood issues in the camp (and specifically for young people in self-care arrangements) poses real and potentially life-threatening child protection issues. This latter issue is discussed further in section 7.8.

However, the researchers were very struck by the tenacious, sensitive and empowering work which has been undertaken with the various community structures at all levels to provide not just an awareness of child development and children's rights issues, but to achieve an environment in which young people themselves can, and demonstrably do now play in the life of the community. For a programme in the early years of a refugee emergency to reach this point within such short time-frames is a remarkable achievement.

Fostering as Care and Protection for Separated Children

From the evidence gathered for this case study, how are we to perceive fostering among the refugee communities in Sinje? Is it to be seen as a long-standing cultural tradition that readily adjusts to the needs of separated children? Is it to be seen as a community coping strategy developed by the refugees in the face of new challenges and offering a response founded on the needs and rights of children? Or is it rather based around the needs of adults and a recipe for the widespread abuse and exploitation of children?

All of these questions contain an element of truth, but the diverse nature of fostering as seen in Sinje makes it difficult to formulate simple answers.

It is the case that fostering (or fosterage, as it tends to be referred to in the anthropological literature) is a long-standing tradition, especially among the Mende people. And it is this tradition that seems have led to so many children being spontaneously absorbed into unrelated families.

Traditional forms of fosterage are not, however, used primarily for the care of parentless children: they reflect a number of factors which include:

- The need to release mothers' time for productive activity: for example, a family with only small children may seek an older child to take care of them, or a mother who may need to work may transfer her small child to another family with older children who can provide care
- The perceived value in providing for the child's discipline and education outside of the family, with cultural value attached to the child's experience of hardship

- A complex system of patronage and the value for the family in being associated with a family of higher social status
- The absence of an automatic expectation that the foster child will be treated in a similar manner to other children in the family

There is clearly an expectation of exchange – i.e. the foster parent has an expectation of deriving benefit from the arrangement: this may take the form of the child's work, usually within the family, or the obligation which the child will have, in later life, towards the foster mother, especially in her old age – a kind of life insurance policy.

These factors raise important questions about the ease with which the system can be adapted to the fostering of children who cannot quickly return to their own families – and especially to caring for children whose experiences may create a range of attitudinal, emotional and behavioural problems. The traditional system of fosterage is not founded on any concept of the best interests of the child: it is primarily a system of mutual benefit to the families involved. It is not generally seen as a permanent form of care, and there is usually an expectation that the child will return to the care of his or her own family.

Reflections of this traditional system of fosterage are clearly to be seen in Sinje. The burden of work placed upon fostered children, the sense of discrimination which the children vividly described to us, and the expectation of "something in return" which clearly lies behind the foster carers' resistance to the idea of reunification without their involvement, and their wish to meet with the child's natural parents (see discussion in Chapter 5 and section 7 below.

When we talked to foster carers, we found these elements of traditional fosterage sitting side-by-side with a rather different discourse: sympathy for children, the desire to help and a sense of obligation often derived from religious conviction. It is therefore not surprising that we found fostering to be a very diverse concept, encompassing a quality of care, as judged by the Child Welfare Committee, ranging from very poor and abusive, to very good.

Given this diversity, we cannot say that spontaneous fostering is protective for children: we can say that in a significant number of cases, it is abusive and exploitative, varying in degree from moderate to severe. It also seems that people are rooted in the expectation that it is acceptable that a fostered child is not treated the same as other children in the family. On more than one occasion a proverb was quoted to us:

We do not put the (foster) child on our shoulders to see far off

This was interpreted for us as indicating that fostered children should not receive special attention, or perhaps more colloquially, that they should not be given ideas above their station.

Without some form of external intervention, it seems unlikely that, for the majority of fostered children, fostering would provide a level of care and protection at a level which can be regarded as acceptable by international standards. The fact that the Concerned Carers do have a clear and comprehensive picture

of the constituents of "good" fostering (see Chapter 5) does suggest that there is scope for promoting a more child-centred form of fostering. But the gap between the rhetoric and the reality appears to be great.

Whose responsibility is fostering? It seems likely that those refugees who arrived in the camps having already taken in a separated child viewed fostering as their responsibility alone. Many foster carers have been reluctant to come forward and declare the presence of a separated child in their family, perhaps underlining the fact that they see it is as their private business. It is to be anticipated that there may be many more unregistered separated children in the camps: the gender imbalance may provide a clue to one reason for this. The larger number of registered boys, especially in their adolescent years, may partly reflect the significant number of former combatants, who were mainly (but by no means only) boys. But there may be a second reason: foster parents probably have a preference for girls, partly because of the value of their domestic work, and partly because of the fact that the carers may ultimately benefit from the dowry which is payable by the parents of the boy upon marriage. It is hypothesised that there may be a larger number of unregistered, and hence invisible, girls than boys in foster care. There may also be a third possible reason for the gender imbalance of fostered children – that older separated girls are taken in by men as "wives" who are then unlikely to be registered as separated children.

Save the Children UK are perceived to have claimed some "ownership" of separated children by their work to identify and document them for family tracing. They do, of course, carry an international mandate for the protection of children as partners of UNHCR. It was striking to see the extent to which the fostered children see themselves as "Save the Children's children": perhaps the occasional distribution of material goods to separated children has reinforced this image of themselves. Perhaps too they feel protected by being under the wings of an aptly-named organisation; some probably have good reason to mis-trust the community's capacity to provide them with adequate protection without external intervention.

The original approach by SC UK, to deploy its own Community Workers to identify and document separated children, to place unaccompanied children in foster homes and to provide monitoring and support, was not cost-effective or sustainable in the medium and longer-term time frames. SC UK have therefore worked hard to instil within the refugee communities a strong sense of community ownership of separated children, with persistent awareness-raising work to emphasise the responsibility of the community, through its various social structures, for separated children.

Behind this work to instil a sense of community responsibility for separated children lies the belief that fostering should not just be seen as a private arrangement. It is rightly felt that promoting a sense of community ownership for separated children is the most effective and sustainable means of providing longer-term care and protection. The next section of this chapter addresses the effectiveness of this approach as a child protection strategy.

Mobilising Community Structures as a Child Protection Strategy

The principal agents of child protection in the Sinje camps are the refugees themselves (including young people) and not any external protection agency, though the role of SC UK in developing the capacity of and supporting those structures, and in dealing directly with particularly serious cases, is not to be underestimated.

What exists within the camps is a multi-level series of community-based structures, each with roles to play in child protection, each overlapping with the others but with a degree of coordination which, though not clearly defined, appears to operate in practice. The most formal role is undertaken by members of the Child Welfare Committee, who act as Children's Rights Monitors under the authority of the Camp Management Committee. The Concerned Carers undertake particular tasks, some delegated by the CWC, but they also operate at a less formal level by monitoring the well-being of children and responding to problems that they, or others, identify. The role of the Concerned Carers is an interesting one: unlike the Child Welfare Committee, who carry the authority of both SC UK and the Camp Management Committees, members of the Concerned Carers are themselves foster carers and hence are more the "peers" of other foster carers than authority figures.

The Girls' Clubs and the Boys' Clubs, through their work with their members, and more broadly through their block Advocates, offer a network of informal, but front-line child protection agents. Their presence, and their growing status, within the communities, and the work they do within the clubs to sensitise other young people to child protection issues makes them an obvious and accessible point of contact for a child who has a personal problem – including matters of protection. This will be discussed further in Section 7.4 below.

What is observable in Sinje is a two-pronged strategy. First, at a *macro* level, there is the preventive and *proactive* approach consisting of awareness-raising work and education with the aim of improving the overall quality of care and protection for children, and preventing neglect and abuse. Although this strategy particularly has in mind the specific protection and care needs of separated children, the approach is a community-wide one which seeks to address the protection needs of all young people in the camps. The approach rests firmly on the work of the Child Welfare Committee, the Concerned Carers and the young people's clubs, all within the overall authority and coordination of the Camp Management Committees, and all with technical support from SC UK.

The second aspect of the strategy is the more *micro-level* work done with the individual child (and foster family where appropriate). This is a more *responsive* approach to monitor children's well-being and to react to any problems or allegations of abuse. This operates in two ways. On an informal level, the Girls' Clubs and the Boys' Clubs have a growing role in providing reference-points for individual young people. Similarly, the Concerned Carers work partly at this level, also offering a point of contact with other foster carers which may be particularly significant as they themselves are also foster carers. At a more formal level, the Concerned Carers and the Child Welfare Committee act to intervene where necessary, and can do so with the more authoritative backing both from

the Camp Management Committee and SC UK.

It was interesting and significant that when we asked both foster carers and foster children whom they would turn to in the case of difficulty, both referred to the people within their immediate social networks, reflecting cultural norms: in the case of the foster children, members of the Child Welfare Committee were mentioned almost as an afterthought. This is a useful reminder that international agencies should not make the assumption that the professionalisation of child protection functions, albeit by members of the community, can readily take root in African societies. The reality is that it is people within their own networks who provide the first point of contact on most personal issues, not an authority figure in a formal child protection role. This also helps to see how the two aspects of the protection strategy are complementary. The community-wide, awareness-raising, sensitisation and educational work on child protection and children's rights has resulted in a diffusion of knowledge and understanding within the community, and this greatly increases the likelihood that there will be someone within the child's social networks, and within the carer's networks to whom they can turn and who may be able to offer a sympathetic and reasonably informed response. This more informal level of work is then backed by the formal work of the Child Welfare Committee Monitors, the Concerned Carerss and the Camp Management Committees, and, where necessary, the intervention of SC UK Community Workers or UNHCR.

A significant feature of this overall strategy is that, unlike more conventional programmes for separated children (including those operated in Sinje, Vahun and Kolahun during earlier periods), it does not isolate separated children either for special assistance or as an especially vulnerable group. The integration of separated children into the clubs, and the integration of the work to address their particular needs, help them to feel part of their community: or in the words of a senior member of the clubs:

We help them to be part of us

This emphasis on the integration rather than the isolation of separated children has not, however, been entirely successful, as evidenced by fostered children continuing to refer to themselves as "Save the Children's children". However, it is a remarkable achievement that SC UK have developed the programme from a typical emergency response to one with a much greater emphasis on longer-term development; this has occurred within quite short time-frames.

Children as Active Agents in Child Protection

Children are often seen as vulnerable to abuse and needing protective mechanisms but they are less often seen as active agents in child protection. The work in Sinje is an excellent example of a successful attempt to mobilise young people themselves to take an active role in child protection. The members of the Girls' Clubs and Boys' Clubs, which now run autonomously, have taken on both informal and more formal responsibilities for child protection, and with this in

mind have been involved in various workshops to make them aware of some of the key issues. Their pattern of meetings continues to provide educational opportunities that enhance this important work – for example in learning about sexual health issues and in developing skills and techniques to enable them to protect themselves from unwanted intimacy.

The more formal aspect of this child protection work consists of the responsibilities of the Advocates, who have a particular role within their block to identity and respond to child protection issues. But this work also occurs at an informal level: the diffusion of an awareness of children's rights issues, and of child protection concerns, among this large group of young people helps to increase the likelihood that individual children will have someone within their own network of friends to whom they can turn in the event of difficulties.

In order to find out how their work actually works in practice we asked some of the members of the Clubs to provide examples of their work:

One girl told us of the case of a young fostered boy: she had observed that he was being badly treated by the foster carers. He had a heavy burden of work and was sometimes beaten if he failed to carry out his duties. He was dirty and badly clothed and was not attending school. She directly raised her concerns with the foster parents and contacted the Concerned Carers who in turn referred the case to the CWC. The girl and the Child Advocate provided advice to the family, as a result of which the situation improved. He has been able to remain in the home, with monitoring from both the Monitor and the Advocate.

Another girl Advocate mentioned the case of a 16 year old girl. The girl approached the Child Advocate to tell her that she had been forced into an early marriage by the foster carers. However, she refused this marriage and wanted to leave the foster home and return to Sierra Leone. As a result, arrangements were made for the Concerned Carers and the Child Welfare Committee to be involved, but even after their intervention, the foster carers insisted that she either accepts the marriage (presumably so that they could benefit from the dowry) or leave the foster home. The girl chose the latter, and arrangements were made for her to live with the young block leader in a self-care situation.

A separated boy living independently had a relationship with a foster girl. The girl's foster father constantly harassed the boy. The boy reported this to a Child Advocate who visited the foster father with the aim of mediating. The relationship ceased but the girl continued to sleep outside of the house, with another boy, resulting in the separated boy being blamed for the girls' behaviour, and so the harassment continued. A further mediation attempt was made and it was made clear that his relationship with the girl had ended, and the relationship with the foster father was harmonised.

These are graphic examples of the role of children as active agents in child protection.

The Integration of Work with Separated Children into a Broader Community-Based Child Protection Strategy

Save the Children UK's initial work in Sinje consisted of a fairly traditional, vertical family tracing and reunification approach. At the same time the work in Vahun and Kolahun had a somewhat broader approach, with Community Workers directly involved in placing unaccompanied children in foster care, working in collaboration with community structures. There was also some interesting work, in Tarvey, to work directly with young people, particularly in response to a set of problems posed by adolescent boys. This gave rise to the birth of the Boys' Clubs and Girls' Clubs, which have evolved into something quite different from their initial form.

These two programmes came together when the Kolahun refugees were moved to Sinje (Camp 2), and although there were some tensions between the two approaches what evolved was a pattern that may well provide an excellent model for replication elsewhere.

Many vertical programmes for separated children have a tendency to isolate this potentially vulnerable group of children for special treatment. In Sinje (Camp 1) they tended to be seen – and still see themselves – as Save the Children's Children. This may have served to be protective of them, but it did little to ensure their integration into the community. It may have caused some resentment among others, and did not set the protection of separated children within the wider framework of the widespread abuses of children's rights. Although separated children do – and in Sinje they did – have specific areas of vulnerability because they lacked parental care and protection, many of these were shared by others: for example, sexual exploitation and abuse within and outside of the family, forced and early marriages and denial of the right to education.

A second advantage of this more horizontal approach is that it has helped to emphasise the community's responsibility for separated children. The initiative of the refugees themselves in forming the Child Welfare Committee was a highly significant step in this direction but this did, in fact, run counter to SC UK's rather more vertical approach in the early stages. Members of the Camp Management Committee in Camp 2 made the interesting comment, referring to separated children:

> *They are our children. Save the Children does not have any child*

This sense of community ownership was not, however, visible in all aspects of camp life. The legacy of the former approach is still to be seen – for example in fostered children still seeing the Save the Children office as an early point of contact in the event of problems. Many of the foster parents we met clearly saw SC UK as their first line of defence in the face of difficulties, not the Concerned Carers or Child Welfare Committee. But the more formal role of the CWC, with its accountability both to the camp leadership and to SC UK (and hence to UNHCR) has probably served to enhance the sense of community ownership, and the growing role of the CCs and the Boys' and Girls' Clubs have served to emphasise this.

Fostering, Foster Parent Motivation and Children's Identity and Sense of Belonging

Reference has already been made to the "two-level" nature of foster parent motivation – their concern and sympathy for children, and their more traditional desire to take in children for their own benefit. A third main reason also emerged during the fieldwork for this case study – the desire to claim the child as their own (please see discussion in Chapter 5). It was understood from SC UK's Community Workers that this was quite common. Paradoxically, while this created a number of difficulties, there is some evidence that such children are more fully integrated into their foster families and receive a generally higher standard of care. In many ways, these arrangements seem more akin to a form of de facto adoption: in one case that we encountered, the foster family had no children of their own and probably saw fostering as an alternative route to having their own family.

However, these cases create a number of difficulties. First, we encountered a number of instances in which the child's family name had been changed to that of the foster carers. Reference has already been made to the two children who had had this experience, but each viewed it differently:

> *When we were in Kolahun my foster carer changed my name to JB as she did everything for me, giving me food, washing my clothes and allowing me to play. But since we came to Sinje and I decided to take my father's name, which is my original name JD she has changed her attitude towards me and she is not giving me any support*

> *For me if I am with my foster parent and they are good to me I don't mind changing my name to my foster carer, but if my foster carer is bad to me I will not allow to take my foster carer name*

The first of these examples is particularly interesting. It seems likely that the child's foster mother wanted to view the child as a permanent member of her family, but that when he decided to revert to his own family name, her attitude towards him changed dramatically: it seemed as though her love and care for him were conditional on the exclusion of his natural family.

It is likely that some foster carers will not welcome efforts to identify these children and to trace their families. We guessed, though could find no empirical evidence, that some of these children will not have been identified as separated children but remain invisible in their communities. Clearly if the child's family name has been changed, and if the child was taken in when very young, it is likely that he or she will remain as a permanent member of the foster family: some parents may even register the child as their own.

Although such *quasi* adoption cases may be offering a high level of care, protection and security, they raise serious questions about the child's right to a name and identity. Unless the child is able to exercise his or her own choice, he or she may be denied any possibility of family reunification: in both of the cases mentioned above, the boys in question were able to choose, and they did so, with very different outcomes.

The Interface of Fostering and Family Tracing and Reunification

The foregoing discussion has raised the difficulties for family tracing if the child's name has been changed to that of the foster carers. We encountered another interesting issue concerning the interface of fostering and family tracing.

During a focus group discussion with a group of foster carers, the following, quite unsolicited comment was made:

> *I will not agree to them returning unless I go back with them*

In the discussion that followed it emerged that the foster carers felt strongly that family reunification needs their presence and involvement:

> *It is important for foster carers to meet the parents so that the parents know that the carers have been doing something for them*

Another said that

> *Some are very ungrateful*

Another volunteered that

> *If we meet, their friendship for ever with us*

No explicit reference was made to material expressions of gratitude or recompense, but the unspoken message was clear!

We raised this issue with a group from the Camp Management Committee of Camp 2 and asked for their opinion. In response one of them said that the foster carers prefer to go with the child so that the child's family can say "Thank you". Another said

> *The child can explain to the parents what they (foster carers) have done for him/her*

Members of the Child Welfare Committee told us that if a foster child expresses a wish for reunification, the foster carers often manipulate the child to change his or her mind and to express the wish to remain with the carers until they can return together. The child's expressed wishes usually seem to be a determining factor in reunification decisions, but it may sometimes be necessary for a more considered determination of the child's best interests to take precedence over his or her expressed opinion, especially where it is suspected that the foster carers may be influencing this.

Bearing in mind that traditional forms of fostering have this component of "exchange", foster carers' request to meet the natural parents seems reasonable. From a child's point of view too, some continuity is desirable and helps to smooth the passage from foster family to his or her own family. Continuing contact with the foster parent is also probably in the child's interests, unless the experience of fostering has been generally negative.

SC UK and the Child Welfare Committee do facilitate contact between foster carers and the family of origin, but it may be important to develop policies and practices which reflect the importance that foster carers attach to opportunities to meet the child's family and to take a more active role in the reunification process. The policy of the International Committee of the Red Cross, who facilitate cross-border reunification, is to take the child only: in this particular cultural context, it may be necessary to review this policy.

Child Protection and Multi-Sectoral Coordination

One of the most significant aspects of SC UK's work in Sinje is the acknowledgement that child protection cannot be achieved effectively by means of "vertical" programming. Rather it requires joined-up working with many other sectors. SC UK recognised the importance of education and skills training as part of the strategy and filled a significant gap by starting its own programmes in these areas. Similarly, an important aspect of their child protection work is advocacy with other NGOs and community-based organisations that may be able to provide services which contribute to their overall protection and well-being.

The issue of livelihood emerges as a key aspect of the overall protection strategy, and affects fostered children, and especially young people in self-care. It is clear, however, that almost all of the foster families are struggling to manage on very meagre resources, and many have taken in an extra child only to find these resources are stretched even further. How far this contributes to the burden of work which falls on to so many foster children is difficult to determine.

It is clear that, in order to promote an effective protection strategy for girls in self-care situations, there has to be an effective livelihood strategy. SC UK has attempted to achieve this by way of Accelerated Learning and skills training followed by practical assistance to get them started up in business. Other NGOs are also involved in these areas. However, this has had only limited success: one reason is that it seems that some young people cannot both attend ALP or skills training and earn enough to keep themselves. A second reason is that skills training does not always result in achieving self-sufficiency. It seems likely that the market in and around Sinje is becoming saturated in trades such as soap making. A third factor is that, while there are opportunities for boys to earn a living in the local, and sometimes more distant, labour market (which often seems to involve quite exploitative and sometimes hazardous work), it is much more difficult for girls to do so. What seems to be needed is a further revision to the skills training programme based on market surveys to ensure that young people are being trained in skills which the current market requires. Our impression is that many young people, mainly girls, are slipping through the protection net and are forced to make money from sex.

It has not been possible to gauge the scale of the problem: but it is clear to us that many girls remain vulnerable to potentially exploitative sex, with its attendant health risks as well as that of unwanted pregnancy. These young people will remain in this unprotected situation unless a more comprehensive livelihood strategy can be devised.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

Save the Children UK's work in Sinje is a fascinating example of work for and with separated children being integrated into a wider child protection strategy, which in turn has involved a committed and consistent strategy for the sensitisation, training, empowerment, capacity-building and support to various community structures within the refugee camps. A SC UK Community Worker described the present strategy as a "hands off, eyes on" approach, which delegates as much responsibility as possible to the various community structures with whom they work. The fact that the Child Welfare Committee now has the formal status of a partner of SC UK (the CWC became official partners of SC UK during 2001) is indicative of the amount of responsibility they now carry. It is important to remember that the formation of the Child Welfare Committee and of the Concerned Carers organisation both pre-date SC UK's involvement: the latter's intervention was important, first in introducing the training and capacity-building strategy, and second in bringing specific expertise in work with separated children and in linking this with the regional family tracing and reunification work.

The fact of recent moves to formalise the relationship between the CWC and SC UK, and the fact that the CWC Monitors now receive a modest stipend from SC UK, also illustrate the fact that the child protection functions within the camps continue to depend on external support and resources. There is an obvious tension between, on the one hand the need for community ownership of separated children and of the various child protection tasks, and on the other hand the reality that there is a need for sustained intervention by members of the community which requires time, training and support which in turn require payment if it is to be sustained.

It is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that the very fact of fostering being a well-established tradition in Sierra Leone actually creates major issues of child protection for fostered separated children. It is clear that traditional forms of fostering are not centred on the child's best interests and may well sanction the less favourable treatment of fostered children as compared with other child members of the household. In traditional forms of fostering, the child's own parents are likely to be in regular contact with the child and the foster carers, and this fact probably affords a measure of protection for children: this is clearly not the case with the separated children in Sinje, most of whom are not in direct contact with their own families.

The concept of fostering observed in Sinje is extremely diverse, ranging from more or less full integration and non-discriminatory care at one end of the spectrum to extreme abuse, discrimination and neglect at the other. It is clear that a degree of discrimination against the fostered child in such areas as work, punishment and access to school is widespread, and probably culturally sanctioned: foster children themselves resent differential treatment far more than they resent the

burden of work, or severe punishment. It is clear that the biological children of foster carers are part of the widespread pattern of discrimination, and it is suggested that there may be considerable scope for those involved in supporting foster families to pay greater attention to the relationships between the foster child and his/her "foster siblings". This is an important but neglected part of the foster family dynamics. The fact that many fostered children are displaying behaviour problems of one sort or another, which must impact on other children in the family, is an added reason for paying greater attention to peer relationships within foster families.

The researchers found what might be described as a "double discourse" about fostering among carers themselves: on the one hand, many of them refer to humanitarian motives for taking in a foster child, often prompted by religious conviction. They are probably aware that external agencies are looking for, and expect, motivation by these higher ideals. On the other hand, when talking about other foster carers, they often refer to more selfish reasons for taking in a child – for example the need for an extra child to help with household chores or economic activities, or the desire of foster fathers for a second wife. These two levels of motivation were frequently observable, but the second level was rarely acknowledged by foster carers themselves; but it is clearly pervasive.

Given the cultural norms about the treatment of fostered children as compared with the biological children of the foster carers, the question must be posed "Where is the line to be drawn between culturally acceptable differential treatment, and unacceptable exploitation and abuse"? This is not an easy question to answer. It is clear that the overall standard of foster care has improved considerably in the years that the Child Welfare Committee and the Concerned Carers have been operating. It is also clear that even now, the quality of care in some (if not most) foster homes is less than satisfactory, and that in some cases the rights of fostered children are not being met.

Even in the less satisfactory foster homes, the question needs to be asked "Is there a better alternative?" If the only alternative is a form of residential care, probably outside of the refugee community, the answer is likely to be "No". A focus group discussion with religious leaders revealed that a Catholic lay catechist had been involved in placing some separated children in Don Bosco Homes away from Sinje, but that this proved to be unacceptable to the young people involved. SC UK, together with the various community structures with whom it works, have taken the pragmatic approach of working with this wide spectrum of foster care, striving to improve the overall quality of care and to raise awareness of children's needs and rights, monitoring the children and their foster carers, intervening and removing children from the most unsatisfactory care where necessary.

The fact that so many foster placements were unsatisfactory highlights the need for family tracing work to be undertaken as rapidly as possible, though given the lack of security in parts of Sierra Leone, the difficulties involved have been great. On the other hand, it may be that more could be done to achieve rapid reunification in situations where the child's family have also taken refuge in a neighbouring country.

The case study has revealed interesting evidence on the phenomenon of foster carers seeing their task as a long-term one, even to the extent of changing the child's name. The implications of this for family tracing are obvious, and it raises important issues about the child's right to a name and identity. Moreover, it is highly likely that not all separated children in the Sinje camps have been identified, and it is hypothesised that the presence of many of them has been concealed for a variety of reasons: one may be the fear of losing the child and the contribution he or she makes to the household through his or her work. The marked gender imbalance among those separated children who have been registered (almost twice as many boys as girls in the 13–18 age range) may suggest that there are large numbers of unregistered separated girls: these children may not be receiving adequate care and protection. Some foster carers, especially those who have taken in a very young child, may see the child as a permanent member of the family and not wish to lose him or her. Some older separated girls may have been taken as "wives" by men in the camps.

Given the scale and severity of child protection issues in the camps – not just involving separated children – there can be little doubt that the strategy used is a highly appropriate one – raising awareness of children's rights and children's developmental needs, diffusing such knowledge and awareness among a wide variety of community structures, and empowering refugees themselves to take action where necessary.

This case study has revealed, on the one hand, disturbing evidence about the treatment of children by their foster parents and by their "foster siblings", as well as other abuses of children's rights within this displaced community. On the other hand, perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Sinje experience is the initiatives taken by the refugees themselves to respond to some of these issues and to establish social structures which confront them directly. The work undertaken to empower young people to take action to tackle some of the issues they are facing provides an important reminder that children are not just the passive victims of abuse and exploitation: they have a part to play as social actors within their communities, and with appropriate support and facilitation, they themselves can be powerful agents in child protection.

Appendix 1

A Brief History of the Child Welfare Committee, Compiled by Erik J. Smart, Current Chairman and Founder Member

The Child Welfare Committee (CWC) was started by a group of Sierra Leonean refugees who fled from Sierra Leone during the civil conflict. The main aim of this organisation was to see to it that children were protected and cared for and also to advocate for them when they were in conflict with the law. This was a voluntary and non-political organisation and was headed by Andrew Massaqoui.

It was discovered that a lot of children (girls) were raped, and forced into marriage which led to early pregnancy. Boys were encouraged to join fighting groups, children were not going to school. Their carers took no good care. After seeing all these sexual abuses, exploitation, and abuse of children's rights, we came together and organised ourselves to fight against these abuses. Shortly after the formation of the CWC, there was a big confrontation by some elements in the community who were perpetrators of the above abuses and who were sabotaging the CWC operation. A priest intervened in the conflict and we resolved it among ourselves.

We started visiting homes to find out the number of children living there, and also to identify separated children. We talked to parents and carers who encouraged early marriage, exploitation etc. We also visited courts to speak for children who were in conflict with the law for stealing, claiming people's wives etc.

After seeing our initiative, Save the Children UK in Singe Town, who is working with and for children, decided to work more closely with us in order to get information about children and also about the problems affecting them.

In 1999, Kolahun refugees were relocated to Sinje after another conflict in Lofa County. Members of the community of Kolahun were invited to a workshop with Save the Children UK. Some members were encouraged to join the group from Camp 2. I chaired this group. Members were selected from the 18 blocks in Camp 2 and therefore the CWC grew to 48 members. This group comprised both illiterate and literate, males and females. It was a non-political, non-profit-making and voluntary organisation for the benefit of our brothers and sisters from Sierra Leone.

This group was organised to see to the protection of children, to advocate for them and to let the children benefit from family tracing and reunification for those separated children and to make sure the children were in care.

Most of the CWC members were teachers and when the International Rescue Committee started their education programme, a good number of the CWC members decided to join the education team. The membership went down to 25 monitors, later to 15 and finally went down to 5. The five who were active were Eric J. Smart, Chairman, James O. Browne, Alimatu Smart, Morrison T. Musa and Brockarie Pabai. These were the CWC members who worked tirelessly and brought the CWC to the level of partner with SC UK on June 20, 2001. SC UK

requested 8 active members. There were a lot of ups and downs regarding leadership but everything is OK now.

A malnourished child in the protection of a carer was identified in the community. The child was taken to the clinic. The child was referred to the ACF Feeding Centre in Monrovia. My wife, a CWC monitor, volunteered to go as carer as the foster carer refused to take him, so she took him with her own two year-old healthy child. The malnourished child underwent treatment, and the night before he was due to be discharged the caretaker's healthy daughter came down with a high fever and before the following day she died. This was a great shock to the community. Just imagine someone who went to take care of another person's son and loses her own daughter. It was a blow to me as a founder. She went purposely to save somebody's child and in the end she lost her own just to promote/achieve the objectives of the CWC. This happened on May 29, 2001.

The CWC members are sometimes molested. Some more monitors have dropped out because the job was voluntary. But nevertheless we are still working with and for the children in the community to achieve their rights.