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Best Practices for Engaging Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Establishing Synergies with the Education Sector:

Learning from Protracted Refugee Settings in Uganda and Rwanda

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BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISMS AND ESTABLISHING SYNERGIES WITH THE EDUCATION SECTOR: ***Learning from Protracted Refugee Settings in Uganda nnd Rwanda***

INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, UNHCR published *A Framework for the Protection of Children*, which is based on and advocates for a systems approach to child protection, consisting of multi-sector components and including "actions for all duty bearers at all levels – family, community, national and international – to mitigate and respond to the protection risks children are facing." Globally, community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) are frontline efforts to protect children from exploitation, abuse, violence, and neglect and to promote children's well-being. CBCPMs are defined broadly to include all groups or networks at grassroots level that respond to and prevent issues of child protection and vulnerable children. These may include supports from the extended family, peer groups, and community groups such as women's groups, religious groups, and youth groups as well as traditional community processes. Mechanisms initiated by governments, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and UN agencies may be linked to CBCPMs as well.

The education sector forms an important part of the child protection response in refugee settings, and UNHCR's Education Strategy (2012-16) reflects a focus on refugee education as a core component of UNHCR's protection mandate. The right to education for all children also forms part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNHCR's Education Strategy promotes the importance of schools as safe learning environments, emphasises improving access to quality education for refugee children and maximises the protective benefits of participation in school. It advocates for the integration of refugee children into national education systems.

The aim of this note is to outline some ways of engaging with CBCPMs, especially within the education sector, which apply in both urban and rural protracted refugee settings. This note is based on the findings of two studies of CBCPMs and their linkages to the education sector in two protracted refugee settings: one conducted amongst urban refugee communities in Kampala, Uganda, and the other in two refugee camps in Rwanda.[i] The purpose of these studies was to learn about community-based child protection processes and mechanisms in refugee communities. In particular, the studies explored what CBCPMs existed, how they were used, and whether and how the CBCPMs linked with elements of the formal, government led aspects of the national child protection system. The studies had a special focus on the role of the education sector in the protection of refugee children.

KEY RISKS FOR CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF CBCPMS AND MORE FORMAL ACTORS

It is important to note at the outset that the hundreds of refugees who participated in the study—across countries, age groups, ethnic groups, and sex—noted that children out of school was their highest priority child protection concern. In both contexts, refugees noted that adolescents were at particular risk of exploitation and abuse because of their out-of-school status but that few services existed to palliate this reality.

Children with special risks

The key protective role played by parents, extended family, neighbours and friends in displacement settings meant that certain groups of children and young people were perceived to be at increased risk of abuse, exploitation, violence, and neglect as well as less likely to access services. These include children and young people who are not living with their biological parents and those who

have been rejected by their families and communities due to behaviour perceived as unacceptable (e.g. criminal activity, early pregnancy). Adolescents whose behaviour had transgressed community norms were perceived to be caught in a vicious cycle - no longer benefitting from their families' support but unable to access more formal services that could help them to re-establish their sense of purpose and future.

Parents and extended family

The primary child protection actors in refugee settings are parents, with the extended family, friends and neighbours also playing crucial roles. More formal networks and systems, whether established by governmental bodies, NGOs, or community-based organisations, should not be expected to replace the role that parents play in protecting children. One of the key findings of the research was that the protracted refugee experience had left parents and communities distinctly disempowered, unable to provide for their children or protect them from harm. Child protection interventions should therefore be designed from a vantage that explores how existing family strengths can best be supported and strengthened.

Community-based child protection mechanisms

In both urban Uganda and refugee camps in Rwanda, communities developed initiatives themselves to address child protection concerns. For example, refugees organised themselves into groups to address the needs of children who were unable to access formal education. The churches were active in addressing child protection issues in Congolese refugee communities, both in Rwanda and Uganda, and the mosques played a role in the Somali refugee community in Kampala. In one camp in Rwanda, the refugees developed a self-led secondary school called the Hope School that allowed teenagers who were no longer able to access formal education to continue their studies, occupying their time and giving them a sense of purpose. Churches, mosques, and—for Somali refugees in Uganda—clan-based structures also served as communications agents about the need to protect children from abuse, violence, neglect, and exploitation in addition to collecting and distributing funds to those who were in need of support in face of such violations.

In both refugee settings studied, more formal CBCPMs had been established by NGOs. These consisted of committees or groups of volunteers from the refugee community, who were trained and supported by the NGOs and who were responsible for various tasks relating to child protection. These tasks included provision of services such as advocacy and awareness-raising, and identification of children in need of protection and support. Notably, however, refugees rarely spoke of these committees as entry points to whom they would refer their vulnerable children for support.

THE EDUCATION SECTOR AND PROTECTION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN

A clear finding from both studies was that education plays a crucial role—arguably the most crucial role—in child protection in protracted refugee settings. It can be challenging for refugee children to access education, especially at secondary level. Since older children are more likely to look for ways to improve their lives (including sex work, criminal activity, drug and alcohol use), it is especially important that young people are able to continue with their education beyond primary level. Attending secondary school was understood to be protective not only in terms of keeping young people busy but also in providing a sense of purpose to focus on long-term objectives rather than short-term gains.

Enabling refugee children to access formal education

Where there were costs associated with primary education (e.g. uniforms, school materials), these costs represented the main barrier to refugee children accessing the formal education system. The primary means of ensuring children and young people are able to benefit from the protective factors

associated with education are, therefore, to make education totally free or to enable parents to earn enough money to pay the costs associated with education. Especially in Rwanda, parents lamented their inability to create their own livelihoods, indicating the need for increased advocacy around these families' right to work in the country.

However, even where costs are not a factor, other barriers may prevent refugee children from accessing education. In Rwanda, refugee students who have completed nine years of education, for example, have no access to free education and therefore almost no options for additional schooling. In urban Uganda, refugees have opportunities to attend mainstream schools, which are also attended by Ugandan children and follow the national curriculum. Where the language of the host country is different to that of the refugee communities (e.g. Congolese and Somali refugees living in Kampala, Uganda) children can struggle to enter mainstream education. Sometimes children are required to enter school at a grade much lower than they were at in their home country, which they perceive as shameful and demoralising, often leading them to drop out of school. Although the majority of parents were very keen that their children were educated, this finding did not apply to all parents. Some kept their children out of school to contribute to the household income or take care of younger siblings, and some parents believed they would be resettled in a third country very soon, meaning that there was no need for their children to attend school in the host country. Other children were excluded from education because they did not have the support of parents or alternative caregivers.

Preventing refugee children from dropping out of school

Even when refugee children are able to access education, there are challenges that contribute to them dropping out of school. In urban Uganda, the main factor contributing to drop-out, according to research participants, was the discrimination faced by refugee children, both from their fellow pupils and from teachers. Teachers commonly have little understanding of, or experience with, refugee children, and sometimes have negative attitudes towards them and/ or misinterpret their behaviour.

Another reason children were reportedly kept out of school, especially girls, was to take care of their younger siblings to enable their parents to go out and try to earn money. The establishment of early child development centres, or nurseries, within refugee communities would not only enable older siblings to stay in school, but also would provide protection for younger children, who were at risk when left at home unsupervised by their parents. Early childhood development centres existed in refugee camps in Rwanda, but some parents lamented the poor quality of child care within them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above findings, it is recommended that UNHCR and refugee-assisting organisations assist refugee parents to better protect their children in the following ways:

- Insofar as resources permit, support income-generating activities for parents to enable them to protect their children effectively, not expose them to harm, and send them to school. Where parents do not have the right to work in the host country, advocate with the host governments for the refugees' right to work in line with national labour policy.
- Establish or strengthen support for parents to learn the language of the host country (if different from their own) so that they can fully engage with child protection institutions, including schools.
- Build the capacity of key community members and CBCPMs to work with parents to help them support their children by raising awareness of the importance of the parent-child relationship. Key topics that CBCPMs could cover might include: helping parents to maintain good relationships with their children; helping parents to identify strategies to prevent their children

from being exposed to harms; and providing information on how to respond if a child experiences a particular harm.

It is recommended that UNHCR and refugee-assisting organisations support existing CBCPMs—including churches, mosques, schools, parent-teachers associations, community groups and extended family, clan or ethnic based structures—to better protect children in the following ways:

- Undertake rapid analysis to better understand existing community structures;
- Recognize and engage with CBCPMs to undertake child protection activities;
- When designing programs, organize consultations with a variety of children and family members—not simply recognized community leaders or formal camp management structures—in order to enable the meaningful participation of all community members, including young people, in child protection issues.
- Provide training to identify and monitor children in their communities who are particularly vulnerable and may find it difficult to report their problems (e.g. those living without their biological parents);
- Train CBCPMs to improve the quality of their messages for their on-going awareness-raising activities and focus on the issues affecting children in their own communities. Training topics could include:
    - Assessing whether marginalised or vulnerable children are being systematically identified and provided with the necessary support;
    - Ensuring that those not associated with a particular church, mosque or other group are not excluded from CBCPMs;
    - Determining that children's interests are prioritised when decisions are made by CBCPMs;
    - Encouraging community elders to advise and protect young family members;
    - Promoting education. Subtopics could include: the importance of sending children to school (including how to change attitudes and beliefs which contribute to children not being sent to school) and how parents can get involved in school-related decision-making bodies and committees, such as Parent-Teachers Associations;
    - Referral processes to Government and non-government service providers for particular child protection issues.
- Improve communication about activities and programmes delivered by implementing, for example, public notice boards and by sharing announcements at community meetings or regular gatherings of CBCPMS. Use such meetings and gatherings to ensure that the criteria for receiving assistance are clear, that refugees always receive a response to a request for services and that the reason for the decision whether or not to provide services is explained.

It is recommended that host governments undertake the following actions to better ensure the protection of refugee children living in their country:

- Ensure that national policies on child protection, such as National Action Plans on Vulnerable Children or on Child Protection, specifically mention refugee children and are applicable to them;
- Review existing child protection referral pathways or service delivery mechanisms to ensure that all child protection actors—including social workers, teachers, police, NGO workers, and others—are aware of the special risks that refugee children face and incorporate these children into their response services.
- Include UNHCR and refugee-assisting organizations in national child protection coordination mechanisms. A specific subdivision for refugee-focused groups could be established within the host government.

It is recommended that donor agencies:

- Enhance efforts to identify additional funding for a secondary education. The Hope School, which the refugees run for approximately $240 USD per month, is a low-cost model that should be explored further.
- Ensure that protracted refugee settings are not overlooked in annual budgetary allocations for refugee-assisting organisations, including UNHCR, given that the protracted nature of these settings does not diminish the difficulty of the refugees' experience within them.
- Insofar as possible, advocate with host country governments for refugees to have the right to work in the host countries.

The following actions are recommended for all child protection actors working with refugee children, including representatives of host governments, UNHCR, and refugee-assisting organisations:

To enable refugee children to access formal education:

- Prioritize assistance to ensure that there is adequate funding for all children to go to school. Insofar as resources permit, provide scholarships or other forms of support—such as school kits and uniform support—to refugee children.
- Strengthen income-generating activities and livelihoods programmes for parents to enable them to care for their children effectively and send their children to school. Where refugees do not have the right to work in a host country, revise policies to allow them to develop livelihoods mechanisms themselves.
- Where refugee children are entering a mainstream education system (e.g. in urban settings), particularly where the official language of the country is new to the refugee children, provide 'foundation classes' either before the children join the formal education system, or alongside it. These classes could focus on language alone, or a combination of language and basic educational skills, depending on whether the child had attended school in their home country. If these classes were linked to the mainstream educational system and formally linked to the curriculum, they could act as a 'way in' to formal education, rather than an alternative. Ideally, they would enable older children to join school at the grade they were at in their home countries, rather than dropping to a lower level.
- Ensure that children who have dropped out of the formal schooling system and do not intend to return to it have access to those non-formal education services available in the country, such as vocational training.

To prevent refugee children from dropping out of school:

- Include training modules on child protection specific to refugee children that is integrated into existing national teacher trainings on child protection. In urban settings, where refugee children attend school along with national children, addressing teachers' lack of understanding of refugee children's experiences and challenges is particularly important.
- Institute a policy to manage the discrimination refugees perceive themselves to face.

To improve general service delivery:

- Develop a confidential feedback mechanism, where community members are able to voice their concerns and report problems. Within CBCPMs, a focal person should be nominated to receive communication and feedback.

[i] See Imogen Prickett, Israel Moya, Liberata Muhorakeye, Mark Canavera and Lindsay Stark (October 2013), *Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms in Refugee Camps in Rwanda: An Ethnographic Study,* and Rebecca Horn, David Bizimana, Scholastica Nasinyama, Lilia Aporo, Emmanuel Kironde, Mark Canavera and Lindsay Stark (October 2013), *Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms amongst Urban Refugees in Kampala, Uganda: An Ethnographic Study*. Additional support for these studies was provided by the USAID Displaced Children and Orphans Fund.