

**Transnational Fosterage of War-affected Children in West Africa:  
Immediate Coping Capacities across Borders**

A report on field research carried out for UNICEF, WCARO

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# 1. Summary of Research and Key Findings

This research was focused on the population of children who fled war in their own country (Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia) and are now living with a foster family in rural Guinea. A team of researchers spent sixteen days in a randomly selected location near the Ivorian border and searched for such children.

The questions to be addressed by the research were:

- Does a large population of informally settled refugee children exist?
- What are the benefits and potential drawbacks of transnational child refugee fosterage?
- Are their different outcomes by gender, ethnicity, and nationality?
- What kind of local capacity is there to support cross border fosterage?

The findings are:

**1.** There is likely a large population of informally resettled refugee children living with local families. In a relatively short time, in a limited locale, one hundred separated children were identified. There are certainly many more along the border area.

**2.** Informal settlement is working, but there is the risk that children will fall through the cracks. There is an impressive child protection capacity in the area. All children interviewed found someone to care for them within a few days of their arrival. A child protection agency could not have done better at matching up children and foster parents in the same period of time. Furthermore, the children and the carers are generally content with their living arrangements. However, these children, technically unregistered refugees, separated children, are receiving none of the benefits that other separated children and unaccompanied minors are receiving. Without assistance, they will be absorbed into the population and most likely will never be reunited with their families.

**3.** Refugee children are well integrated into the community. There was very little differentiation between refugee children and local children. There was some difference between the outcomes for boys and girls, especially in the area of school attendance, but more research is

needed to come to definitive conclusions regarding gender. Furthermore, ethnicity turned out not to be a great factor in carers' decision to foster war-affected children. The most common reason for fostering was feeling sorry for the child.

4. Carers and children are asking for help with education and family tracing, though not necessarily family reunification. The request for education assistance is not surprising, and is present for all children in the area. The request for family tracing without family reunification is slightly surprising, since it has been assumed that family reunification should be the primary goal for separated or unaccompanied children.

**Recommendations:**

There is a need for further research in this area, namely by expanding the geographical range of the study, focusing on the special issues of girls, finding a better way to uncover abuse where it exists, and understanding the local meanings of family and children's own strategies about the best place to be. In the realm of programming, there is a need to work closely with local communities and recognize their impressive child protection capacity. There should be increased aid to schools in the war-affected border regions, and assistance with family tracing for those who request it.

## 2. Research Question

“Globally, there is growing evidence that many separated refugee children are not embraced within programmes providing care and protection or family tracing. In many contexts, there are large numbers of boys and girls who have become separated from their families and have never come into contact with agencies or interventions to assist them. These children may be living within their extended family network, or with others who fall outside their traditional system of care, such as unrelated families, groups of peers or siblings, or on their own. Some may be living, for example, as street children within their own countries or in the cities of neighbouring states. Others may provide domestic service for strangers, in exchange for food or shelter, or work as farm labourers in areas bordering refugee camps.”

From “Not Seen or Heard: The Lives of Separated Refugee Children in Dar es Salaam.” (2003). *Radda Barnen*.

Over the last fifteen years, conflict has affected the nations of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire. The effects of these inter-related conflicts have not remained within national boundaries and flows of resources, armed combatants, and refugees have made this a sub-regional issue. Hundreds of thousands of people in West Africa have fled across borders to escape war. A large fraction of these refugees are children. Many unaccompanied children, rather than seek shelter in camp settings, first seek support from transnational extended family or ethnic networks. Frequently, before refugee camps can be set up, during periods of self-resettlement, fleeing children turn to such networks out of necessity and are absorbed invisibly into communities.

This research is focused on children who fled war in their own country (either Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, or Sierra Leone) and ended up separated from their families and spontaneously settling with Guinean families. We know very little about these informally resettled children: the size of the population, or the dangers they may face. It is clear, however, that there are impressive immediate coping capacities across borders. Although many local NGOs and others have been reporting large numbers of such children, other agencies have been denying their existence. . In urban settings many are already on the radar as “street children,” but it is harder to spot them in rural settings, as they have often integrated so fully into society.

Below are a handful of personal stories from children and their foster carers about how they met and arranged their fostering relationship. These stories will serve as a grounded introduction to the population addressed in this research.

*A child's story* (a sixteen year old boy from Côte d'Ivoire). "I was in school when we heard gun sounds. The teachers released us to go home. I ran to the house, but I couldn't find anyone. I saw some people running, so I joined the group. We took the Guizé road, that is, we passed through the bush. In the bush we came upon a small village. The people I came with joined a vehicle and left me there. I started crying. Someone in the village called me over and said I could spend the night. I explained my story to him and said I will live with you and work so you can feed me. After a few months, the man asked if I had been attending school before. The man brought me to Nzoo to register me for school. The whole time the man was afraid that my parents would come and accuse him of stealing their child.

*A child's story* (a fifteen year old girl from Côte d'Ivoire). "When the war came, I was at home, but my father and mother were out. My neighbor said, 'let's find somewhere to go' and we came together all the way to Nzoo. My neighbor was from Kaolenta near Nzoo. The woman continued on, and left me in Kaolenta. I was sitting in the market in Kaolenta, wondering what to do. I went and sat next to a woman who was selling and explained my problem. The woman said, 'OK, you can come and stay with me.'"

*A carer's story* (a thirty year old woman with two children of her own, born and raised in Guinea). "Three years ago, I went to the waterside to wash dishes and I found four boys there crying. I had some extra rice in one of my pans so I gave it to them to eat and asked what was wrong. They explained that they had fled from

Côte d'Ivoire with a group of people but had been left behind and now they didn't know where their parents were I said, 'OK, you can come and live with me until we can find your parents.' That was three years ago and they are still with me."

*A carer's story* (a thirty-year-old man from Guinea). "We were going to the football field to play. I saw a boy; his feet were swollen. The boy explained his situation. I took him home and fed him and decided to keep him."

The ability to absorb into the community unaccompanied children and the relative ease of these transactions is remarkable. For obvious reasons, child protection agencies have to date evaluated mainly the population of children at hand, that is, those enrolled in their various programs.<sup>1</sup> This leaves out a whole section of war-affected child refugees, some of them, arguably, among the most vulnerable of children.

Among the important unanswered questions about this population are:

- 1) Why do children flee across national boundaries? Why do adults take them in?
- 2) What are the benefits of informal resettlement?
- 3) What is the potential for abuse in fosterage arrangements, and are there local systems to monitor abuse?
- 4) How is informal resettlement different for boys and girls?
- 5) How important is ethnicity to arranging fosterage?

And finally, after these questions are answered, what can we conclude in the area of policy? In other words, what is the best way to help these children?

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Coulter's (2005) unpublished assessment of the "Girls Left Behind" project in Sierra Leone in which she interviews an equal number of girls who participated in the project and girls who did not.



### 3. Background

There are two main hypotheses to explain the prevalence of transnational informal resettlement of unaccompanied children. The first is the importance of ethnic ties across national boundaries and the second is the tradition of child fosterage throughout the region.

#### 1. *Ethnicity and Borders*

National boundaries in Africa, though vitally important in many ways, are often arbitrary and easily traversed by those living near them. In particular, national boundaries often cut through ethnic boundaries. Studies of African culture point to a complex structuring of identity, at times strategically referencing nation, at other times referencing ethnicity, clan, gender, or society membership. There are long-standing cross-border ties and kinship relations throughout this area. However, international aid agencies often make policy as if nationality were the primary element of identity. In her analysis of the Liberian influx into Sierra Leone in 1990 and 1991, Melissa Leach (1992: iii) concluded, “Whilst agencies focused on nationality; host-refugee relations were structured according to differential geographical, kinship and ethno-linguistic boundaries of local and sub-regional importance.” For local people historical and recent cross-border ties, kinship relations and prevailing attitudes towards “strangers” make “self-settling” refugees an obvious approach.

#### 2. *Fosterage*

Fosterage is an umbrella term for a number of different types of relationships, generally involving the exchange of children within an extended family or outside the extended family in the case of craft apprenticeship. Kobiané *et al.* (2005: 473) describe several types of fostering: “kinship fostering, crisis fostering, alliance and apprentice fostering, domestic fostering, and educational fostering.” The practice of fostering is quite common in West Africa and is written about extensively in the anthropological literature on family structure in West Africa (Schildkrout 1973; Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1990; Bledsoe 1990; Bledsoe 1993) and elsewhere (Fonseca 2003). Most recent studies of child fosterage in West Africa have been based in

demography (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Ainsworth 1996), public health (Oni 1995), or economics (Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes 2002), often addressing the pressures to the system of child fosterage that grow out of economic breakdown.

From the demographic literature, it is clear that the practice of child fosterage is widespread throughout West Africa (from 25% to 40% of children are fostered as reported in various studies).<sup>2</sup> From the economic literature, some of the reasons for fostering are: to increase family unity, to spread the burden and the benefits of child rearing throughout an extended family, for access to education or training. These studies have mainly investigated fostering as an exchange between adults, with the desires of the children involved as an afterthought if at all. Scholars have pointed out benefits and drawbacks to this widespread practice (see Oni (1995) on the health care of fostered children) and international child protection agencies have often been loathe to embrace child fosterage arguing that it can be abusive and that arrangements drawn up between adults for children's care do not necessarily fit with what might be in the child's best interests. Understanding the changing nature of child fosterage practices is crucial to the development of programming for war-affected youth that works in parallel with West African cultural models for child protection.

It is clear that child fosterage has been vital to knitting together the West African post-war social fabric. Legions of children separated from their families or rejected by their communities have found new homes with foster parents. In a crisis situation unaccompanied children may have no other option but joining existing households. In this case, the agreement to foster is not between two adults, but between an adult (or adults) and a child in need. An important unanswered question is how this "emergency fostering" is different from traditional fostering and how it parallels traditional fostering.

### 3. *Perspectives from Policymakers*

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<sup>2</sup> The 1974 census of Sierra Leone reveals that 29 percent of Sierra Leonean children whose mothers were aged 15-19 were not living with their mothers. 36 percent of children born to mothers 20-24 years of age were also living away from home. For women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years, the proportions of children away increase to 40 percent and 46 percent respectively. These figures indicate high rates of "out migration" of children at relatively young ages (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985: 61). These figures varied greatly by region and ethnic group with the South and East of the country reporting almost double the rates of out-fosterage to the North. Ainsworth (1996: 25) reports that in Côte d'Ivoire in 1985 one-fifth of non-orphaned children age 7-14 were living away from both natural parents.

Fosterage is of increasing interest to child protection policy makers. In addition to its importance in post-war settings, the system of child fosterage is also of increasing interest in parts of Africa where AIDS is devastating adult populations and children are forced into novel living arrangements. In particular, there is growing agreement that separated children are best cared for in a community setting rather than in institutions (Tolfree 2003).

However, even when community care is acknowledged, there is still often a call for external monitoring. “In the light of anthropological knowledge about traditional patterns of fostering, ... some traditional forms of substitute family care are not based on the best interest of the child and may both have negative impact on child development and infringe on children’s rights. ... (F)ostering programs need to be firmly embedded in the local community and supported by an agency with a solid knowledge of child development and child rights” (Tolfree 2003: 5).

The primary concern is that fostered children are treated differently from biological children, particularly in the areas of forced labor, differential access to health care and other family resources, and educational inequity between fostered and non-fostered children. Kobiané, *et al.* (Kobiané, Calvès et al. 2005: 472, 474), based on a study of education of orphans in Africa, cite conflicting results on schooling of non-relative children in West Africa. They cite Pilon (1995) and Kobiané (2003) to claim “Studies in the West African cities of Lomé in Togo and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso show that school attendance rates are lower among children of other relatives, as compared with the children of the household head. Those who are worst off, in terms of school attendance, are children living with nonrelatives. ... children residing in households headed by nonparental relatives or nonrelatives are less likely to attend school, and this is particularly true for girls.” On the other hand, they cite Nyangara (2004: 33) who reports that “paternal orphans in Namibia and maternal orphans in Mozambique and Nigeria were more significantly likely to enroll in school than non-orphans.” They further cite Foster *et al.* who state, “the majority of orphaned children were being cared for satisfactorily within extended families, often under difficult circumstances... There was little evidence of discrimination or exploitation of orphaned children by the extended family caregivers.”

This research is groundbreaking in a number of regards. Although there has been some preliminary work on fosterage in post-war settings, it is rare to research *transnational* fosterage, *stranger* fosterage, and the problems of war-affected youth in *rural* settings. Furthermore, it is rare to try to understand child protection needs from a local perspective. Rather, too often a normalizing notion of the “best interests of the child” silences local people and fails to acknowledge alternate solutions. As Mann (2004: 15) concludes, “Understanding a particular culture or community’s definition and goals for child development has not yet been the focus of research with separated children.”

## 4. Method

The flows of refugees from Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire make the Southeast region of Guinea (Guinée Forestière) an ideal area in which to carry out this research. The original research plan called for the lead researcher to pick one village close to the border and try to identify as many cases of transnational stranger fosterage as possible. After conversations with child protection NGOs in the area, I selected the village of **Nzoo** primarily because I was told that it would be easy to tell the Ivorians from the Guineans there. The population in our study was mostly Ivorian with a handful of Liberians. Most had never registered with any agency because they had passed through the bush and settled in the village close to the border.

I hired two research assistants: one to translate from French to English (he also spoke Mano, Malinké, and Peul) and one a local community activist with strong ties to the community (he spoke Kono – the primary language in Nzoo – as well as Yakouba and Mano.) So, we ended up with a three-person research team.

Cognizant of the latest theories of how to ethically conduct research with war affected youth (Boyden 2001; Das and Reynolds 2003; Mann and Tolfree 2003), in each case I interviewed the child and the foster parent about their arrangement. We separated the child and the parent for interviews. We explained that I was not registering them for benefits, that I was merely conducting research and wanted to hear their stories. I did not take names of participants.

I met first with Andy Brooks, Regional Emergency Officer at the West and Central Africa Regional Office of UNICEF (WCARO), then proceeded to the Guinea country office of UNICEF in Conakry to consult with UNICEF Guinée officials, and then moved to the regional UNICEF office in Nzérékoré to consult with the head of office, find a research assistant and finalize plans for moving to the identified location.

*Questions for fostered children:*

- How did you find your foster carers?

- Did you search for someone of your own ethnicity? Nationality?
- What are your plans for the future? Do you hope to return to your community or do you want to stay where you are? Why?
- If foster carers abuse children (through overwork, beating, refusing to allow school attendance, etc.) what can they do? That is, what kind of recourse do they have in the community, in the family, at school, and elsewhere?

*Questions for carers:*

- Why did you take in this child?
- Have you been satisfied with the child's behavior?
- Would you be more likely to take in a child:
  - From your own ethnic group or nationality?
  - A boy or a girl?
  - Of what age?
  - Who is attending school?
- What sort of assistance would make it more likely for people like you to foster unaccompanied children?

(See Appendices 7.2 and 7.3 for the actual interview protocols for carers and children.)

Child protection agency staff were also interviewed for their first hand understanding of the issue, and for their input on policy needs and recommendations. (See Appendix 7.1 for a list of officials interviewed.) Officials from international agencies dealing with refugees (UNHCR, ICRC) were doubtful that the population truly exists, and said that after three years in the case of Côte d'Ivoire and eight years in the case of Liberia, all refugees (adults and children) should be in refugee camps. Ministry officials and Guinean nationals working in local NGOs agreed that there is a large population of transnational child refugees in villages along the border, but admitted that they had no resources to register them or address their needs.

## 5. Findings

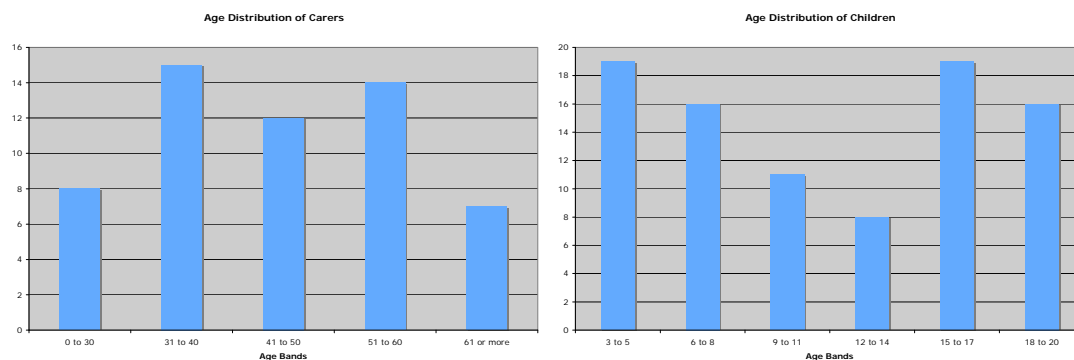
In Nzoo and environs, I conducted 120 interviews, approximately half were child interviews and half were carer interviews. Many of the child interviews were conducted with the eldest sibling of a set of siblings, so that gives a population of about 100 children. After discarding outliers, there were 150 data points, 56 carers and 94 children.

This sample is neither large enough nor random enough to draw any serious conclusions about the situation for refugee children in the region generally. The findings presented here should be understood as preliminary and may serve to direct questions for further research in the future.

### 5.1 Demographics

This section is a simple description of the sample by age, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.

#### *Age range and distribution:*



The carers ages are well-distributed. The shape of the children’s age distribution has two “humps,” one for very young children and one for adolescent children. The first hump represents children who fled war three years ago, essentially before they could talk. Their consequent lack of knowledge of their homes has meant that they have had no choice but to stay in Guinée. The other hump represents children who are in Guinée to complete their schooling. Some of these may have a place they could return to in Côte D’Ivoire, but have chosen to stay in Guinée for the functioning schools. (Furthermore, The sample of children may be slightly biased

towards older, school going children since I worked closely with the Collège to identify children to interview.

***Gender:***

Among carers, one third were female and two thirds male. This may simply mean that the head of the household was interviewed. If that is the case, there are surprisingly many female-headed households.

Among children the numbers were almost equal (52% female, 48% male). This result is also slightly surprising. We might have assumed that people would be more likely to hide girls.

***Family Makeup:***

I asked the carers the total number of people living in their household. The range of answers was 2 to 28 with a mean response of 8. I also asked, of the total number in the household, how many were under eighteen. The range of answers was 1 to 13 with a mean response of 4.5. The average percentage of under-eighteens in any household was 55%.

The next question asked how many “strangers” were in the household.

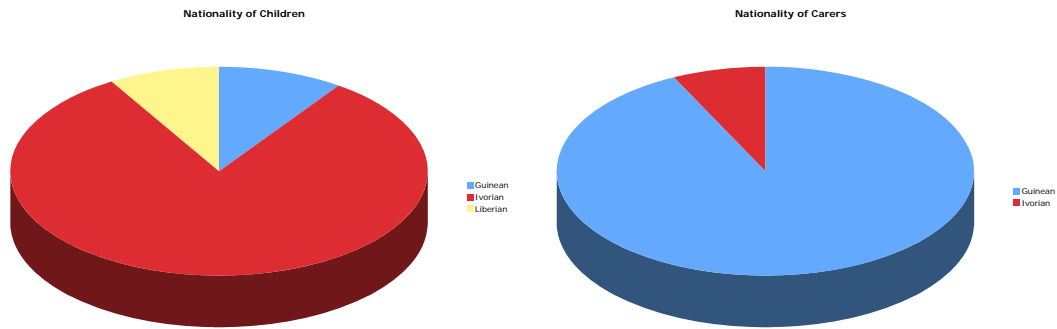


The most frequent occurrence was a family taking in one child. When there is more than one child fostered, it is because children came as sibling sets, or rarely, because a carer decided to take in more than one.



**Nationality:**

Most of the children interviewed were Ivorian, and had fled from the conflict three years prior. Some gave “Guinean” as their nationality because the father was born in Guinea, although perhaps their mother was Ivorian or Liberian and they had never visited Guinea in their lives. There were a handful of children who had fled Liberia as much as eight years earlier.

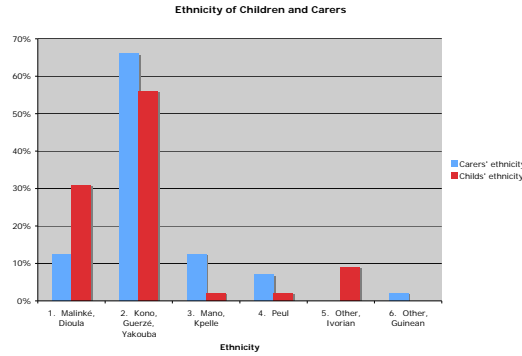


The carers were mostly Guinean, with a few Ivorians who had fled with strange children they met on the way.

**Ethnicity:**

I grouped similar ethnic groups across borders. (By similar, I mean that the language is often mutually intelligible, or that people said in interviews “I am Guerzé ... or Kono – it’s the same thing.”)

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Carers</i>	<i>Children</i>
1. Malinké, Dioula	12.5%	31%
2. Kono, Guerzé, Yakouba	66%	56%
3. Mano, Kpelle	12.5%	2%
4. Peul	7%	2%
5. Other, Ivorian	0%	9%
6. Other, Guinean	2%	0%



Most of the population of both children and carers were of the primary ethnic group in the area (Kono-Guerzé-Yakouba). Due to the ethnic makeup in the sending and receiving areas there are more Dioula children (the primary name of the related ethnic groups in Côte d'Ivoire) and more Kono and Mano carers (the primary names of the related ethnic groups in Guinea).

## 5.2 *Fostering, nationality, and ethnicity:*

Most members of the sample were strangers before they met in a crisis situation.<sup>3</sup> Carers responded:

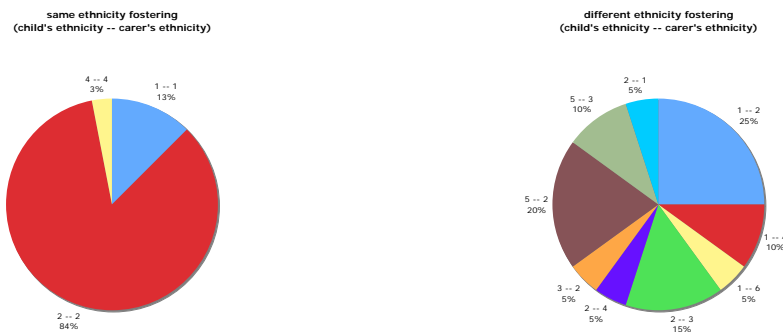
<b>How did you meet the child?</b>	
<i>Categories:</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Met them here in Guinea	60%
I saw them in CI when I was running	16%
We knew each other before.	23%

The hypothesis was that people would be more likely to foster a child from the same (or related) ethnicity. Simply due to the prevalence of one ethnicity in the cross border area, we would assume a certain percentage of pairings to be between carers and children of the most populous group. Indeed, even a random pairing with the same population of carers and children would yield 40% same ethnicity pairings. If we look at the actual data on ethnicity of child-carer pairs,

<sup>3</sup> I excluded cases of what I considered family fostering, but I included one case of schooling fostering where the child ran with his foster carer.

we see that 62% of the time, the child and carer were of the same ethnicity (if ethnicity is grouped as above.)<sup>4</sup> This shows a slight preference for same ethnicity fostering, but not a hard rule. Indeed, some of this preference can be explained by the relative ease of communication between children and carers speaking the same language. However, there was at least one example of a refugee child expressly seeking out a carer of his own ethnicity – Peul. Perhaps for minority ethnicities it is even more important to find someone of one’s own language and culture with whom to connect.

The following graphs break this data into two sets: the first for same ethnicity child-carer pairs (62% of the total) and the second for different ethnicity child-carer pairs (38% of the total).



Most of the fostering pairs occurred between children and carers of the main ethnic group in the area affected (that is, the sending and receiving areas). Among pairs with different ethnic backgrounds, there was no discernible pattern of ethnic preference.

An unexpected piece of data arose from the results, and may be an important question for further research: among carers, 43% had lived for some period of time in Côte D’Ivoire. I am not certain, but this is probably larger than the percentage in the population generally. (12.5% had lived for some period of time in Liberia.) Several people spoke of their experiences as a “stranger” in another country as making them more sympathetic to the refugee children.

<sup>4</sup> Recall that not every pair was complete (that is, sometimes I interviewed the child and not the carer and sometimes a carer but not a child.) This data is based on the 52 complete pairs.

In some ways these findings fly in the face of expectations. The literature points to a conservative extended family and ethnicity system to explain high rates of child fosterage, yet it may be that international travel and relative cosmopolitanism are a better explanation.

If ethnicity is not an explanation, how do carers themselves explain their decision to foster a strange child?

<b>Why did you agree to take on this child?<sup>5</sup></b>	
<b><i>Categories:</i></b>	<b><i>Percent</i></b>
I felt sorry for the child	76%
I knew the child before	15%
Ethnicity (spoke same language)	5%
I've traveled, I know more	3%

Far and away the most popular answer depended on simple human feeling. When people spoke of ethnicity as a reason, it was usually in terms of making communication easier. No one expressed the sense that there was a greater obligation to foster children of one's own ethnicity.

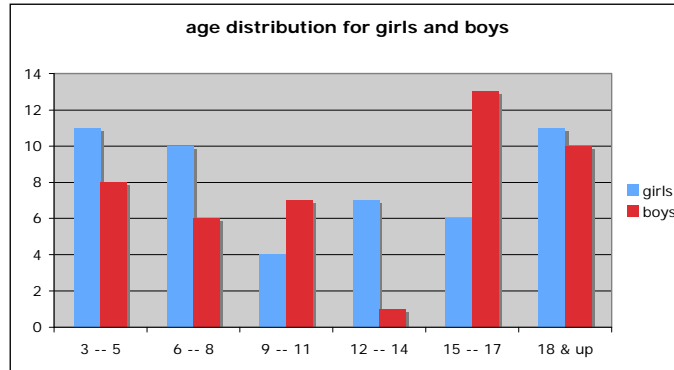
Of course, the hypothesis about the general prevalence of fosterage in West Africa during peacetime is still an important one. However, we would not expect respondents to give that answer. Indeed, more long-term research is needed on the flexibility of West African family structures generally.

### **5.3 Gender**

Another question to be answered is whether and how stranger fostering is different for boys and girls. First, the age distribution for boys and girls in this sample was slightly different.

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<sup>5</sup> Some people gave more than one answer, so I counted some carers twice.



There are more very young girls in the population, and there are more secondary school aged boys. (These create the two humps in the distribution discussed earlier.) It is unclear why the 12 to 14 age bracket is so dominated by girls.

Carers generally did not seem to have different motivations for fostering girls and boys. One carer however said about his decision to foster a girl, “I took the girl because women always remember the good that you do for them. I also thought maybe someday she could marry one of my sons.”

A clear picture of gender differences emerges from looking at children’s responses to “what are your responsibilities around the house?”

**Girls’ household responsibilities (from younger to older):**

- Wash dishes, wash clothes, small housework
- Small work around the house.
- Wash dishes, wash clothes, beat rice, go for wood.
- No hard work, just washing dishes and clothes
- Small housework, draw water, etc.
- Fetch water, wash dishes, find wood.
- No forced labor. I do small work for the lady. When my father was here, he paid for the lodging.
- Get water, find wood, wash dishes (they don’t force me.)
- Work on the farm, small house work
- I go to the farm, get water, wash dishes

- I cook and sell fried bread.
- I work for myself, farming and cooking.
- I work for myself.
- We sell acheke (a cassava based street food) and oranges.
- We go to the farm
- If the wife is tired or not well, I can help with cooking and drawing water.

**Boys' household responsibilities (from younger to older):**

- I go to school, then I work around the house. I clean the yard and put the sheep in the house.
- Draw water, small housework.
- I help my tuteur to work on the farm.
- Small work at home, also work in the bush and at the garage.
- I go to school, and then go to the village to do small work.
- I look for wood to sell for myself, and I give the money to my tuteur's wife.
- They don't force me to work, but I see that the tuteur needs help so I help when I can (farm work, etc.)
- Draw water, find wood, beat rice.
- Farming, any work.
- On Sundays we go in the bush to work. I brush around the house.
- We help the tuteur around the house and brush the yard.
- I help the tuteur with work
- In the morning I go to school. In the evening I work in the shop of clean around the house.
- Go to the farm to get wood to sell for kerosene to study
- Small housework, but no forced work.
- After school I help the tutrice to get water, cut palm kernels, help on the farm.
- After school, I draw water and find wood.
- After school I sit by my tuteur and learn tailoring.
- Different work. After work, my tuteur sends me on errands.

- No work because I'm a student. I clean the yard and take care of my sisters.
- In the morning, I clean the yard, bathe and go to school.

There is some overlap in the tasks (both genders draw water and find wood), but girls are much more likely to be involved in kitchen and laundry work. Boys are more likely to do farm work. Also, the older boys are more likely to have time off from chores due to their status as students. Some of the older girls were already supporting themselves (and perhaps some younger siblings.)

So, there is clearly a gender distinction in labor, but this is certainly true for *all* children in the community. It is unclear if fostered children's labor patterns are significantly different from local children living with their own families. This is a direction for future research.

Finally, as Mann notes, "Studies into the situation of separated children may miss the experience of girls after they reach the age of 12 or 13 years. At this point their needs and experiences may be understood as those of women and not of children" (Mann 2004: 17). In this case, I avoided some of that by asking for people under 18 rather than children. This yielded several "children" with children of their own, some of whom had indeed married their "tuteur." Future research will need to be sensitive to this population of young women.

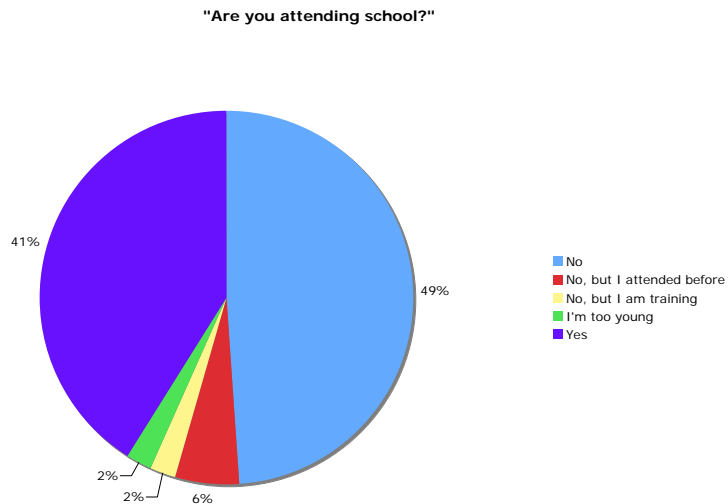
#### 5.4 *Schooling*

Of carers I asked, "Does the child work? Attend school? Take some other training?" (Question 2H). Very few said work or attend training, so the interesting figures here are about schooling.

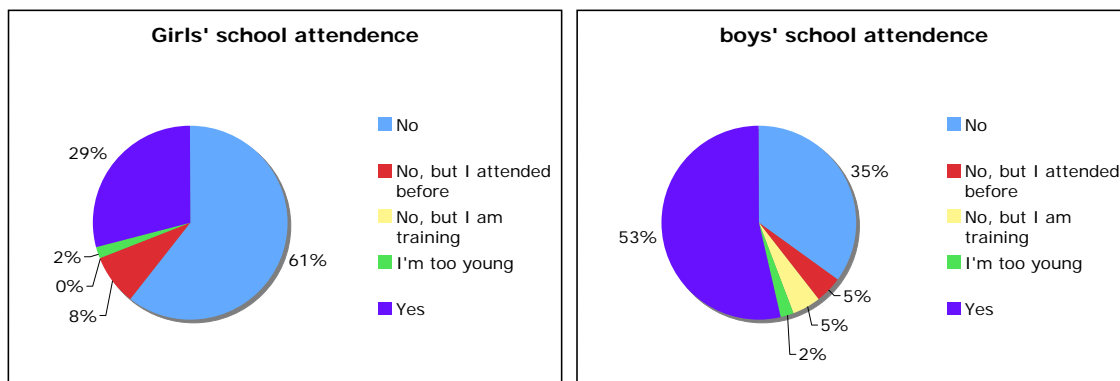
<i>Do your children attend school?</i>	
No.	38%
Yes.	52%
Differential (some yes, some no)	11%

Generally, families that can afford it send all their children (family and not) to school and families that cannot afford it send none of their children to school. There are a handful of families in the middle (11%) who have to choose whom to send, and they generally send their own children first and fostered children second.

According to the children's own answers, 41% are attending school. (The difference between carer and child answers makes sense as carers with the most children might be the most pressed financially and therefore less likely to send their children to school.)



Broken down by gender, it is clear that girls are much less likely than boys to attend school.



It is unclear how far these numbers are from the child population generally in the area. However, The UNICEF Regional Strategy for Child Protection in West and Central Africa (p. 5) reports that between 1995 and 1999 the net enrollment rate in primary school was, for boys, 56%



and, for girls, 41%. The fostered boys are almost at the average rate for the region, whereas the girls are lagging much further behind at 29% school attendance.

Finally, although some boys had found apprenticeships with tailors or mechanics, girls reported no such informal training participation.

### 5.5 *Labor and Local Monitoring*

The question investigated here is whether carers are exploiting their fostered children. Essentially, do they work harder than others? To understand labor issues, I asked, “What are the child’s responsibilities in the house?” of carers and “what are your responsibilities around the house?” of children (Question 2F). I asked this question as a way of getting at exploitative child labor practices. (I couldn’t ask, “Are you exploiting the child?” and expect to get useful results.) Almost everyone answered the same way, with a list of household chores that all children do (sweep the yard, fetch water, fetch fire wood, etc.). For the youngest children, carers would give playful responses like “his only work is to eat.” They would also often make the point that they did not force the children to work. The jobs were divided by gender (see the discussion of gendered labor above), with some overlap for younger children. A few of the older children did contract farm labor to help out with expenses.

This is one area in which the *rural setting* is important. Because there is so much farming, children (mainly boys) can do contract farm labor to make enough money to pay their own school fees if they wish. (One child in the sample left the larger town of Lola to come to the smaller town of Nzoo because he thought it would be easier to support himself.)

I also asked carers “Are you happy with the behavior of the child?” and children “Are you happy with the behavior of your carer” (Question 2G) to get at problems with labor allocation or with overwork. This question was not very revealing, however, as all respondents answered yes. (Of course, one weakness of the method is that I do not know what happened to children who were

unhappy with their living arrangements and left town, or to those who may have already returned to Côte d'Ivoire.)

### ***Local Monitoring of Fosterage***

This section will address whether local mechanisms for monitoring child fosterage are working in the community. In response to the question, “to whom should a child complain if he or she is mistreated?” (Question 5A) almost everyone said some variation of “the chief.” Some carers started by saying, “since I am old, the child could come to me, if we couldn’t solve the problem, we’d go to the chief.” (Two or three, interestingly, all people who had lived in Côte d'Ivoire, said “to the police or to an NGO.”) I am not sure the question really elicited anything interesting, but I think this means that traditional monitoring mechanisms are still in place in Guinée Forestière.

Also interesting, no one mentioned the “Child Protection Committee” (CPC) as a place one should carry a complaint. The CPC as set up by IRC in the area includes the sousprefect, yet no one mentioned him as a person to whom one should take a complaint about the mistreatment of children.

Only one or two cases of possible mistreatment came about through my interview process. One girl had been living with her mother and little sister in a rented room after they ran away together from Côte d'Ivoire. After the mother died, the family said she could stay with them rent free, but put heavy work demands on her. Her boyfriend eventually asked her and her little sister to move in with him to avoid the mistreatment. She and the boyfriend both spoke of the mistreatment after the fact, but I didn’t interview the erstwhile foster family.

To get at general community monitoring I asked whether the community was interested in the welfare of children (Question 5B). Almost everyone said yes, but what else could they say? A

couple of people responded no, saying that when benefits were sent for children, they were kept by the big people in charge.<sup>6</sup>

The Save the Children report (see bibliography, Tolfree) on community care of separated children is in favor of supporting traditional fosterage, but worried about the potential for abuse. Tolfree (2003) recommends vigorous monitoring of fosterage placements and regular follow up with foster families as well as child rights training for carers, children, and the community at large. None of these things were in place in Nzoo, and yet there was very little dissatisfaction reported among children or carers.

As Mann (2004: 18-19) notes, “Interventions to assist separated children must understand and engage with local conceptions of child development and existing childcare arrangements. ... By imposing systems of support that appear to outsiders to fit the local context, but which in reality may not recognize the specific content of existing practices, agencies can undermine traditional support mechanisms for children.”

## **5.6 Family Tracing**

Overwhelmingly, neither carers nor children knew the location of foster children’s parents or family. When asked, “do you know the location of the child’s parents or other family,” almost all carers said “No.” Even some of those who knew the child before the conflict had lost track of the parents. (The percentage saying something other than “No” is 2%). Of course, I excluded from the sample anyone who was living with family. One boy met some extended family for the first time when he arrived in Nzoo.

Furthermore, almost everyone said “yes” to “would you like help finding the family.” (Though it is frankly hard to imagine anyone saying no to an offer of help.) Future researchers should

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<sup>6</sup> I believe they were referring to a distribution of aid through the sousprefect since that was the only distribution for refugees I heard of in that community. Some may have also been referring to an earlier problem with distribution of World Food Program food at the school for which a headmaster had been sacked

find a better way to ask the question in order to get at “how important is it to you that the child’s family be found?”

The interesting results came when I asked, “If the family is found, would you prefer the child stay here or go to the family?” (Question 3C). The carers gave four types of responses, though often an answer would contain several of the responses. I categorized based on who seemed to have the final decision.

Go to the family	16%
Stay here (either because it’s too dangerous there, or because I’ve grown used to the child, or because I want the child to continue schooling)	33%
The family will come and we’ll discuss it. It’s up to the family.	27%
It’s up to the child	24%

The children answered more simply, based on their own desires (to continue schooling) or fears (of war in their country). 22% said they would like to return to their parents, 78% said they would like to stay where they were. A selection of children’s own statements give a sense of what they would prefer:

**If your family are located, would you stay here or go there?**

- I’d like to go back to my family.
- I’d prefer to stay here rather than return to CI
- We would like to go back to our parents in CI
- I’d like to stay here. I’m afraid of the war.
- If they find my parents, my parents will come and tell my tuteur thank you.
- I’d be doing the same work with my brother that I’m doing here, so I’d rather stay here.
- I’d like to stay here but occasionally go see other members of the family.
- If they find my brothers, I’d prefer to stay here if there is any training for me.
- I’d like to stay here. I don’t know my parents that well.
- My sister might come and help me.

- I'd prefer to stay here.
- I'd like to stay with my tutrice.
- I just want to stay here. I don't want to go back to CI. The two strange children should stay with me.
- I would go back to them.
- Since I'm in school here, I'd like to tell my parents where I am.
- I'd like to stay here
- I wouldn't want to go back to CI now because of the war.
- I want to continue my schooling here.
- Since I'm doing well in school, I'd like to stay here. If I find my family, I'll tell them I'm attending school here.
- If I get money for my siblings to go to school, I'd like them to stay here.
- I'd like to continue my studies here. I'd like my parents to come here.
- I'd rather stay here and go to school if possible
- Now I'm going to school and playing football. I don't want to go back to war, so I'd tell my people to come visit me.
- I'd rather stay with my tutrice to continue my schooling.
- I'd like to stay here with my tutrice.
- I'd like to stay here and go to school.
- I'd rather stay here. Liberia is not yet safe.
- I'd like to go back to my parents.
- If there's still war in CI, I'll stay here for schooling.
- I'd like to stay here.
- I'd like to stay here for training because there's still war there. My father can come visit me here.
- I would visit them for breaks, but I'd like to continue school or training here.
- I'd like aid to find them but I'd stay here and finish school.
- I would be happy, but I'd like to stay here to finish schooling.
- I'd like to go back to live with my parents because I miss them.
- I'd like to stay with my tuteur and then they'll come visit me.

- I'd like to stay here and continue school, but I'd just like to see them.
- I'd like to stay here.
- I'm very happy to be here today. If you find my mother I'll be very happy. I'd like for my mother to come here and I'd finish school and help her.
- I would live with my father.
- I'd like to stay with my tutrice because she takes good care of me.
- I'd like to stay here and go to school.

These answers also call into question relief agencies' belief that the best outcome for refugee children is to reunify them with parents or other family. Perhaps it is in the child's best interest in these cases to support them in functioning fosterage arrangements.

***Child Protection Agencies:***

I asked, "Are you registered with any child protection NGOs or UN agencies, here or at the border?" (Question 4A) and got the following answers:

<b>Are you registered with any agencies?</b>	
Yes, with the local NGO <sup>7</sup> or the sousprefect	18%
Yes, with an international NGO	11%
No	71%

A few of the 11% registered with international NGOs received some assistance at one point or another (a few Liberians had lived in camps for a while. Ivorians received blankets, or transportation. More likely, they received nothing and could not remember with whom they registered.)

Among the 71% majority who did not register with anyone, the reasons given for not registering are:

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<sup>7</sup> A local NGO with almost no financial resources (Groupe des Déshérités Sinistres (G/DSI)) had already begun registering people, though it was not clear what they were offering people in return; and indeed, they continued to register people during the work as we uncovered new cases together.

<b>Why didn't you register?</b>	
We passed through the bush	35%
No one was registering at the border	27%
The parent or child was sick or upset	15%
I thought it was for a short time	8%
I don't know	4%

These figures are rather troubling, but give some sense of why, at least in one location, there is such a large unregistered refugee population.

## 5.7 Conclusions:

With regard to the main research questions, which were confirmed and which denied?

- 1) *Size of population:* At least in one location, there is a large number of informally fostered transnational child refugees. Most likely, similar populations exist along the border area.
- 2) *Ethnicity:* Carers were only slightly more likely to care for children of their same ethnicity. Most frequently, they took in strange children out of human feeling. To be investigated further are the importance of carers' international experience and the importance of flexible family arrangements generally.
- 3) *Gender:* Girls in the population are attending school at levels much lower than the regional average, whereas boys in the sample are only slightly below the regional average in school attendance. Carers foster girls and boys in comparable numbers.
- 4) *Child labor and monitoring:* The refugee children are doing comparable work to the non-refugee children in the community (though more comparative work is needed). Most fostered children are happy with their circumstances. Both adults and children said they would take a complaint about abuse to the local chief rather than to a formal child protection committee.
- 5) *Family tracing:* nearly every child in the sample did not know the location of his or her family, and said they would like help finding them. However, most said that if their family were found, they would prefer to stay in Guinée with their foster family.



**Informal settlement is working, but there is the risk that children will fall through the cracks.**

There is an impressive child protection capacity in the area. Every child I interviewed found someone to care for them within a few days. A child protection agency could not have done better at matching up children and foster parents in the same period of time. Furthermore, the children and the carers are generally content with their living arrangements.

Refugee children are well integrated into the community. I saw very little differentiation between refugee children and local children. The refugee children seem to be well integrated into the community. There are similar results for boys and girls. There are similar levels of child labor for both local and refugee children.

However, these children, technically unregistered refugees, separated children, are receiving none of the benefits that other separated children and unaccompanied minors are receiving. Without assistance, they will be absorbed into the population and most likely never find their families again.

## 6. Recommendations

The scope of the study is too small to serve as the basis for any sweeping recommendations. Nevertheless, I present below some preliminary recommendations for research and for policy.

### Directions for Future Research

1. Most important is to expand the geographical range of the study, and conduct a region-wide situation analysis. This could be combined with an effort by local child protection NGOs to register separated and unaccompanied children in the region. One could use standard geographical random sampling or directed sampling based on whether the goal is to get a snapshot of the situation in the whole region, or to most quickly identify the largest population.
2. It is important to focus on adolescent girls because in their case the line between child and woman is sometimes blurred. Also, it is clear from the results on school attendance that the girls in this study are less well-served by fosterage than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the line between tuteur and boyfriend was found to be unclear at times. Investigating girls' trajectories into and out of fostering arrangements would require some finesse and most likely working with a female research team.
3. It would be useful to conduct similar research with the biological children in foster families to compare their workload and schooling rates with fostered children. For future research, it would be good to interview family children and fostered children in the same family to see if they have equal workload.
4. The tracing results are somewhat surprising. That is, it is unexpected that children would be so nonchalant about returning to their parents or other family. More anthropological research is needed to try to understand children's own care strategies, and the local meaning of family.
5. A challenge for future research is to think of better ways of uncovering potential abuse. This means finding a better way to ask the questions, but it might also mean looking in other places than existing fosterage situations. This might also mean looking for cases, perhaps among street

children, where children were unhappy with their arrangements and fled. I might also be useful to look for children who are back in Côte d'Ivoire after a period in Guinée (if possible). To evaluate the local monitoring system, we should investigate how hard it would be for a child to approach the chief in cases of abuse. We could perhaps also look for cases where a chief successfully intervened in an abusive fosterage relationship.

6. For the long term, it will be necessary to document the longitudinal effects of child fosterage. (For example, there was a question about different outcomes for children who fled with people from Côte d'Ivoire versus those who met people in Guinea. The current study cannot yet address that question. We will need some long-term research.) As Tolfree (2003: 16) notes, “there have been no studies into the long-term impact of fostering in situations of armed conflict and forced migration...: in particular, we need to know more about how fostered children, disaggregated by gender, fare during their adolescence and how they, and their carers, cope with their entry into adulthood, raising questions of marriage, economic self-sufficiency and inheritance. It is also important to know the extent to which community-based support structures continue to provide effective monitoring and support to young people and their carers.”

### **Programming Recommendations**

Both children and adults asked for two things: assistance with education, and family tracing.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding education, it seems to me counterproductive to provide special incentives for refugees. Rather, a policy of assistance for education generally seems to make the most sense. It can certainly be argued that the border area has had to deal with an influx of school-aged children and may need extra assistance to education. (I held interviews with the directors of the secondary and primary schools in Nzoo to determine their ideas about what assistance was most needed.)

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<sup>8</sup> At the end of the questionnaire, I wanted to give people a chance to bring up any other issue I might have missed. The responses to question 6 turned into a forum for people to ask for help. The main help asked for was help with the child's schooling; then, family tracing, food, and other assistance.

Regarding family tracing, I must stress that for the most part they were interested in knowing the location of family members, but not necessarily in returning to Côte d'Ivoire. Many wanted to remain with their foster families and continue their education until their home was safe. It may be the case that it is not in the best interests of every child to be reunified. In discussion with protection staff in Guinea, the preliminary programming recommendation is to continue searching for these children and register them via local child protection committees.

There is a need to work more at community level, and to stop expecting that child refugees should all be in camps. This means reviewing even so-called community based NGO structures (such as child protection committees).

There is already an impressive child protection capacity in border communities. One of the principles of a local solution is the fact that most foster carers (76%) took in a child simply because they felt sorry for a child in crisis and felt it was the right thing to do. What could be a stronger basis for programming? In Nzoo, with no external help, a very effective child protection system was put into place. It is clear that in our efforts to design programs for the benefit of these children, it would be foolish to ignore the communities' existing heartfelt and generous care for the young strangers in their midst.

## 7. Appendices

### 7.1 Appendix: List of Key Informants Interviewed

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position and Organization</b>	<b>Location</b>
Stephen Grunbaum	GTZ	Conakry
Amadou Bory Jalloh	IRC	Conakry
Jeremy Konyndyk	Country Director, ARC	Conakry
Alpha Jalloh	Country Director, Sabou Guinée	Conakry
Giulio Gugliuzza	Responsable Agence, ICRC	Conakry
Eva Ahlen	UNHCR	Conakry
Rose-Anne Papavero	Child Protection, UNICEF	Conakry
Ibrahima Yansaneh	Child Protection, UNICEF	Conakry
Gaetan Duhamel	UNICEF, Nzérékoré office	Nzérékoré
Alpha Diallo	Sabou Guinée	Nzérékoré
Tia Vincent	CBEC (Comité pour le Bien Etre Communautaire)	Nzérékoré
Oumar Guissé	Inspecteur Régional des Affaires Sociales	Nzérékoré
Louis Togba Guémou	IRC	Nzérékoré
Mark Menjor	Program Manager, UAMs, IRC	Nzérékoré
Monemou Nyankoye	GACoBO (Groupement des animateurs Communautaires pour le Bonne Oeuvre)	Nzérékoré
Olivier Beer	UNHCR	Nzérékoré
Alpha Kabiné Bayo	G/DSI (Groupe des Déshérités Sinistres)	Nzérékoré
Lah Georges Zogbelemou	G/DSI (Groupe des Déshérités Sinistres)	Nzoo
Zorokis Simmy	Principal, College de Nzoo	Nzoo
Gilles Doré	Directeur, Ecole Primaire Nzoo Centre	Nzoo

7.2 Appendix:

**Interview protocol for CARERS**

**Serial number:** \_\_\_\_\_

General information

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. gender \_\_\_\_\_
3. nationality \_\_\_\_\_
4. ethnicity (tribe) \_\_\_\_\_
5. location of interview \_\_\_\_\_
6. date and time of interview \_\_\_\_\_
7. language of interview \_\_\_\_\_

1. Background

- A. Where are you from?
- B. How long have you been here?
- C. Aside from here, have you ever lived anywhere else?

2. Living Arrangement

- A. How many total people are living in your household?
- B. Of that total, how many are below eighteen, and how many are above eighteen?
- C. Of that total, how many are your own family members, and how many are strangers?
- D. How did you meet the child you are caring for?
- E. Why did you agree to take on this child (ethnicity)?
- F. What are the child's responsibilities in the household?
- G. Are you happy with the behavior of your foster child? (If not, why not?)
- H. Does the child work? Attend school? Take some other training? (If so, who pays?)

3. Family Tracing

- A. Do you know the location of the child's parents?
- B. Do you know the location of any other member of the child's family?
  - a. If so, would you like assistance reunifying them?
  - b. If not, would you like help finding them?
- C. If the child's family were found, would you prefer that the child be reunified with family or stay here with you?

4. Child Protection NGOs

- A. Is the child registered with any Child Protection NGOs or UN agencies, here or at the border? If so, whom, when, where? If not, why not?
- B. Have you received any help from them? If not, why not?

5. Local monitoring of fosterage

- A. If a local child is mistreated by his or her guardians, what can he or she do? To whom should he or she go to complain?
- B. Are the members of this community generally interested in the welfare of children?

6. Anything else?

Is there anything else you would like to say that hasn't been covered in this interview?

7.3 Appendix:

**Interview protocol for CHILDREN**

**Serial number:** \_\_\_\_\_

General information

1. age \_\_\_\_\_
  2. gender \_\_\_\_\_
  3. nationality \_\_\_\_\_
  4. ethnicity (tribe) \_\_\_\_\_
  5. location of interview \_\_\_\_\_
  6. date and time of interview \_\_\_\_\_
  7. language of interview \_\_\_\_\_
- 

1. Background

- A. Where are you from?
- B. How did you come here? Why did you come to this location in particular?
- C. How long have you been here?
- D. Do you feel welcome by the community?

2. Living Arrangement

- A) With whom are you living now?
- B) How did you meet each other?
- C) What are your responsibilities in the household?
- D) Are you happy with your foster family? (If not, why not?)
- E) Are you attending school or other training?  
(If yes, who is paying your fees?)  
(If no, would you like to attend school or other training?)

3. Family Tracing

- A. Do you know the location of your parents?
- B. Do you know the location of any other members of your family? If so, which family members and where are they?
- C. If not, would you like help finding them?
- D. If your family were found, would you like to return to them or stay here?



4. Child Protection NGOs

- A. Are you registered with any child protection NGO or UN agency here or at the border? If so, whom, when, where?
- B. If so, have you received any help from them?
- C. If not, why not?

5. Local monitoring of fosterage

- A. If a local child is mistreated by his or her guardians, what can he or she do? To whom should he or she go to complain?
- B. Are the members of this community generally interested in the welfare of children?

6. Anything else?

Is there anything else you would like to say that hasn't been covered in this interview?

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