Working with Separated Children

A field guide

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Save the Children

Acknowledgements

Contents

Mary's story

Name   **Mary**
Age   **9 years**
Sex   **Female**
Father **Killed on 27 January**
Mother **Fate not known**

I was sleeping. I heard my father shouting and hitting me to wake me up. When I opened my eyes, my mother was not there, only my father and my sister Adut, who is two years old. I could hear a lot of noise, like that of thunder. I saw my father lift Adut, and then he told me, 'Let's go.' He was directing me: 'Go left, turn right, run.' I asked him, 'Father, what is happening?' He told me, 'Keep running and don't ask any more questions.' I asked him again, 'Where is mother?' He said, 'I will tell you tomorrow.' While I was running in front of him I suddenly heard a noise, and when I turned round I saw my father on the ground. My sister was on the ground crying very loudly. My father was breathing very quickly; I tried to call him, but he was not answering me. People were passing, running, shouting; some were even stepping over us. My father was no longer breathing nor moving. I tried to call him; he did not answer me again. I did not know what to do; Adut was crying, my father was not answering me. I remained near my father until 7 am when some soldiers came and told me that my father was not alive any more. They asked me to follow them. I tried to carry Adut; I could not, so I was left. Another group of soldiers came and asked me why I was waiting near the body. I told them, 'My father is killed, my mother has disappeared and I'm unable to carry my sister.' One of them came and put Adut on his shoulders and asked me to go in front of him. I left my father there alone. My father used to help us very much. He used to buy us sweets, meat and clothes. We walked for two days without eating any food until we reached the camp. We were given some boiled grains; I ate some, but my sister could not eat. When she was very hungry she was crying, but there was nothing to give her. After two days she was no longer crying; she became sick and thin and died later on. Nobody bothered to bury her. Her body was thrown away; I am trying to chase away the birds but in vain. I'm left alone, and I do not know what to do.

Introduction

Children become separated from their families in many different emergency situations. Although this guide is in part a response to the situation that arose in the Great Lakes region after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, it is not solely concerned with children separated by conflict. In famine and natural disasters, the principles of policy co-ordination, prevention of separation and community-based support we describe are equally relevant. The significance of the Rwanda crisis was that it drew many agencies into work with children whose parents had been killed or who had been separated from their families. Some of these agencies had no previous experience of this kind of work and were unfamiliar with its basic concepts; most others had to bring in staff who may have been experienced in emergencies but were new to work with separated children.

Apart from the problem of finding and training field staff, the Great Lakes emergency caused agencies to look more carefully at some of the generic problems that face children in all emergency situations: for example, how families deal with the poverty and destitution caused by the emergency, and how relief interacts with informal systems of care and social support. In writing this guide, we have tried to clarify the basic principles that should guide agencies who have to deal with these issues.

The crisis in the Great Lakes was on such a scale that the larger and more experienced agencies — such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Save the Children — had to find new ways of collaborating and of co-ordinating their work with separated children. Although no two emergencies are ever the same, the basic principles for collaboration that emerged from the Great Lakes region are highly relevant elsewhere and have already influenced work in other regions, notably West Africa, and in famine situations such as South Sudan, 1998. This guide describes those principles and the roles and responsibilities of the agencies that take part.

Finally, many agencies working with children separated by emergencies have been drawn into broader social welfare issues in the post-emergency period. This field guide deals with the transition from emergency intervention to longer-term programming, and the strategic issues that agencies must consider in making this transition. More specifically, in post-conflict work, children separated by conflict are likely to be part of a far larger group of children who are separated from their parents for social and economic reasons.

A Meeting both specialist and generalist needs

Family tracing and reunification programmes are complex, multi-layered initiatives. To work well, they need to be managed by senior staff who have a sound understanding of basic principles and are able to take part in an informed dialogue with technical staff in the field. Equally, field staff need to have a good grasp of the larger programme into which their particular piece of work fits, and they also need to maintain a high level of professionalism in the areas for which they are responsible.

This guide is therefore aimed at a mixed audience of generalist programme managers and senior technical staff. They might include:

- Senior managers within international agencies whose mandates cover work with separated children (ICRC, UNHCR, Unicef) and within larger NGOs

- Senior field-based managers of agencies whose programmes include work with separated children

- Senior staff of government departments that have responsibility for family tracing and reunification

- National and international staff of NGOs and government agencies working with separated children

It is not easy for one book to satisfy the needs of both generalists and specialists. However, experience in the Great Lakes region and elsewhere has convinced us of the importance of taking on the task, despite the risks.

Wherever possible, detailed information has been kept to an absolute minimum; in-depth information on all the subjects covered in the guide can be found in the training manual that is published alongside this volume (the relevant passages are cross-referenced in the text). For ease of reference, we have begun each chapter by indicating the main target audience.

The broad aims of the guide are:

- To give an overview of work with separated children to managers in national and international agencies who may not have previous experience of the subject

- To show staff working at project level how their work relates to other aspects of family tracing and reunification

- To help the staff of government ministries develop long-term strategies for: preventing separation; managing family tracing and reunification programmes; supporting alternatives to institutional care; and developing broader child protection systems

- To show how work with separated children fits in with other aspects of emergency programming, such as disaster preparedness and post-conflict rehabilitation

- To clarify the underlying principles of work with separated children that need to be incorporated in all programmes and to explain why certain kinds of response should be avoided

- By spreading a better understanding of roles and responsibilities, to encourage collaboration between government, UN and non-governmental agencies. Recent experience has shown that a lack of co-ordination between the agencies giving direct assistance — food, medical aid, shelter, water and sanitation — can undermine efforts to keep children with their families and communities

There is no such thing as an off-the-shelf programme for work with separated children, and this book does not give a blueprint that will suit every situation. Instead, it sets out the fundamental principles that the international community has agreed should guide activities within and between agencies; it also looks at practical problems of implementation.

B The contents in detail

CHAPTER ONE **When an emergency begins**

Work with separated children is generally part of a wider relief effort that may involve the provision of food, medical help and other services. However, the way in which this relief is distributed can sometimes have a negative effect on children, causing further separations. For this reason, co-ordination, information exchange and coherence at policy level are vital. There should always be close collaboration with agencies providing other forms of assistance.

Since agencies intervening in emergencies need to bear in mind the long-term social policy implications of their actions, they should also work with local groups and local government right from the start.

CHAPTER TWO **Emergency interventions**

The objectives of emergency interventions are to prevent further separations, to get children already separated back to their families as quickly as possible, and to protect children who remain separated. Tracing work in emergencies may have to be adapted to suit urgent needs; for example, some procedures may have to be simplified. Nevertheless, protection of the child must always be the paramount consideration. This chapter looks at the principles of work in emergencies, outlines the resource needs and summarises implementation procedures.

CHAPTER THREE **Moving from emergency interventions to longer-term programming**

This chapter is for NGOs that are implementing tracing programmes. Many of the principles underlying these programmes apply equally to emergencies and to longer-term work. Agencies should therefore consider from the outset the broader issues of child welfare that arise from their programmes, thinking strategically not only about the manner of implementation but also about eventual phasing-out or handover. This is likely to involve collaborating with local authorities and governments, and developing local capacity from an early stage.

Within this overall structure, the chapter looks at programme implementation, discusses practical management dilemmas and provides practice guidelines on administration, caseload management , staffing and finally managing information systems.

CHAPTER FOUR **The IDTR system**

This chapter looks at the core activities of tracing programmes known as IDTR: Identification, Documentation (including very young children and children with disabilities that prevent them from giving information about themselves), Tracing and Reunification (including special cases such as former child soldiers). Alternative long-term solutions are discussed, together with procedures for follow-up.

CHAPTER FIVE **Interim care and placement**

Despite efforts to prevent it, children do become separated from their families, and until they can be reunited with them they must be cared for. The agencies and governments providing care will have to make choices about how they do this.

Although no solution can be right in every situation, the various options for interim care are described, together with what is known about their advantages and disadvantages.

CHAPTER SIX **Working with separated refugee children**

Tracing work with separated children in refugee and displaced populations presents special challenges, repatriation being one of the most critical. Whether this is voluntary or forced, there should be adequate preparation for the movement and return of separated children. Separated children in foster families are particularly vulnerable to being abandoned at this time; although this cannot always be prevented, steps can be taken to protect children who are at risk.

CHAPTER SEVEN **After reunification and reintegration**

Children often return home — or are reunified with family members — to find themselves in new and difficult situations. This chapter reviews problems of reintegration and broader issues of protection and follow-up; various approaches, including community monitoring and work with government social welfare departments, are discussed.

Agencies working in tracing need to take a long-term view so that appropriate support for local structures can be included in programming. They can support the efforts of governments to co-ordinate work with children in need of protection by analysing the nature of the problems facing children in the communities where they are working, and by increasing the flow of information that government needs for planning and policy development.

CHAPTER EIGHT **Information systems and technology**

Information systems are fundamental to tracing: they relate to the internal systems of an agency and to the systems that enable the sharing between agencies of information necessary for tracing. This chapter examines the issues that need to be taken into account when setting up systems.

Technology can play an important part in tracing, but there are limits to what it can achieve. It should also be appropriate to the situation rather than becoming an end in itself. A brief summary of available technology is included.

For an online version of this book, visit the Save the children website at http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/onlinepubs

1 When an emergency begins

This chapter is mainly for staff who have not previously been involved at management level in emergencies, or who do not have experience of emergencies where work with separated children has been part of the overall response.

It explains the general principles that should underpin work with separated children in emergencies, including the need for inter-agency collaboration and for links with other aspects of the relief programme.

Children are particularly vulnerable in emergencies. Those who become separated from their family or their usual carer require immediate assistance, for the following reasons:

- To establish their identity, so that early action can be taken to reunite them
- To give them care and protection in the meantime
- To safeguard their basic human rights

To achieve these aims, agencies planning to work with separated children must have in readiness a strategy for emergency interventions. Being prepared can:

- Reduce the number of separations
- Mitigate the distress of children already separated
- Facilitate early reunifications with family or carers

In practice, preparedness means (i) having trained and experienced staff who can be called on at short notice, (ii) having access to the material resources necessary for early intervention, and (iii) having a contingency plan. A major effort may be needed to convince agencies and donors of the importance of investing in preparedness.

Agencies likely to be involved in emergency interventions with separated children should:

- Undertake a situation analysis
- Devise a strategy for intervention
- Take steps to co-ordinate their response with other agencies

1A The importance of inter-agency co-ordination

The importance of inter-agency co-ordination is emphasised throughout this guide. Although formal mechanisms for inter-agency co-ordination in work with separated children are as yet in their infancy, historically the ICRC and the lead UN agencies have usually initiated discussions with NGOs, sometimes leading to formal collaboration.

In complex humanitarian emergencies, which may involve both famine and conflict

all the key agencies will need to work together, co-ordinating their policies and activities and exchanging information as the situation develops.

Co-ordination is necessary because:

- More than one agency may be working with separated children, and unless their activities are co-ordinated, work will be duplicated, information may not be exchanged and the variety of different policies may create confusion. None of this will be in the best interests of the children concerned

- In complex emergencies, work with separated children will take place in the context of a wider relief effort involving food aid, medical services and other forms of assistance; such work should therefore be incorporated within an integrated plan of action

- The way in which relief is distributed can cause new separations. A well-drafted intervention strategy can reduce the risk of this happening

- Emergency interventions with separated children may have long-term implications for the host country's social policy; collaboration with local organisations and national government is essential from the start

The following sections give an overview of the actions agencies should be prepared to undertake in the early stages of an emergency:

1B Analysing the situation

It should not be assumed that interventions for separated children will be needed in every emergency. However, investigations should always be made at the earliest opportunity, and a long-term view should be taken.

> **In former Yugoslavia there was an inadequate response, owing to inaccurate assumptions about the scale of the problem; the result has been that, after several years, there is no record of what has happened to many children. Similarly, despite the fact that there had been conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone since the early 1990s, regional co-ordination in family tracing work in West Africa did not get under way until 1996.**

The first step in responding to an emergency is to carry out an initial situation analysis. Specific problems facing children, including family separation, should be identified as part of this situation analysis.

The people carrying out the situation analysis must have experience of work in emergencies and a good knowledge of the country or region. Their professional competence should cover the core areas outlined below and they should work as a team to produce a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the emergency on the affected community and the needs arising from this.

Their report should cover the nature and scale of the emergency, likely developments and immediate priorities. The terms of reference (TOR) for a situation analysis will vary according to the circumstances, but problems specifically affecting children must not be neglected. The analysis should include:

- Basic subsistence, nutrition and health

- Child protection

- Separated children

1 Basic subsistence, nutrition and health

This should include:

- Impact of the emergency on food production, the functioning of markets and distribution

- Problems of subsistence that may particularly affect women and children: for example, the loss of access to land because of inheritance laws, or the loss of income or productive capacity resulting from men being conscripted into the army

Access to food relief

The analysis should look at the accessibility and appropriateness of food relief, and in particular at any distribution systems that may disadvantage certain types of household. What impact, if any, is relief having on family separation?

There should be recommendations regarding the need for a nutritional and food security assessment, perhaps using the food economy approach described in Information Sheet 6 on page 113.

Emergency health needs

This should identify available health provision and include problems specifically facing adolescents, children and women — such as gynaecological services for child and adult victims of rape — in addition to standard maternal and child health care etc. See, for example, *The Sphere Project: humanitarian charter and minimum standards*.

2 Child protection

The situation analysis should cover the key protection issues facing children: military recruitment, sexual and physical abuse, involvement in dangerous or exploitative labour etc. Have changes occurred in the local structures that would normally be protective of children?

The analysis should also consider the effectiveness of national and international organisations with a child-protection mandate, such as Unicef, UNHCR and ICRC. To what extent are they able to function in the emergency?

3 Separated children

To assess whether a family tracing and reunification programme is needed, the team must establish the following:

- Is this an emergency in which significant numbers of children have become separated from their families?

- If so, what are the circumstances in which separations are taking place? Is rapid action likely to prevent further separations?

- How are the affected populations dealing with the care of separated children? Is outside intervention necessary?

- What procedures are already in place for identifying and documenting separated children for tracing purposes? Are additional resources needed?

- Is there any indication that separations on a significant scale may happen in the future?

- How has the emergency affected government departments responsible for child welfare and protection? Is there a policy on separated children, and is it being implemented?

- Are local and international military personnel involved in identifying and placing separated children?

- Which of the following are present in the affected areas?

    – Government social welfare agencies
    – National/international NGOs
    – International organisations eg Unicef, UNHCR, ICRC
    – Community organisations, such as churches

- Are any of these organisations currently involved with separated children? Do they have the capacity to extend their work to include separated children?

4 Education in emergency situations

The situation analysis should also look at how basic learning and structured activities might be maintained for all children within the affected communities.

5 The media

The impact of media reporting on child-related relief activities — such as a proliferation of orphanages, or public pressure to evacuate children — should be assessed, and appropriate responses should be included in the emergency strategy.

6 Political, historical and military context

The team carrying out the emergency situation analysis should have access to all current analysis and information, either through agency headquarters or regional offices. Team members should also be familiar with the main sources of information at country and regional level.

For notes on security, work in insecure areas, interviewing key informants etc, see page 26 of this field guide and pages 62-68 of the training manual. Information from the situation analysis and assessment of children's needs should be shared with other agencies. It is good practice to present the findings to inter-agency groups.

7 The risk of creating new separations

The situation analysis should indicate the scale of needs and may make recommendations for programme activities. But it must be recognised that any intervention — in particular, targeting assistance to separated children — runs the risk of creating further separations (see Chapter Two), so the decision to act should always be carefully considered. Ensuring that food and other relief supplies are distributed equitably and that the poorest households have access to them can be the best way of keeping children with their families, or at least with neighbours who know who they are and where they come from.

1C Devising a strategy

The following sections are mainly for agencies that have not previously worked with separated children. They outline the basic principles of inter-agency work to develop an effective system for preventing further separations and for tracing and reuniting separated children. Unless these basic principles are understood and followed, resources will be wasted and children will be exposed to avoidable separation and distress.

All programmes concerned with separated children should fit into an overall operational framework and observe the principles of collaboration and co-ordination outlined in this chapter.

The detailed content of the strategy will depend upon external circumstances: the following account reflects the experience of recent emergencies in the Great Lakes, West Africa and the former Yugoslavia.

1 The operational framework and the individual responsibilities of all the parties involved should be clearly defined

Agreement must be reached on an overall framework for inter-agency collaboration. The roles and responsibilities of the different parties — UN agencies, ICRC, IFRC (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), NGOs — must be established within this framework: in some emergency situations, Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) covering the activities of participating agencies have been signed. These must be carefully drafted, and should be both clear and concise.

> **An MOU drawn up in Bukavu, Zaïre, was five pages long and very detailed, which made it difficult to use in practice. By contrast, an agreement drawn up in Rwanda between the government of Rwanda, SCF (UK) and Unicef was much shorter and became a useful working document.**

Provided there is a co-ordinated approach to tracing, responsibility for work at the local level can be shared among many organisations, both local and international.

Agreements between agencies are usually made at field level but may be supported by regional or global agreements.

2 A contingency plan for separated children should be drawn up

Experience has shown that where agencies collaborate to draw up contingency plans, far more can be achieved. The plan will need to address:

- Ways of preventing separation (see page 30)
- Identification (see page 48)
- Documentation (see page 49)
- Tracing and reunification (see page 50)
- Care and protection (see page 58)

A working group, including where possible representatives of the national

government and of all agencies working with separated children, should be set up to prepare the contingency plan.

The group should agree on the language it will work in and on a deadline for finalising the plan. Plans for work with separated children should be drawn up at the same time as plans for other sectors (such as food, health and shelter) and incorporated into the broader operational plans. These sector plans should not be drawn up in isolation; each must take account of all the others.

All agencies working with separated children in the field should collaborate in this work (see page 93).

3 Where separations cross national borders, a regional structure for the programme must be agreed

This will require a system for exchanging information within and across borders; a schedule of regular regional meetings should also be drawn up.

UNHCR, Unicef, ICRC and the major international NGOs involved at field level, supported by regional office or HQ, are usually the key agencies in developing a regional structure (see page 22).

4 Permission to carry out relief activities must be negotiated

These negotiations will normally take place at local level, but international mediation may be needed to support local efforts.

UN agencies, ICRC or international NGOs will undertake these negotiations

5 Resources must be mobilised

Requests for emergency funding and resources (materials and equipment) will have to be submitted to donors. Agencies may be able to share emergency supplies. Some donors also encourage joint funding applications.

Everyone involved in work with separated children should exchange information about the resources available to them and requests that have been made. This would usually be done through an inter-agency forum.

6 National legislation on child welfare should be reviewed

Special attention should be given to national legislation and to how, for example, legislation relating to fostering applies in times of emergency. Agencies should work with the national government to disseminate appropriate child welfare policies (where these exist) and to begin the process of drafting new legislation (where this is needed).

To avoid duplication and confusion, there should be transparency about the technical and material support being provided to government. This will be most effective if it is part of a well-planned process of capacity building, with a view to handing the caseload over when it reaches a manageable size.

Unicef and international NGOs, working with government agencies and/or local organisations, should take a lead in this.

7 Advocacy and lobbying

The special needs of children in emergencies should be publicised at local and international level. Agencies must ensure that information and analysis from the field is available to support this work and that any exploitative and misleading reporting is counterbalanced by advocacy for prevention of separation, tracing, reunification and, wherever possible, community-based care. All media activity should encourage a culture of collaboration.

1D Co-ordinating the response

Implementing an agreed strategy requires a response that:

- Includes all the parties working with separated children
- Involves other sectors — such as health, food and education — whose activities are relevant to separated children

Lack of co-ordination can lead to:

- Inappropriate interventions
- The duplication of structures
- The duplication of activities
- Gaps in provision
- Responses not in the best interests of the children (such as setting up orphanages)

In most complex emergencies, the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) will appoint a Humanitarian Co-ordinator. The post holder would normally be the resident representative of the United Nations Development Programme, who in nearly all cases also has the title of resident co-ordinator of the UN system in the country.

Unicef will normally be responsible for co-ordinating work with internally-displaced children and UNHCR for work with refugee children; an NGO may be designated 'lead agency' for implementing this work.

If the ICRC is present and carrying out tracing, it will generally centralise all information relating to separated children.

In reality, however, during the very early stages of an emergency there may be little structure to the work being done with separated children. Different agencies will be active, and the emphasis will change as new players come and go. Systems for co-ordination must be geared up at the earliest opportunity and agencies must commit themselves to making these systems work. Failure to co-ordinate or collaborate often reflects a lack of confidence or experience on the part of the individuals or agencies involved. A strong inter-agency structure can help to overcome this.

Although every emergency is different, the key principles of co-ordinating a tracing programme at country level are as follows:

1 There must be mutual understanding of the roles and mandates of the agencies involved

This can be promoted by distributing relevant information (see Information Sheet 1

on page 101) in the appropriate languages and by organising meetings and workshops.

UN agencies, the ICRC and international NGOs have a key role in this work.

2 Agencies must work within an agreed programme strategy: all activities should conform to an agreed policy, and agreed procedures should be followed

The broad principles for work with separated children have been agreed by UNHCR, Unicef, ICRC and the main international NGOs (see the SCF publication *Children separated by war*). Detailed procedures should be agreed locally, based upon these principles:

- Co-ordination and collaboration between organisations is essential; this may be formalised through an MOU (see above) covering the activities of the different agencies. Communication between agencies and authorities is also critical

- Activities to prevent separations should be a priority. These must be based on a sound understanding of the reasons for separation

- The sharing of information within and between countries is essential in programme planning and implementation

- Decisions on sharing of information relating to individuals must be based on an assessment of protection needs and security risks and the best interests of the child

- Documentation, tracing and reunification should be carried out as part of an integrated effort to promote the care and protection of children within their own communities. Local expertise should be used wherever possible, and institutional care should be seen as a last resort

- Ways in which traditional structures can be used to protect reunited children and children in foster families should be explored

- Planning and funding should seek to build local and national capacity so as to ensure the sustainability of interventions and hence the long-term welfare of children

The agreed policy and procedures should be widely publicised, both in printed form and through workshops and meetings. Governments should be helped to disseminate these, so that policies agreed centrally are endorsed locally.

UN agencies; the ICRC; and international NGOs have key responsibility for this.

3 Procedures should be established for the exchange and sharing of information about separated children

Sharing of information within and between countries is essential to programme planning and implementation.

The basic principle of information sharing is that the maximum information necessary for tracing should be exchanged at the minimum risk to the child and the family. Protection and the best interests of the child should govern issues of confidentiality.

Decisions about the degree of confidentiality needed must be made on the basis of a situation analysis. This will have to be reviewed regularly.

Information refers not only to the information recorded during the course of the programme, but also to any information already held by statutory authorities and local and international agencies (see Information Sheet 1 on page 101).

Guided by these principles, UN agencies, ICRC and lead international NGOs should be responsible for local assessments and decisions.

4 Systems must be set up for exchanging information on programme activities between all implementing agencies, including international and local organisations

These agencies will include ICRC, IFRC, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and government agencies.

The systems should include:

- Regular meetings to which all parties are invited and which have an agreed agenda and a competent chairperson
- An information clearing house that can provide details of the situation and the programmes

The co-ordinating body or lead agency should ensure that these systems are set up and monitored.

5 There should be co-ordination with community initiatives

Agencies should make contact with churches, community organisations, traditional leaders, local people etc to ensure that their own efforts complement and support those of local communities. This may involve informal mechanisms for both tracing and the care of separated children in the community.

Basic information on these informal systems should be gathered during the situation analysis; but further local enquiries will probably be needed.

All agencies, national and international, working with separated children should undertake this work.

6 National and local government should be kept fully informed of tracing and reunification activities

Government agencies may play a key role in programmes; however, the level of involvement by national and local government will depend on their capacity and resources. This is likely to change over time (see page 00).

Nationally, the co-ordinating agency or Unicef should support the flow of information; agencies working in the local government area should keep in touch at the local level.

7 Non-state entities (NSEs) with *de facto* power should be involved, even though they are not a recognised authority

Unsigned agreements can be made with NSEs, thereby setting up a working

relationship without necessarily implying recognition of the entity.

UN agencies and international NGOs operating in areas controlled by non-state entities are most likely to be involved in this work

1E Regional co-ordination

The population movements caused by war or famine frequently cross international borders. For this reason it is essential to take a regional view when working with separated children.

If there is the likelihood of the emergency widening across the region, all major agencies in a position to respond can play a role in regional contingency planning. Links between programmes should be set up, preferably before the event. This will not happen automatically: someone has to initiate the process and put the mechanisms in place.

The same principles apply to regional co-ordination as to co-ordination at country level. Indeed, a clearly-defined framework is even more important, as cross-border liaison adds another layer to planning and management. Matters demanding clarification will include:

- The lines and methods of communication between regional and country programmes with respect to co-ordination and operational activities

- The reporting and decision-making structure, both between country and region and between country or region and headquarters

- The mechanisms for exchanging information across borders

Increasingly, the major agencies have regional structures, with regional offices that relate to country programmes. This is often the natural starting point for planning; it is likely to be the UN agencies, the ICRC and the larger NGOs that are able to engage regionally.

A regional co-ordination group including the major agencies working with separated children may be appointed or elected, and a lead agency (which may be a UN agency, the ICRC or an NGO) can be chosen to represent each country.

In 1997 the key agencies involved in working with separated children in West Africa convened a meeting to formalise and strengthen working arrangements between those countries of the sub-region affected by population movements in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The objectives of the meeting were threefold: to share information and experiences; to examine emergency family tracing strategies; and to discuss prevention strategies.

Some of those present were able to share experiences from the Great Lakes region, allowing these to be incorporated into planning for West Africa.

The group looked at existing capacity; identified gaps and ways of addressing them; and agreed on the definitions to be used, common standards and strategies, and the principles of cross-border work.

A further important strategy was to identify 'focal agencies' in each country, and within those agencies, focal persons or posts. This was critical in facilitating good communication and links.

1 Evacuation and regional co-ordination

The evacuation of children from conflict zones is a problem that requires both a regional and an international approach. In the rush to remove children from danger, it is easy to neglect basic precautions for safeguarding their identity. But if their personal details are not recorded — or if these details are not passed on to the appropriate people — children can become permanently separated from their families (see page 87 of the training manual).

Evacuations during emergencies, particularly when children are involved, attract a great deal of media attention, and individuals may feel compelled to take action in response to this. Agencies must ensure that their staff are sufficiently experienced and confident to resist media pressure for dramatic action in these circumstances and to follow the proper procedures.

If a regional inter-agency forum exists, this can be used to promote good practice based on the UNHCR/Unicef guidelines for evacuation, which should be widely disseminated. Procedures based on these guidelines should be agreed, so that if there is an evacuation, separated children can be protected and further separations prevented.

Key points from the UNHCR/Unicef guidelines on the evacuation of children from conflict areas are as follows:

- Families should be protected and assisted in place where possible
- Families should be kept together during evacuations
- Evacuation should only be carried out under proper conditions
- When organising and carrying out an evacuation, the best interests of the children should take priority
- The reception and care of children must be properly planned and appropriate
- Families should be reunified as soon as possible

With regard to separated children, the UNHCR/Unicef guidelines state that 'every effort should be made to trace the parents or other close relatives of unaccompanied minors before evacuation is considered'. The guidelines are reproduced on page 50 of the training manual.

1F Working with governments in emergencies

All programmes will need to make strategic decisions about how they engage with government.

Tracing and reunification programmes cannot work effectively unless agencies, including relevant government departments, have the capacity and resources to fulfil their allotted tasks. For this reason, one of the most important tasks of the co-ordinating group (see Chapter One) is to analyse who is best placed to do what and in which location. In making these decisions, the basic criterion must be: which agency can most effectively reunify as many children as possible with the least delay, while at the same time protecting their rights and promoting their best interests?

1 Defining government roles

National governments and local authorities have a key role in facilitating tracing and

reunification, both by making appropriate policy (for example, legislation on fostering and adoption, rules governing children's homes) and by providing practical support (for example, by allowing access to institutions, convening local meetings). But during war and its immediate aftermath, few governments have the capacity to implement large-scale tracing and reunification programmes. In these circumstances, a variety of approaches should be discussed with the authorities; for example:

- The secondment of skilled government social welfare staff to operational NGOs. This model was effective in Uganda, where a government social worker seconded to SCF (UK) played a leading role in the tracing and reunification programme. His experience was used to build up capacity within government after the war. Technical support was also provided to the government at a national level at this stage

- Providing support to government social welfare staff at provincial level, where structures are still functioning

- Direct implementation of tracing and reunification programmes by international agencies, international NGOs and local NGOs. This may be the most effective way of working during and immediately after emergencies, when government capacity is minimal, or in chronic conflicts where government social welfare structures are not functioning. This model was used in Rwanda from 1994–98. Direct implementation may be the most efficient way to protect the rights of children in these circumstances

For these approaches, the long-term objective should be to hand over a manageable caseload to government. But unless there are trained and motivated staff with access to the necessary resources, handover is unlikely to be in the best interests of the remaining separated children. Investment in building government capacity will be an important part of this process (see Chapter Three). Continuing co-ordination between individual agencies about how they plan to wind down or hand over emergency programmes is also crucial.

2 Emergency interventions

This chapter is aimed at anyone involved in the planning and management of emergency programmes for separated children. It looks at prevention of separation and tracing work in emergencies. Detailed information is set out in Chapter Four.

If separations are occurring or are likely to occur and there is a need for interventions, the response should be:

- Rapid

- Co-ordinated

- Based on an agreed strategy and an understanding of roles and responsibilities between agencies

The objectives of emergency interventions are to prevent further separations, to get children already separated back to their families as quickly as possible and to protect children who remain separated. This will involve the following:

- Specific interventions to prevent separations and to identify children already separated

- Documentation, tracing and reunification

- The provision of emergency placement and care

One of the problems every programme must face is that assisting separated children runs the risk of creating further separations; this risk can be minimised by implementing programmes that support children in their own communities, through the wider relief effort (see Chapter Five).

Although the basic principles outlined in this chapter apply to both famine and conflict situations, an additional section specifically about separated children and famine has been included. Readers who need a short overview of the subject can refer to this. The key areas of concern include: the prevention of separation through appropriate systems for distributing relief; the documentation of children who present as separated; and early reunification.

2A Prevention of separation and emergency tracing activities

Tracing activities are described in full in Chapter Four. Tracing work in emergencies should follow the same principles, but may have to be adapted to suit urgent needs; for example, some procedures may have to be simplified. Nevertheless, protection of the child must always be the paramount consideration.

Although good documentation of separated children is important, emergency tracing should maximise the opportunities for immediate reunification and take advantage of the fact that relatives may be nearby.

1 Priorities

Separated children under 18 years are normally included in tracing programmes (see Definitions on page 122). However, it may be necessary to target younger children in a large-scale emergency, on the grounds that older children have a better chance of surviving on their own and are able to retain information about their identity. These priorities should be agreed between all the agencies working with separated children. Remember that there will always be exceptions, such as older disabled children.

2 Information and awareness-raising

Disseminating information about tracing activities is critical. Families who have lost children must be told what they can do to find them, and the staff of other agencies working in the emergency need to be clear about the advice they should give to families looking for children.

Links with the community should be made as early as possible to establish what is happening to children and to support any informal tracing activities.

3 Obstacles to tracing work

Access and security

If there is restricted access to an area owing to the political and military situation, decisions about whether to carry out tracing work will need to be made on the spot; these will be guided by organisational policy. The opinion of local staff is always valuable in such situations.

Security is the prime consideration: tracing should not be pursued if it knowingly puts either staff or children at risk. Agency policy on security should be made available to all staff, and security guidelines should be included in training programmes.

The most effective way of negotiating access to an area or a group of children is to make a joint approach, for example through an inter-agency forum or through representations from ICRC or a UN agency. Whether these negotiations are conducted at local level or at a higher level (or both) will depend on the situation. Everyone dealing with such issues must enter into negotiations with a clear understanding of their aims and objectives.

When working in areas where land-mines are known (or suspected) to have been used, guidelines must be followed (see page 00 of the training manual and the SCF handbook *Safety First: Protecting NGO employees who work in areas of conflict*).

Lack of logistical support and resources

It is sometimes impossible to reunify children in emergencies because staffing and transport requirements have been underestimated. Realistic assessments of resource needs are absolutely essential when applying for funding. Unless programmes are adequately resourced, they cannot carry out tracing activities effectively. Assessing and justifying resource needs requires close dialogue between technical and management staff.

2B Basic resource needs for emergency programmes

In some emergencies, agencies may already be working with separated children in the affected area; this was the case during the 1996–97 repatriation crisis in the Great Lakes. More often, though, systems need to be set up and resources mobilised quickly. Where tracing systems are already in place, emergency work must complement them and be compatible with them.

Chapter Four looks at setting up tracing programmes in more detail. The following section is a brief summary of the basic requirements for emergency work with separated children. It applies equally to work with separated children in their country of origin or to work with separated refugee children.

1 Staff

Senior staff who have international experience of working with separated children should be present in the field during emergencies. They will need to co-ordinate and supervise the work of project staff, provide training, liaise with other agencies and local authorities, organise the necessary materials and logistical support, monitor the situation and assess the need for changes to planned interventions. The co-ordinator will provide feedback to managers to facilitate planning for communication with donors and so on.

The mainstays of any tracing programme are the tracing staff or social workers who work directly with children and communities. These staff should be nationals of the country from which the children originate. Although this requirement can be difficult to meet in some emergency situations, it is important that wherever possible children are interviewed by people who speak their language and know their culture. Such staff will also be familiar with the geography of the affected country, and be less likely to misspell personal and place names.

There are unlikely to be enough trained social workers available, but teachers, health workers and others with experience of working with children often have transferable skills.

Recruitment can be difficult during an emergency, as there is no time for lengthy interviews. However, a standardised interview format may be used to speed things up. Although it is important to have realistic expectations of recruits, professional standards must always be maintained.

Social workers or tracers should have the following minimum qualifications:

- Secondary education
- The ability to read and write the local languages and the international language used in paperwork (a test should be administered)
- Sensitivity to the needs of children and readiness to promote their rights and best interests
- Experience with children
- Organisational skills
- The ability and willingness to drive, ride a motorbike etc
- Willingness to take part in training or to learn new skills

Since long-term staffing needs may not always be clear at the beginning of a programme, it may be advisable to employ staff on short-term contracts that can be extended after review.

Even if field staff already have experience of working with separated children, they are likely to require training for work in emergencies and an induction that familiarises them with the agency (see Chapter Three).

2 Logistical support

Logistics or support staff will be needed to deal with communications, supplies, transport and so on. Competent and safe drivers are essential. The major logistical requirements are transport for staff and possibly for children, and appropriate equipment for communications.

3 Supplies

Forms and printed materials will need to be adapted and printed in the appropriate language. Items such as cameras, film, megaphones etc will need to be taken to operational sites where there are mass population movements. Agencies working with separated children in emergencies should keep emergency kits that contain all necessary items and can be sent to the affected area. The suggested contents of these kits are described on page 92 of the training manual.

Agencies providing emergency care will need to plan for supplies of food, water, blankets, etc.

4 Forms used in tracing

In past emergencies, much time has been wasted on designing tracing forms before operations begin. Many organisations have created their own forms, and in some cases this has resulted in the same child being registered twice on different forms or in a two-phase system where registration and then documentation is carried out.

The major agencies have now agreed to standardise their forms. As the forms are widely available on computer disk, they can easily be modified according to the local situation. Model forms are available on page 29 of the training exercises.

5 Information systems

Information is the essence of tracing, and systems will therefore need to be set up for the collection, storage and exchange of information. After the acute phase of an emergency is over, the suitability of these systems for longer-term work may need to be reviewed (see Chapter Eight). It is vital that agencies are aware of any existing systems, so that whatever they set up during emergencies is compatible with these systems. It is also vital for the protection of children to follow policy on the transfer and exchange of information (see information sheet on page 101); this is particularly important in cross-border operations, where UNHCR or ICRC should co-ordinate activities.

In a tracing programme where more than one agency is documenting children, there must be one agency that centralises all the information about the caseload.

> **Following the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the ICRC set up a regional database in Nairobi; tracing information relating to separated children in every country to which they had fled, as well as to those still in Rwanda, was entered into this database.**

Centralising information allows the names of families searching for children to be cross-matched with the names of separated children. It is therefore imperative for all agencies running tracing programmes to give copies of their documentation forms to the agency responsible for centralising the information. This is usually the ICRC; if it is not involved, a lead NGO will normally be appointed to centralise all information. In some countries, centralisation may be carried out by the government department responsible for separated children (see information sheet on page 101).

Where refugee camps or displaced persons camps have been set up, systems for inter-camp tracing and the exchange of information should be established soon as possible.

2C Implementation

If more than one agency is involved, the work may be divided up by task — for example, one agency working on prevention of separation and one on IDTR activities — or geographically, depending on the size and scale of the operation. The specific activities should be defined as part of contingency planning.

Emergency tracing activities can be carried out wherever there is access to people: along the routes they are travelling, at transit sites, at way stations where food and water is distributed, in refugee camps or displaced persons camps. Teams can be deployed in these locations to prevent further separations, to identify separated children and to carry out tracing; an appropriate venue will need to be found where children can be interviewed and documented (see page 87 of the training manual).

Sites for setting up emergency tracing must be chosen with both security and logistics in mind. For example, a lot of people with cameras, megaphones etc working in a tense situation may aggravate the local military or block routes, thereby causing even more problems. Where appropriate, permission must be sought from local authorities.

1 The causes of separation

Separations occur during times of conflict, famine or natural disaster either accidentally or voluntarily. The prevention of accidental and voluntary separations require different methods.

Accidental separations generally occur in large numbers when communities are under attack or during large population movements. Children may also be abducted for ransom, sale, labour or forced military recruitment.

Interventions by relief agencies can also cause accidental separations, for these reasons:

- Badly organised movements of populations or evacuations

- Failure to keep proper records

- Failure to follow policy guidelines on emergency medical care

- Organising adoption or fostering without proper documentation

- Simply being unaware of how easily separations can happen

See page 15 of the training manual for how to prevent separations.

Voluntary separations are generally the result of poverty and socio-economic stress. The problems that cause voluntary separations are likely to be exacerbated during times of conflict and can be made even worse by the way in which relief and assistance is provided (see page 16 of the training manual).

2D How to prevent separations

Even in extreme situations, many separations can be prevented and children already separated can be swiftly identified. This can be done by making local groups, communities, governments, aid agencies and donors fully aware of the fact that:

- Separations can happen

- Action can be taken to prevent them

Interventions to prevent accidental and voluntary separations and to promote reunification must be based on an understanding of why separations are occurring, and may involve any or all of the following activities.

1 Preventing accidental separations

Work with the affected community

Where possible, this should be carried out through local networks, such as churches or community organisations. Before an emergency occurs, people in the communities likely to be affected should be told about the risk of separation and advised on appropriate preventative measures (such as teaching children their name or attaching name-tags to their clothing).

During large-scale population movements, messages advising people on how to hold on to their children and what to do if they lose them, can be broadcast over megaphones or displayed on posters or banners (see page 26 of training manual).

Work with the host population

Separated children from refugee or displaced populations are sometimes taken into the homes of the host population. In areas where this is likely to occur, the population should be told how to help preserve the child's identity — for example, by keeping the clothes the child was wearing when found, recalling basic information about the circumstances of separations, and registering the child for tracing where appropriate (see page 49 of this manual).

Raising awareness among everyone involved in emergency assistance (including health workers, transport agencies and military personnel)

Information and training on how to prevent accidental separations and promote family unity should be provided for staff at all levels, from heads of agencies to truck drivers. The personnel working for international agencies in emergencies change so frequently that this information and training work will have to be repeated at regular intervals; local partner agencies must also be included. In addition to training

sessions, written material in the form of handouts or leaflets is useful and should be widely distributed, as should guidelines on evacuation (see page 50 of training manual).

During emergencies, staff working with separated children may be able to identify particular areas — such as border crossings or loading points for transport — where separations are occurring and target them. Staff can also advise others involved in the relief effort who may have concerns about separated children.

2 Preventing voluntary separations

Setting up children's centres or failing to ensure that all households have access to basic relief supplies and to health and educational services are major causes of voluntary separation. To prevent such separations it is necessary to work with the agencies that are providing these services. It is essential for every agency to understand the problems caused by family separation and the role they can play in preventing it.

Providers of emergency care for separated children should ensure that gatekeeping policies and procedures, designed to screen all children prior to admission, are fully understood by relevant staff (see page 32 of the training manual).

Where large numbers of children are living with foster families, for example in a refugee population, there is a risk that they could be abandoned during population movements such as a repatriation. Taking the time to prepare families and make alternative arrangements where necessary can reduce this risk.

2E Identifying children already separated

Children who have been separated must be identified as soon as possible, as their family or care-giver may still be near by. If these people cannot be found, the children will need to be given protection and reassurance, and should then be documented for tracing.

The identification of separated children should be done with care, as it may inadvertently cause new separations. For example, broadcasting information about where assistance for separated children is available has led to parents telling their children to register as separated.

The identification of children already separated is linked with the prevention of separation and can be organised in a similar way. Trained staff can stand beside the routes along which large numbers of people are travelling or at points where separations are likely to occur and look for lost or abandoned children.

Checking transit sites or refugee camps at night or at times when people are eating is another way of identifying children who are alone. When a child is identified as separated, any nearby adults should be briefly interviewed to confirm that the child really is separated. Initially, children should be kept on the spot where they are found in case their family is nearby; their clothing and any possessions should be kept (see page 32 of the training manual).

2F # Emergency documentation

Documentation means the compiling of information that is relevant to a child's current circumstances and to the search for his or her missing family. The aim is to collect enough information to be able to:

- Carry out tracing where possible

- Know the child's wishes

- Assess his or her current situation

- Make plans for the future

During an emergency, basic information about children must be collected. This should be sufficient to enable emergency tracing to be carried out and so provide the minimum information required for standard tracing systems (see page 87 of the training manual). Many newly-separated children can be rapidly reunited if there are adequate personnel and resources; however, some will remain separated after the emergency is over and their details will need to be entered into a longer-term tracing database.

The system used for recording information should be rapid and efficient, and should enable the child to be found again once he or she has been documented.

Information should be collected through interviews with the child and with anyone else who can give details about the child or his or her family; the circumstances in which the child was found should also be recorded. Each child should be interviewed as privately as possible. Children may be photographed according to the agreed procedure (see page 125 of the training manual) and identification labels or bracelets may be attached to them.

A more thorough documentation will be required for younger children or those unable to provide sufficient information for tracing; these children are often referred to as 'without address' (see page 129 of the training manual) An additional page is provided with the standard documentation form part 1 that should be completed for such children. Procedures have also been developed for working with children 'without address'; used by staff with appropriate training, they have led to a higher success rate in documentation and reunification (see page 131 of the training manual).

1 Problems of documentation in emergencies

In the past, emergency documentation has often been unreliable. There are several reasons for this:

- Many children are documented who are not in fact separated (in some cases more than one-third) but are seeking material assistance

- Staff carrying out the documentation are inadequately trained

- Criteria for documentation are unclear

- Staff are over-zealous with their documentation (perhaps from a desire to justify their employment)

Over-documentation wastes scarce resources. It can be avoided by:

- Providing better training

- Introducing clear criteria

- Informing the affected population about the objectives of documentation; it is for family tracing and not material assistance

- Employing experienced people as supervisors of the field staff who carry out documentation

Information collected during an emergency will never be absolutely reliable. For this reason, the details of children separated in acute emergencies should not be immediately entered into a tracing system. Many of these newly-separated children will be quickly reunited and will not require tracing.

If you believe that information about children who are still separated after a certain period is unreliable and the children concerned are accessible (e.g. in a camp), it may be worthwhile checking on their status and if necessary collecting further information before entering the details of the remaining emergency caseload on to a permanent database. But if the children are less accessible (e.g. living in communities), such an exercise may prove time-consuming and fruitless; and if they have gone home or are no longer separated, this fact will eventually be discovered during tracing work (see page 50 of this manual). This second documentation should not, therefore, become routine; children should only be documented once unless it is absolutely necessary to repeat the process.

2G Emergency tracing and reunification

1 Tracing

This term refers to the process of locating and making contact with missing family members using the information collected during the documentation procedure.

Immediate tracing must be the first priority in emergencies. Children can be more easily reunited with their families soon after separation; if time is allowed to pass, reunification becomes, for a variety of reasons, more difficult to achieve and less likely to succeed.

This has resource implications, as staff and logistics need to be in place rapidly. However, the long-term benefits of speedy reunification easily justify the immediate expense: the cost of institutional care for the children would be much greater than the cost of emergency tracing and reunification.

Tracing can be carried out even in the midst of major emergencies. Although action to preserve life must be the first priority, action to protect separated children — including tracing — can be carried out at the same time by competent agencies.

Emergency tracing includes the following activities:

- Photographs can be displayed on notice boards, with information about how people who have lost children can make enquiries

- Information about separated children can be sent ahead of a population on the move, so that photos and lists can be on display when people arrive at the next transit site or camp along the route

- A transit camp provides good conditions for intensive tracing: for example, staff can circulate through the camp with details of children and use megaphones to give advice to families searching for children or to announce details of lost children

- Photographs or lists of names can be sent to other refugee camps in the area where families may have gathered

- Cross-matching can be carried out using the details provided by families searching for children

2 Verification

This is the process of establishing the validity of relationships and confirming the willingness of the child and the family member to be reunified. Verification must be carried out for every child: at its simplest, this involves asking the child and the family member the same set of questions about the child and the family and making sure their answers match. However, verification with younger children and those who give little information should be carried out with more care (see page 136 of the training manual).

3 Reunification

During emergencies, reunification does not involve prolonged planning and preparation of the child and family; there is no time. However, practical arrangements for bringing the child to the family or the family to the child may need to be made; this may involve liaising with other agencies involved in caring for children or organising transport.

2H Emergency placement and care

There is clear evidence that providing institutional or residential care can directly cause separations during emergencies.

Even in the most extreme circumstances, communities will do their best to look after separated children. But if aid is being channelled through institutions or collective feeding centres, people will inevitably place children in their care. Families may also abandon their own children to institutions in the belief that they will receive food, education and other support.

In emergency situations, when communities are facing enormous difficulties, there are no easy answers to this problem. However, agencies should be guided by the following principles:

- Resources should be used to support community-based solutions that build on existing social structures

- Agencies should provide services and material resources equitably, and should make enquiries locally to ensure that all children have access to them.

- Where there is no alternative, appropriate temporary care in centres should be provided, following the principles outlined later in this chapter

1 Temporary community-based care

Most communities will do their best to care for separated children, and agencies should attempt to understand and support these efforts. Children may be taken in spontaneously by families; or families may be encouraged to take children by other members of the community, by community leaders or by agencies.

Agencies working in emergency placement and care need to consider the following questions:

- What is culturally appropriate in this situation? For example, is it usual for families to care for extra children, either from their extended family or from outside? Have emergencies resulting in separation occurred here before? If so, how did the community cope with them then?

- What is the attitude of local government and local leaders? Will they help to persuade families to care for children? Are there people in the community traditionally responsible for child care? Can they be brought in to help?

- Do families have the resources to care for extra children, or do they require additional support? If so, how should it be provided?

- Assistance targeted at 'separated' children may result in the documentation of children not in fact separated from their families. How can this be avoided?

- Can groups of older children be cared for in the community? For example, by giving them accommodation and food and arranging for neighbours or some other responsible local person to supervise them

- Where older children are caring for younger children, and where this is in the best interests of the children concerned, can they be supported by the community to continue this arrangement?

- Is food aid provided in a way that supports community and family-based care of children?

2 Problems of community-based care

The potential problems for children of family and community based care must be recognised; these are discussed more fully in Chapter Five. Agencies that place children with families must have the capacity to follow up these children for the purposes of protection and tracing. And wherever children are being spontaneously taken in by families other than their own, local structures that can help to protect them must be supported.

Agencies should be aware that children who are taken in by families from a different community may be at more risk from abuse or exploitation.

Where children are spontaneously taken in by families from a different community, the risks should be assessed as soon as possible and, if recommended, alternative arrangements should be made.

Children should not be placed in families from a different community unless the potential problems have been fully assessed.

3 Problems of institutional care

Placing children in large, impersonal institutions can be extremely damaging for their development. Such places simply cannot provide the care and attention all children need.

Moreover, staff in institutions are often untrained, overworked and poorly paid, and may themselves be living in difficult circumstances. At the worst, children who have already gone through great privations and distress may suffer further emotional, physical and sexual abuse in institutions.

Even the better-run institutions are not without their problems. After leaving care — especially if they have been there for a long time — children will have difficulty reintegrating into normal community life

If there is no alternative to institutional care, it should be introduced as a temporary measure to provide a place of safety for separated children. Care should be provided in small family groups where possible. Everyone involved in the institution must accept its temporary status and work towards the objectives of family reunification or of placement in the community.

Where care is provided in existing centres, these should be screened for their suitability and their willingness to co-operate with the tracing programme.

Emergency care should be provided discreetly, to avoid attracting children who are not genuinely separated.

4 Setting up emergency care provision

Principles for setting up emergency care are as follows:

- Staff must be trained and supervised

- All admissions must be screened and documented

- Children, especially the younger ones, should remain in the locality at least initially, in case their families are found

- Distribution of food should be organised in a way that does not attract others

- Conditions in the institution or centre should be neither better nor worse than the prevailing local conditions

- Children should be involved in decision-making where possible

- Care should be provided in small family groups with personalised attention

- Siblings should be kept together

- Children should be grouped according to their place of origin; this helps with tracing

5 Emergency care for babies

The care of small babies in emergencies presents special problems, and all agencies working with separated children should recognise this fact in their planning. Current policy is that where wet nursing is acceptable and available, it should be the first option for feeding separated babies. However, in areas with a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS other available options, such as safe artificial feeding, should be considered first (see page 46 of the training manual).

2I Separated children and famine

The word 'famine' is widely used to describe a situation of possible or actual starvation. It is linked to events such as military sieges, drought, mass rural starvation and, typically, the migration of populations in search of food.

During times of famine, children may become separated from their families for the following reasons:

- Because family members have died, leaving children with no one to care for them

- Because either adult members of the family or children have been forced to leave the family home to search for food

- Because children have been abandoned by their family or when they present themselves as separated in order to receive food or assistance

In most situations, the only really effective way of preventing separations is to provide enough food for everyone in the community and to ensure that everyone has access to this food. However, even when major relief operations are under way, this can rarely be achieved.

Finding a response to the needs of separated children – and a response to the needs of starving children that does not create further separations – is very difficult. Everyone working in these situations must be able to develop an appropriate strategy. This requires:

- A good understanding of the principles of working with separated children

- The opportunity to consult widely with communities, agencies dealing with other aspects of relief, local authorities etc

- Appropriate technical support

The following points are intended to serve as guidelines and should be taken into consideration when planning a strategy for prevention of separation and the care of separated children

1 Inter-agency collaboration

As in all emergency situations, inter-agency collaboration is essential. Agencies involved with separated children must work closely together, and should meet regularly to plan activities and share experiences. They must also develop good working relationships with agencies providing other forms of assistance, in order to:

Advocate for methods of distribution that are least likely to cause separations

Raise awareness among medical agencies, agencies providing therapeutic feeding etc, of the importance of documentation and of problems relating to separation

Provide training where appropriate

2 Feeding programmes

Wherever feeding programmes are being implemented, programme staff should be aware of the possibility of children becoming separated from their families and should know what to do if they come across separated children. If there are concerns about separated children, an agency such as the Red Cross, Unicef or UNHCR, or an NGO such as SCF that works with separated children, should be contacted.

Any response designed specifically to feed children who present themselves as separated should be avoided. If food is provided for separated children, it should be of the same quantity and quality as the food distributed to other children in the population. Failure to follow this principle may cause further separations

Staff in feeding centres should be familiar with the basic steps which can be taken to avoid permanent separations:

- Any child who presents him or herself alone must be interviewed (see screening below) and the details recorded immediately

- Clothing or any other possessions that young children have with them should be kept, as they may help with tracing

- A very young child whose carer is likely to die is at risk of being permanently separated from relatives if he or she does not know details of members of the extended family. The carer should be interviewed sensitively so that these details can be recorded; this will facilitate tracing if it is needed

3 Providing care for separated children

If children are found to be alone and in need of care, agencies should work with the community to seek a solution that is "in the best interests of the child". Agencies wishing to work with separated children should be aware of the programme implications of making a response: the minimum requirements are a medium to long term commitment and the availability of skilled staff or training provision (see page 140 of the training manual).

4 Documentation, tracing and family reunification

This is a priority for all children who are separated from their families. Even if tracing cannot be carried out immediately – for example, when there are restricted communications – the documentation process must be undertaken as soon as possible and the mechanisms for a tracing structure explored.

5 Children 'without address'

Special procedures for documentation should be adopted for these children (see module on children without address in training manual).

6 Prevention of separation

Further separations can be prevented by having clear criteria for admission to children's centres and ensuring that staff are trained in screening children or families who present with children (see below).

It is important to develop an understanding of who the children requiring care are, and why they are separated. Those caring for children may be able to acquire a deeper insight into the dynamics of separation in the course of their day to day work; this is essential for prevention of separation work.

7 Screening children for admission to centres

The object of screening is to ensure that children in most need are provided with appropriate help, while at the same time children and families are not encouraged to become dependent on outside assistance; in this way, voluntary separations are avoided.

Screening interviews are very difficult to conduct, as children and families who are desperate for assistance may not be truthful about their circumstances. Children should not be cross-examined, but time should be taken over the interview and sensitive questions asked to try and construct a full picture of the circumstances.

Children may be afraid, upset, anxious or confused, and their stories may change (see module on interviewing children at page 161 of training manual).

8 Criteria

Only children who are separated from their parents or usual care givers, and for whom no other relatives are able to provide care, should be admitted to centres as residents. Although the definition of a separated child usually includes children under 18 years, an upper age limit may well be decided locally. Every effort must be made to find a placement for the child within the community. If there are questions about the suitability of placements in the community, a home visit may be required (if this can be arranged) and relatives should be encouraged to accept children.

When a child is admitted to a centre, his or her details must immediately be entered into a registration book and a bracelet put on the child (where this is agreed policy); the number on the bracelet must correspond with the number in the book. All new admissions must be referred to the tracing team without delay.

9 Temporary assistance

All children/families should be told that the assistance they are being given is temporary. All children admitted to residential care should understand that family reunification or placement is the objective, not long-term residential care. This is because children are likely to be better cared for and protected, and their developmental needs more likely to be met, in a family setting.

3 Moving from emergency intervention to longer-term programming

This chapter is for NGOs and other agencies implementing medium or long-term tracing programmes. The first part is particularly relevant to senior managers responsible for programme strategies.

After the acute phase of an emergency has passed, a more distinct picture of the needs of separated children should emerge. At this point, agencies will need to reassess the problem and the resources they have available to meet it. Fewer agencies are likely to be involved by this stage; they should collaborate on a joint medium to long-term strategy to meet the needs of the remaining children who require tracing. Agencies should also keep each other informed of their exit strategies.

Medium to long-term plans will have to take account of both the management of the tracing programme and broader child protection and welfare issues. This is likely to involve developing appropriate local structures that can handle (i) documentation, tracing and reunification, and (ii) the long-term follow-up of separated children.

Where children are being reunified after long absences or with distant relatives, follow-up and protection are of greater importance. Problems of poverty, food security and access to education may hinder reunification, but as these problems are also likely to affect many other children in the population, targeting assistance solely at reunified children may cause resentment in the community and should be avoided.

The main issues to consider during the transition from emergency to post-emergency work are:

- Strategies to support handover of the remaining caseload of separated children to national staff/national structures, and the schedule for handover
- Strategies to deal with the long-term social policy and child protection needs

These strategies need to be developed in collaboration with national and local government and with local organisations, as they are likely to be implementing the policies and the programmes in the long term. Agencies such as Unicef and the larger international NGOs may already be supporting social policy work of this kind, for example (i) supporting the development of a national legal framework for children and child welfare, (ii) devising relevant training curricula in schools of social and community work, and (iii) helping government to define its role, and that of NGO implementing partners, in work with children at risk of abuse or abandonment.

The transition from emergency to long-term work will involve a transfer from international to local responsibility, accompanied by a scaling-down or withdrawal of key international agencies and expatriate staff. The gaps this can leave at programme level demonstrate the importance of developing local capacity and skills at the strategic or management level as well as in the field.

3A   Working with governments

Even if governments or *de facto* authorities have little capacity to implement tracing and reunification programmes, their role in facilitating such work can be critical. A policy dialogue with government should be opened at the earliest opportunity. This is important in order to:

- Establish the principle that all children separated from their families have the right to be included in family tracing and reunification programmes

- Ensure that authorised tracing agencies have free access to all children's centres, orphanages and other institutions

- Clarify and update national legislation covering fostering and adoption, including inter-country adoption

Agencies need to be aware of the broader context within which this dialogue is conducted, including:

- The history of government commitment to welfare reform

- The willingness of government to exchange staff and ideas with international agencies

- The attitude of government towards the relief community

- The strength of local NGOs in relation to government agencies etc.

All these factors will influence the pace and outcome of policy dialogue with government, and they must be realistically assessed when policy work is being planned and evaluated.

3B   Legislative reform and policy work

1   The changing priorities of governments

In the acute phase of an emergency, it is likely that a single ministry — for example, the ministry of relief and rehabilitation or the ministry of reintegration and social affairs — will have been responsible for most policies relating to separated children. In high-profile emergencies, when large quantities of relief materials are entering the country, this ministry is likely to operate at a similarly high level; it will have good access to the military and other authorities, and it will act as an intermediary between donors and government on relief and humanitarian affairs. Dialogue on policy may be relatively easy at this stage.

Policy dialogue can, however, become more difficult when peace is established and responsibilities for children become fragmented. The key government agency for work with separated children is now likely to be a relatively low-status, poorly-resourced department of social welfare. The implications of this change in status must be taken into account when devising strategies for policy dialogue and longer-term work.

2   Assessing government capacity to develop and implement policy

Factors to consider when assessing government capacity include:

- Its potential to develop policy and regulate its implementation. This may be far greater than its potential to deliver services or implement programmes

- The popular legitimacy and credibility of government structures (or those of NSEs). This is likely to vary at different times and in different locations

- The volatility of government priorities during times of conflict. These can shift rapidly between civilian and military priorities

Government capacity for — and interest in — family tracing and reunification changes over time. Agencies must monitor these changes and develop flexible working strategies.

3 Policy and practice

The degree of operational involvement by government in tracing and reunification will depend on the factors discussed in the previous sub-section. However, support for policy work is important. At policy level, longer-term objectives should include:

- National policy development

- The introduction of a national system of accreditation and inspection of children's homes where this does not exist

- Promoting the rights and developmental needs of children in institutional care

- The introduction of strict 'gatekeeping' policies to control the growth of institutional care

- Legislation on fostering and adoption

Capacity building of government and national NGOs

Where a viable government infrastructure has been re-established, the appropriate ministries should be involved in planning and co-ordinating family tracing and reunification activities. Agencies should help to build the capacity of these ministries, which may mean providing technical advice, training and material resources. Social welfare/policy work at national level, as well as training and support for local authorities, will be an important part of this capacity building:

- There should be a commitment to capacity building with national staff

- Agencies should work with, and train, local partners as and when this becomes possible

3C Putting the programme into action

This section deals with planning and management. It is important for field co-ordinators and all levels of management, and covers the following core elements of planning and management:

- *Implementing the tracing programme*

- *Managing the caseload*

- *Transport and other logistical needs*

- *Recruiting, training and supporting staff*

Information systems are discussed in Chapter Eight, which should be read in conjunction with this chapter.

1 Implementing the tracing programme

Tracing may be needed for children displaced across a province, a country or an entire region. Agencies may undertake tracing work in one area as part of a co-ordinated effort or they may set up a national or regional tracing programme. Whatever the circumstances, the administrative and support structure must be equal to the scale of operations. The way in which these structures are set up should take account of local conditions, including security and accessibility; areas may be mined or distances may be so great that the only feasible means of travel is by air.

The way in which the programmes are implemented will depend upon the immediate context, but the following basic principles summarise the lessons learned from recent tracing programmes:

- A team of trained national staff should carry out the tracing, including management of the information system. Team members should be paid a reasonable (though not disproportionately high) salary and be held accountable for their work

- Supervision and professional support for field staff is essential. It can be provided through a structure of local team leaders, regular visits to the field by senior programme co-ordinators, regular team meetings etc

- All available resources should be used in carrying out documentation and tracing: for example, local NGOs working with communities can be trained to document children or to undertake tracing alongside their usual activities

- There should be regular communication — including joint planning and evaluation sessions — between management and professional/technical staff. Managers should have a good grasp of the core concepts and policy issues related to work with separated children

- When several agencies are involved in family tracing and reunification, continuing co-ordination of their efforts through an inter-agency forum is essential. National governments, Unicef, UNHCR or an experienced and competent NGO should take the lead in this task

- Where tracing involves several agencies, a centralised information system will be needed

- If informal tracing is already taking place, it should be supported. If not, efforts should be made to set up a network of self-motivated volunteers, to work closely with the tracing team and be a link with the community. They could be given small incentives

2 Managing the caseload

Caseload management is critical for the success of tracing. It involves:

- Analysing the current caseload: data on the age and sex of separated children, the geographical spread and density of the affected population, the accessibility of areas

- Assessing the human and material resources that are needed, those that are currently available and how they can be deployed

- Analysing trends in the rate of reunification; planning future staff and other resources needs

This will require information to be collected, recorded, entered into a database (computerised or manual) and finally analysed.

Caseload management means that resources can be deployed efficiently and that children can be prioritised according to their needs. Priorities should be agreed in the inter-agency forum where this exists.

3 Transport and logistics requirements

A major constraint and frustration for most tracing programmes is lack of suitable transport. A member of staff might spend a day or more on foot trying to find one family, but suitable transport could enable that same person to visit five families during the same period. This dependence on transport — together with the potential for it to be misused — means that it is often a source of tension within the programme. Problems need to be anticipated, discussed within the team and managed appropriately.

A realistic estimate of the programme's transport needs is absolutely essential at the planning and budgeting stage. Information must be provided to show donors that investment in transport is a cost-effective way of meeting programme objectives.

Transport should be:

- Suitable for the local terrain
- Where possible, standardised for ease of maintenance
- Appropriate for moving children safely
- Suitable for the prevailing security situation

Support must be available for training , maintenance, spares etc.

The choice of transport will depend upon many factors — the size of the programme, the area to be covered, its accessibility, the security situation, the available finances — and may involve a combination of several of the following:

- Four-wheel-drive vehicles: these are expensive, but are suitable for all types of terrain, can move children safely and can carry a radio
- Motorbikes: these are of more limited use, as they cannot cope with every kind of terrain or carry a radio; they are also liable to accidents, difficult to maintain and open to misuse
- Bicycles: these are cheap, but will need frequent replacement and are likely to be stolen or misused
- Local public transport is usually slow and unreliable, and is unlikely to cover the whole area
- Horses, camels, donkeys and other animals are also slow and unreliable but may be the only option in some outlying areas
- Aircraft and helicopters are expensive, but may have to be used if the area to be covered is very large, insecure or contains mines
- On foot is slow

The movement of people and information is vital to a tracing programme. A shrewd logistics expert can be one of the most valuable members of a tracing team, particularly in a national programme where staff, forms and children are being moved from one end of the country to another. Sound transport management involves not just managing vehicles and systems but also managing the way in which the transport is used. On-the-job training can be helpful for field staff.

3D Recruiting, training and supporting staff

1 Recruitment

A programme's recruitment and training needs cannot be determined until its overall strategy has been finalised — and these needs will change as the programme evolves beyond the emergency phase.

Senior staff who have international experience of working with separated children should be involved in setting up programmes and in taking them through to the post-emergency phase.

This means that agencies must:

- Keep a database of experienced staff
- Update skills by organising regular workshops for staff who have worked with separated children

Agencies should also consider providing basic training for non-specialist staff who may wish to be deployed in the future. All technical staff will need induction, training and support.

The national staff recruited for emergency work will probably constitute the core team for ongoing work with separated children. It is a good idea, once the situation stabilises and the structure of the programme and its future development are clearer, to carry out an appraisal of staff with a view to longer-term work.

2 Briefings

The induction and preparation of senior staff should include, at the minimum, an overview of the current situation and the position the agency has adopted, delivered through meetings, talks and documents. Briefings should cover the following themes:

- The political and security situation
- The local environment, including culture, language, geography etc
- The background to the organisation's involvement in the country/region and its work with separated children
- The organisation's policy on separated children
- Its relationships with other agencies
- Technical information on the tracing programme
- Guidelines on dealing with the media

Where possible, this induction and briefing should take place both at HQ and in country (where field trips should form part of the orientation process). If the member of staff concerned is replacing someone else, handover notes should be prepared to supplement the verbal handover. Points that should be covered in the handover include key information about staff, external contacts etc.

3 Training

Training needs should be assessed at the outset and a strategy for providing and evaluating training should be drawn up as soon as possible (see page 66 of training manual). Almost inevitably, tensions will arise between the demands of programme work and the need for training and induction. Management and technical staff must agree on sensible ways of meeting both needs.

All staff must be given training for their immediate tasks. In addition, consideration should be given to providing other types of training, such as:

- Training for trainers
- Broader skills, such as office management and languages
- Other aspects of staff development, such as chairing meetings, writing reports and supervising staff

Meetings and workshops to compare experiences and methodologies and to look at case studies can stimulate two-way learning between international and national staff.

4 Staff support

Most tracing programmes are carried out in difficult conditions, where staff are under stress from a variety of sources. Agencies that work in emergencies must have not only the right policies on support but also the resources to put them into practice.

'Appropriate' support means, among many other things, ensuring that:

- Living conditions are acceptable and the diet is good
- Security arrangements are up to date and universally understood
- Communications are well organised
- Management and team structures are functioning effectively

Good management will also recognise that tracing work can be emotionally draining and that regular rest periods, opportunities for debriefing etc are essential.

Staff working in the field are often subject to considerable stress, largely because:

- They work long hours, often in insecure areas and under uncomfortable conditions
- They have to deal directly with children who have experienced terrible events
- For national staff, experiences the children have gone through may be similar to their own

For many people directly affected by the emergency, this type of work is a source of strength, restoring a sense of purpose to their lives. But even so, every tracing programme must take very seriously the need to support its local staff.

National staff should be consulted about the type of support they would find useful; this could include team meetings, 'awaydays', retreats or social events. Team working can also be helpful: for example, if staff regularly work in pairs they can derive support from one another.

Providing a regular forum for communication is essential for encouraging

collaboration between staff and for ensuring that clear guidelines and procedures are widely available. It also helps to avoid misunderstandings and frustration and reduces tension between team members.

There should be a system of accountability that enables good work to be rewarded. Feedback about the programme and outcomes is also very important for motivating staff, particularly those working in isolated areas; this can be achieved by circulating statistics — such as the number of children reunited — reports and newsletters, organising exchanges of staff within programmes, or running national or regional meetings.

International staff will also need support, particularly if they are carrying out tracing during an emergency. In such circumstances, staff tend to work too hard and burn out, despite the fact that compulsory rest and recuperation policies have been widely adopted. Most international agencies recognise the toll that working in emergencies takes on staff and will offer debriefing and counselling.

4 The IDTR system

This chapter should be read by technical/professional staff who work in emergencies and non-emergencies alike. Managers should also make themselves familiar with the definitions and key concepts described.

The subject of the chapter is the tracing process known as IDTR (Identification, Documentation, Tracing and Reunification). Detailed instructions on how to carry out each stage of IDTR are given on page 78 of the training manual; the principles that should inform such work are outlined here.

For the purposes of this manual, the term 'tracing' denotes the search for family on behalf of a child. There is also a need to assist families searching for children; this is usually done by the ICRC, but in some cases other agencies may take on this task (see page 92 of the training manual). Similar principles and procedures apply.

4A Identification

On the basis of the situation analysis, a comprehensive plan should be drawn up for the rapid identification of separated children, wherever they may be. This is vital for ensuring that all children have access to tracing and protection. Such a plan should include the following stages:

1 Raising awareness of tracing needs among those in authority

The support of the government, the military, local authorities, local associations, traditional leaders and the churches is essential in identifying and assisting separated children.

2 Informing the general public

A campaign should be launched to inform the affected population about tracing programmes and the needs of separated children. The campaign should explain:

- What people should do if they know of any separated children
- How those caring for children who are not their own can have them documented for tracing purposes — and why this is important
- What steps those who have lost children should take
- The fact that this is not a programme of material assistance

When conducting such a campaign, these key principles should be followed:

- Collaboration with local people is essential: the identity and status of field staff should be known and understood by local authorities, community leaders etc
- To avoid confusing the public, the messages put out about tracing programmes must be consistent
- In order to allay fear and suspicion, those messages should also be clear

When using the media to disseminate information, a combination of methods may be needed to reach different sections of the population.

3 Location and identification of children in need of tracing services

The identification of separated children should be carried out by means of both a formal search undertaken by tracing agencies and a contact and referral system with other relief agencies, hospitals, churches, local agencies etc so that they know who to contact if they come across separated children (see page 82 of the training manual). If more than one tracing agency is involved, the process should be carefully co-ordinated to avoid causing confusion and duplication of work.

4 Working with and through the community

Close links with the community are essential if there is to be a two-way flow of information: agencies acquire vital information about children and their families, and the community's own attempts at tracing are made easier.

Contact should be made with relevant local organisations and agencies. These should be brought into the co-ordination framework where this has been established (see page 19 of this manual). Beyond this, any informal networks can be established or strengthened by agencies working with identified members of the community, who can both pass on details of formal tracing work and collect information from the local people.

> **In South America, families of 'disappeared' children are actively involved in tracing. In addition to carrying out certain aspects of tracing, family members are represented on the management group of the local NGO that has been created to trace the children.**
>
> **In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, members of the tracing team identified women in the community who were concerned about separated children and motivated to help. Each tracer worked with a group of women in the region, holding regular meetings for exchange of information. The women then spread this information about the tracing programme within the community, through their usual daily contacts, and brought back information to tracers. Small incentives were given to the women from time to time.**

4B Documentation

Documentation means the compiling of information that is relevant to a child's current circumstances and the search for his or her missing family.

In any programme, the criteria for defining which children are to be documented must be made absolutely clear to everyone involved. Relevant training, together with monitoring to ensure that appropriate documentation is being carried out, must be incorporated into planning.

1 Basic principles

Documentation is not a 'psychological debriefing'; however, describing the events of

their separation can be profoundly distressing for children. To help them cope with the process:

- Only trained staff should carry out the interviews

- The child should be told what is happening and why

- Where possible, interviews should be carried out in private

- The child should be made to feel as comfortable and secure as possible

- Children should be allowed all the time they need (this may mean lengthy interviews)

Where there are many separated children, staff may feel under pressure to hurry through the documentation. To avoid rushing the children and therefore jeopardising the quality of the information and causing distress to the children, it may be necessary to find ways of sharing the work: for example, specialist tracing staff can train and supervise others — such as carers or teachers — who are able to spend more time collecting information from the children. In emergencies, priority can be given to certain types of children, such as those 'without address' (see page 26).

It is essential for any tracing programme to have the capacity to train, monitor and supervise newly-recruited staff.

2 Photographs

A photograph is often taken as part of the documentation process; it provides a record of the child for reference and verification purposes, and may also be used for tracing. As photographs are sometimes the only means of tracing for children who are very young or are otherwise unable to give information about themselves, they should always be taken as soon as possible after separation.

A tracing programme must have access to appropriate photographic equipment. The number of photographs to be taken, the way the photographs are used and the equipment to be employed will depend upon the circumstances. Where more than one agency is sharing the task of documentation, this should be discussed between agencies and procedures agreed. The taking and storage of photographs is discussed more fully in Chapter Eight of this guide and on page 125 of the training manual.

4C Tracing

The aim of tracing is to find a long-term solution that is 'in the best interests of the child'; in most cases, this will mean a return to the family. Tracing should be carried out on behalf of every separated child, unless there is conclusive proof that all members of the child's family are dead.

Tracing that does not result in family reunification still serves a useful purpose, as it can clarify the options for long-term care and give the child access to reliable information about his or her family. Similarly, tracing in circumstances where reunification is not immediately possible should be carried out with a view to re-establishing family contact (see page 57).

In certain circumstances, however, tracing can endanger the life of the child or family, for example when it draws attention to someone who is at risk of being attacked or detained. In such cases, tracing may have to be delayed.

1 The techniques of tracing

Tracing can take a variety of forms, but in all cases the methods used should fit the circumstances: for example, a photo tracing campaign in a refugee camp, or mass tracing in a large-scale emergency.

Here are brief descriptions of the most common ways of carrying out tracing; fuller details are given on page 96 of the training manual.

Spontaneous tracing

Parents actively search for their children and children actively search for their parents. The method can be extremely effective in the days and weeks immediately following separation — especially if the separation has occurred locally — but tends to become less successful as time goes on. This type of tracing should be supported by a mass information campaign to explain where the children might be, launched as soon as possible after the emergency.

Red Cross messages

This alternative method of spontaneous tracing involves parents or children sending messages via the ICRC to the place where they believe their children/parents are to be found, and the parent/child searching out such messages from ICRC offices.

Case-by-case tracing

People from NGOs or other agencies — including government employees and the staff of institutions — go to specific places to search for the family of the child, using information from the child's documentation form. This method is very time-consuming, labour-intensive and demanding of transport.

Centre-based tracing

The centres caring for separated children trace on behalf of the children in their charge. This is particularly effective when the children originate from the surrounding area. The centre staff have the opportunity to develop a relationship with the child, which can make tracing easier. However, since these staff depend for their livelihood on the continued existence of the centre, they may not be motivated to carry out the tracing. Linking their future employment with community-based work may help to resolve this problem.

Inter-centre tracing

Centres actively involved in tracing exchange information about children who originate from the locality and carry out tracing for one another. In the past, this method has usually been confined to international NGOs, which are more likely to have good communications with one another.

Photo tracing

This method has produced good results in certain settings — notably refugee or displaced persons camps, where the population is living in a restricted area — and when used immediately after the separations have taken place. In other situations, however, it has frequently led to misidentification. Complex verification procedures need to be followed, especially with younger children. Photo tracing is an expensive and labour-intensive technique, but it is sometimes the only hope for children who cannot provide information about themselves.

Cross-referencing

Tracing requests are completed by parents or relatives and cross-referenced against

the child's form or file; this can be done either manually, using a card index, or on a computer database. Where a match is found, reunification can be arranged. For this method to be successful, a centralised database is needed (see page 86).

Using the media and other forms of publicity

This method can fulfil two functions: publicising the tracing programme as a whole and tracing on behalf of specific children. It can involve television, radio, newspapers and the use of posters, but its success will depend on how many people have access to the media chosen; more than one medium may therefore have to be used.

Baby tracing

Mothers who have lost babies are taken to centres and asked to try to identify their missing children. This method has proved successful where there is a concentration of mothers and babies separated as a result of specific incidents. Verification is a problem, however, as there is unlikely to be adequate information about the babies; it must be carefully done (see page 136 of the training manual).

Mass tracing

Using the entire information base on children separated from their families (whether in country of origin or in exile), lists are produced for each area of origin. Via the local authorities, public meetings are arranged where these lists are displayed or read out and photographs are displayed. This method allows a large number of cases to be dealt with at one time; the meetings can also be used to document children in foster families, to complete tracing request forms and to spread information about the tracing programme, the rights of children etc.

Individual family casework (also known as family mediation)

This is not a tracing method, but a way of getting children back home to their families. Many of the children living in centres have been placed there voluntarily by their parents, who believe that their children will be better off. The children themselves may have been told to lie and say that they have no family. Individual casework is required to identify such children and work with them and their families towards reunification.

2   Good practice in tracing

Selecting the most appropriate methods of tracing and reunification requires careful analysis of the composition of the population and of how children became separated.

The decision about which method or methods to use should be made locally and within an agreed operational framework that involves all agencies taking part in tracing activities; this does not mean, however, that everyone must use the same method. Regular meetings can be held between the participating agencies to monitor how the agreement is working in practice.

In the past, agencies have not always kept to these initial agreements. One solution is to include a monitoring clause in any memorandum of understanding or inter-agency agreement; this provides a formal basis for discussing and resolving the problem at local level or for taking it to a higher level if necessary.

In practice, a variety of tracing methods may be used; for example:

- Computer cross-matching may be carried out for all children whose families are searching for them, resulting directly in reunifications

- Lists of names by place of origin may be used in mass tracing, thereby solving a proportion of cases
- Centres may carry out tracing locally for individual children

All these methods are complementary and can be used simultaneously. The key principle is co-ordination, so as to maximise the effectiveness of the tracing and avoid duplication.

Programmes must be flexible and have the capacity to respond to opportunities as they arise.

> **In Rwanda in 1995 many babies were separated from their families during the closure of one of the displaced persons camps. The babies were taken to one centre and all the agencies collaborated to carry out a baby tracing programme in response to this need.**

Regular inter-agency meetings are the best way of discussing new approaches. Tracing methodologies can and should be innovative, as long as they give first priority to protection of the child. For example, children should go on speculative tracing trips only in exceptional circumstances (see page 93 of the training manual).

Tracing should not be considered complete until all reasonable efforts to locate family members have failed. However, active tracing may be discontinued when the child reaches the age of majority. When this happens, the child's details should remain in the information system so that enquiries from family can be answered.

3 Verification

The purpose of verification is to prevent the child from being handed over to the wrong person. This can happen by accident — perhaps because of mistaken identity or bureaucratic errors — or for more malevolent reasons, such as a desire to take revenge on the child's family, to remove a witness, to use the child as forced labour or to exploit the child sexually.

Verification also confirms the willingness of the child and the family member to be reunited.

Official documents, such as birth certificates, are unlikely to be available, so other methods must be used. It is usually a case of cross-checking the information provided by the family member with that recorded on the child's documentation form and, if they match, confirming verbally with the child. If available, a photograph of the adult is shown to the child. Where little information about the child is available, as with those 'without address', more elaborate methods have been developed in order to protect children; staff working on tracing programmes should be familiar with these (see page 136 of the training manual).

4D Reunification

Reunification of the child with a family member is the objective of tracing and verification. Ideally, this will be with one or both parents; in national and international law, parents have the right to raise their own children.

If reunification with the parents is not possible — perhaps because they are dead, impossible to locate or in another country — reunification with other members of the

family is the alternative. This does not preclude continued efforts to trace the parents. As a general rule, reunification with any adult member of the family can be considered; many societies expect relatives to assume responsibility for children whose natural parents are dead or missing. Decisions about reunification with family members should, however, be guided by local law (including customary law) and practice.

Reunification should be carefully planned, and there should be an assessment of whether the family is willing and able to take the child. In all cases the wishes of the child and the family should be taken into account. These are major decisions which should not be taken lightly or left to inexperienced staff to make unaided. The staff of a tracing programme must have the expertise to make such judgements.

1 Preparing for reunification

In all but the most straightforward of cases, the child, the family and the community must be prepared for reunification. Time should be set aside to discuss future plans and explain what will happen and when. In some cases, there will be an exchange of photographs or correspondence, or even a family visit.

Where children are reunited with close relatives whom they know well, or the period of separation has been short, less preparation will be required. But where the structure of the family has changed — for example, through remarriage — readjustment is likely to be more difficult and more careful preparation will be required.

This more intensive preparation takes time and is beyond the capacity of some tracing programmes. It should ideally be carried out by people who will remain in touch with the child and family after reunification. In some countries, this can be done through a formal social welfare structure at local level or through the church. In others, a network linked to the tracing programme — such as community monitors in Liberia or animateurs in DRC — has been used.

2 Reunification into difficult circumstances

Anyone working on tracing programmes is constantly confronted by the problem of families who would like to take their children back but are unable to do so because they are too poor.

Some tracing programmes provide reunification or resettlement kits, which are intended to provide a short-term boost to the family's economic situation. In some cases these appear to have persuaded families to take their child back.

Any support that is given to reunited children alone is likely to cause resentment among other families in the neighbourhood, who may be just as badly off. If agencies working with separated children are able to provide material assistance, this may be best channelled through the community.

In practical terms, people working on tracing programmes should be aware of any other resources that may be available locally and whether there are other agencies to whom needy families can be referred (see page 82 of this guide and page 106 of the training manual).

Reunification with distant relatives can be problematic; there may be a reluctance on the part of the child or family member to live together, and such children may be at more risk of neglect, exploitation or abuse. These children may not be adequately protected without some form of follow-up (see Chapter Seven of this manual and page 113 of the training manual).

3   Special cases

Certain children and their families face exceptional problems.

> **Children evacuated from Rwanda during the 1994 conflict were taken for medical treatment to France and Italy, where they remained in many cases for two years or more. By then, many of them had forgotten their language and even their families, and they returned to vastly different circumstances from those to which they had become accustomed.**

In such cases, children and family should be given appropriate support — such as an exchange of letters and photographs — prior to reunification, time should be allowed for discussing fears and concerns, and practical arrangements should be made to deal with special problems such as language, disability or the need for continuing medical treatment.

Child soldiers

In many regions children are recruited or abducted into the military during armed conflicts; they leave because the conflict comes to an end, they escape or they are demobilised. Although a formal demobilisation process that includes children may be agreed, experience has shown that the process is often unsatisfactory and children's rights continue to be abused. For example, the inclusion of children in the official tally for demobilisation may actually lead to more children being conscripted, to enable the faction leaders or rebel forces to hold on to their trained under-age combatants.

The terms 'child fighters', 'child soldiers' or 'child combatants' are used to describe children up to the age of 18 years who have been recruited forcibly or voluntarily into the military. However, many young people who are older than this by the time of their demobilisation may have been with the military for many years and be in as much need of assistance as those under 18 years; programmes should therefore be flexible regarding their age criteria.

Child soldiers are more likely to be boys, but girls are also found amongst the combatants. Girls are also frequently abducted and used for sexual and domestic services. Many are subjected to rape or sexual abuse over a long period; the problems they face are different from those that boys face, and solutions— including reintegration into their communities — are often more difficult.

People working with former child soldiers should understand that they will have had a range of experiences. Not all children are actively involved in fighting and acts of violence; some carry out peripheral duties such as cooking, cleaning and portering. Illegal drugs are commonly used to incite child soldiers to violence.

Agencies intending to work with ex-combatant children should be involved in planning for their demobilisation, so that appropriate strategies can be agreed to support their reintegration into their family or other structures.

Former child soldiers may have special protection needs. Confidentiality is a key issue here: if they require family tracing, separate systems (including information systems) should be set up for their benefit and there should be clear guidelines about information sharing.

Co-ordination between agencies working with former child soldiers and a clear definition of roles and responsibilities are essential.

Former child soldiers should always be given the opportunity to register for family

tracing. Interim care may be required for those who cannot return home immediately. Training and support for staff, particularly those working in interim care centres, is essential (see page 116 of the training manual).

Preparations for the reunification of former child soldiers must take into account the need to shield them against risks such as discrimination, targeted attacks and further recruitment. Agencies must acquire an understanding of the local political situation and of the attitudes of the military and the community. If necessary, discussion should be held with community leaders and elders as well as the family with which the child will be reunited. A programme of awareness raising with the community should also take place before the child returns home.

A well co-ordinated support structure and information system should be set up so that the return of former child soldiers can be monitored. In Angola, for example, many children never reached their intended destination after demobilisation. Access to specific areas for the purposes of monitoring and follow-up should be negotiated; if international agencies are denied access, it may be possible for local organisations or structures, such as the churches, to be trained and supported to carry out the follow-up.

4   How to organise the reunification

This process has been the subject of much debate. In many cases, social workers or tracers take the child home, where some kind of ceremony takes place. This serves as a public demonstration of the family's acceptance of its responsibility for the child, and thus helps to ensure his or her long-term protection. Recently, however, large-scale programmes have attempted to organise mass reunifications, where a number of children are taken to a point in the community and collected by their families. This is more suitable for situations where the separation has been recent and short, and where both parties are less likely to have significant concerns about reunification.

Although the method used to reunite families will depend on the scale of the programme and the resources available, if there are concerns about protection an individual approach is clearly preferable.

When large numbers of children are involved, there is a danger of reunification simply turning into a trucking operation. This is not desirable; the inevitable preoccupation with logistics should not blind agencies to the social and emotional needs of children at this time.

5   When not to reunite children with their family

Even when the family of a child has been traced, reunification is not always the preferred option. Numerous provisions in national and international law outline the right and obligation of parents to care for their biological children. However, this right can be overridden where it is felt that the best interests of the child would not be served by reunion with the parents (see page 108 of the training manual). It may be decided that reunification is not in the best interests of the child:

- If there is a likelihood of the child being mistreated or neglected if reunited

- If the child gives a clear indication that he or she does not wish to live with the family

- If, despite casework, the family refuses to accept the child

Where there are serious concerns about reunification, decisions should be made on an individual basis, taking account of the long-term prospects for the child, the

wishes of both the child and the family, and the stipulations of national and international law; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that the wishes of the child must be taken into account (see Information Sheet 2 on page 103). The over-arching principle must always be the best interests of the child.

6 When reunification is not immediately possible

This usually occurs:

- In cases of cross-border separation, where one or other party is outside the country of origin and does not wish to return and where reunification outside the country has been refused by the authorities (see Information Sheet 2 on page 103)

- When the security situation or concerns about protection make family reunification inadvisable

- When there are problems of access: for example, when areas of the country are held by an opposing force in civil disturbances

This subject is discussed more fully in Chapter Seven of this guide and on page 108 of the training manual.

In such circumstances, agencies should make every effort to re-establish and maintain family contact until reunification becomes possible, using Red Cross messages or other forms of communication. Action may also be taken to promote reunification, such as advocacy on behalf of individual children or groups of children with the national authorities; the problem may also be highlighted through international advocacy.

7 Alternative long-term solutions

If reunification is impossible, children need long-term placements that will meet their developmental needs until adulthood. This placement should ideally be within the community from which they originate. If, however, children are obliged to remain outside their own community, efforts should be made at least to keep them in touch with their own culture, for example by placing them in a family from their region of origin.

These long-term placements include fostering, adoption, group care and independent living, all of which are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. Inevitably, some children will remain in institutions, and it is important that they should be prepared for what will happen after they leave: for example, they should be given training in basic life skills and help with finding work and somewhere to live. Without this, girls brought up in institutions often have few options but to stay on and become carers themselves. Boys also face enormous problems in establishing a place for themselves in the community.

There are rarely, if ever, enough resources to carry out regular follow-up visits for each child reunited. For this reason, agencies should devise clear criteria to help staff identify which children should be followed up; this should be done during the period of preparation for reunification. It is also important for agencies to identify who will be responsible for follow-up, what the purpose of that follow-up is — to provide social or material support — and most importantly, what can be done if problems are found.

Follow-up as part of community monitoring and broader community support is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

5 Interim care and placement

This chapter is for programme co-ordinators and field managers. Senior managers should also be familiar with concepts of non-institutional care and child protection and the legal issues related to fostering. Arguments for non-institutional care need to be fully understood; staff must also be aware of the protection issues that arise in all forms of interim care.

Despite everyone's best efforts at prevention, there will always be children who become separated from their families as a result of emergencies. In addition, family separations will continue as a result of low-level conflict, food insecurity and chronic poverty.

The focus of this chapter is the care of children during the period between separation and reunification. It considers the problems of providing physical protection for children and promoting their general development in circumstances that also support tracing and reunification. It is generally agreed that children are best cared for in a family environment, but for children who have become separated, the process of family tracing and reunification can be lengthy. This is particularly true when large numbers of children are involved.

5A Principles of interim care

Key principles for agencies planning the provision of interim care are:

- It is essential to make enquiries about the informal systems that currently function in the community, and to find out whether traditional arrangements for the care of separated, destitute or orphaned children have been affected as a result of the emergency
- Wherever possible, interventions should build on these informal systems
- A capacity to document all separated children for tracing purposes as well as to monitor and follow them up for child protection purposes must be incorporated into planning
- The sustainability of all child care projects must be analysed

1 The impact of emergencies

All communities have their own ways of dealing with children in need of care. This may be:

- Within extended families
- Through informal community networks
- Through formal or informal fostering and adoption systems
- By placing the children in institutions

'Traditional' or informal fostering arrangements, involving well-understood obligations

and entitlements, are widespread in Africa — and many other parts of the world — but these arrangements can be disrupted by conflict, famine and aid interventions.

Although fostering based on existing social networks will continue during emergency situations, separated children may also be fostered by families not previously known to them. This may involve:

- 'Spontaneous' fostering, where a child is found by a family and taken in by them, *or*

- 'Arranged' fostering, which is usually organised by humanitarian agencies along the lines of fostering schemes in developed countries

Outside interventions, including the setting-up of feeding centres or specific programmes for separated children, will probably affect all local forms of child care. To minimise the potential disruption of local systems, interventions should aim to support these structures. This requires a good understanding of the child care already being provided within extended families and communities.

There is a tendency for institutional care to proliferate in emergencies; steps should be taken to minimise this wherever possible (see Chapter Two). There is no single blueprint for providing interim care, only a range of options. These are described below.

5B Fostering

Fostering refers to situations where children are cared for in a household outside their immediate biological family.

Fostering is usually understood to be a temporary arrangement, and in most cases the birth parents retain their parental rights and responsibilities. As part of this arrangement there is an understanding of the child's place in the foster family. In developing countries, the status of the fostered child may differ from that of other children in the family, whereas in the North, the expectation is that fostered children will be treated in the same way as other children.

Children are generally far better off growing up in a family setting than in a large and impersonal institution. Even so, there are risks for children living in a substitute or foster family: they can be neglected, abused, exploited or have their rights denied. Particularly during large-scale emergencies, there is not always the opportunity to check on the welfare of children taken in by families or placed with them.

The term 'fostering' is used to describe a range of different forms of care, including:

1 Informal fostering

Most fostering in developing countries occurs informally, when a child is taken into a family that may or may not be related and no third party is involved in the arrangement. Informal fostering may be endorsed and supported, directly or indirectly, by the local community.

Informal fostering of this kind takes place in many situations, including emergencies. Families may have a variety of reasons for taking in children:

- The child may be part of the extended family

- The families may be linked by traditional obligations

- The motive may be purely humanitarian

- There may be an economic or social advantage in accepting the child

Although arrangements of this type are often based on traditional custom and practice, and will therefore have built-in safeguards, these may be weakened as a consequence of conflict or other emergencies, such as famine.

2 Spontaneous fostering

Spontaneous fostering refers to the situation where a child is taken in by a family without any arrangement or contact between the families concerned. This can occur during times of conflict when a child is found alone, perhaps because of the death of his or her family. During recent emergencies, many separated children have been spontaneously fostered, either by members of their community of origin or by members of the local community in a country of asylum. This type of fostering has been responsible for saving many lives. However, such children may be at risk of exploitation, particularly when taken into families outside their own community.

3 Formal fostering

This is an arrangement for placing a child in a family that usually involves a third party such as a social welfare agency, government department, religious body or national or international NGO. The fostering may or may not be governed by legislation.

In the North, this kind of fostering has been seen as an alternative to institutions for many years, and is regarded as the most satisfactory long-term solution for children who have no family or who are unable to live with their family for other reasons. In developing countries, similarly, formal fostering may be the only acceptable long-term solution for separated children for whom tracing is unsuccessful.

Programmes of formal fostering require considerable resources, and can only meet the needs of a relatively small number of children. Agencies planning to set up or support formal fostering must consider:

- The administrative and programme costs
- The infrastructure and resources required
- The management of the programme
- The handover of the programme

In some countries, the infrastructure for formal fostering may exist but it may not be widely accepted as an alternative to institutional care. However, the idea of fostering may be promoted by:

- Providing training for professionals, such as social workers, in how to support foster care
- Arranging visits and exchanges with social workers from other countries to share experience
- Running media campaigns

This method has been quite successful in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, where a social work infrastructure was already in place. However, the fact that foster families do not receive regular payment severely restricts the number of families able to take children.

4 Support for foster families

In developing countries, material support is not usually offered to families fostering children; it is not a sustainable practice, and may draw in families for the wrong reasons. But this reluctance greatly reduces the number of families willing to take children — particularly babies, where, if breast feeding is not possible, extra costs will be incurred in purchasing milk. Some programmes have enabled babies to be fostered by directly providing the families with milk formula. However, this is an expensive procedure that requires close monitoring and is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term.

Where support is provided to families fostering children, this may be more appropriately done through a grant or loan to improve the circumstances of the whole family.

A campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of fostering can help to encourage prospective families. Assessing motivation can be difficult; however, involving leaders or other respected members of the community may help in identifying suitable families.

5 Adolescents and fostering

The fostering of adolescents can be problematic, as they are more likely to be taken in as labour; girls in particular may be sexually abused and exploited. Other options, such as home construction programmes, may be more suitable (see below).

6 Key points

The following points should be noted by agencies wishing to support formal fostering:

- External evaluation and monitoring that focuses on child protection should be built into all funding proposals involving guardianship, fostering and adoption

- A long-term commitment of both funds and staff is needed: many NGOs are unable or unwilling to provide this, and for many governments recovering from conflicts, social welfare has a low priority

- Efforts should be made to harmonise governmental and non-governmental policies on fostering

- Policies on fostering should be developed and applied as quickly as possible in emergencies

- The community should be involved in selecting foster families, as this may reduce the likelihood of the children being neglected

- Local capacity to manage foster care should be developed, using appropriate local structures; follow-up should be linked to the development of community welfare structures

- Further research is needed into traditional substitute care and into the circumstances of children placed in foster families

5C Child rights and fostering

1 Access to tracing for fostered children

Children living in informal or spontaneous foster families are often 'invisible' and therefore may not be identified as separated. This may be because the children are in inaccessible areas or have been concealed by the community. Children may be hidden out of a desire to protect them — there may be suspicion about the aims of the tracing programme — or because the family wishes to keep them, either from altruism or for mercenary reasons (labour, future gain such as bride price etc).

Because fostered children are living in a family environment, they may not be seen as a priority by the people responsible for family tracing. However, all separated children have a right to re-establish ties with their families. Where a formal system of documentation exists, every separated child living in a foster family should be included. Information about tracing services should also be made available to children living outside family structures, such as street children.

2 The protection of fostered children

A major problem concerning children in unsupervised foster care is that their circumstances are unknown. While some fostered children may be well treated, others — whether they are from the same extended family or from elsewhere — are treated as outsiders, forced to work long hours, denied schooling and perhaps subjected to physical and sexual abuse.

As most fostering takes place against a backdrop of catastrophic events, families will be subject to extra stress. They may have no attachment to the child and feel no obligation to him or her.

Similar treatment may, of course, be experienced by children living in their own families, although they may receive a degree of protection through their place in an existing social structure.

3 Civil rights of children in informal foster care

Children who remain in informal fostering arrangements for long periods are unlikely to have their status formalised or made legal. This may have serious implications for their future in terms of inheritance and property rights. Fostering will not necessarily bestow on a child either civil or kinship status.

4 Children fostered outside country of origin

Children fostered outside their country of origin are in an even more vulnerable position with regard to civil and political rights. Such children will probably be stateless and disenfranchised; in countries where there is local instability, their long-term safety may also be in doubt.

5 Monitoring and follow-up

In order to protect the rights of children in foster families, there must be some means of monitoring and follow-up. Agencies promoting foster care should consider:

- Access to children: Is there free access at the moment, and is this likely to change in the future? Access might be denied either for political reasons — for example, the attitude of the government or non-state entities (NSEs) — or because transport is lacking, particularly where the only feasible mode of travel is by air

- Human and material resources: Agencies working with separated children should assess the sustainability of their arrangements and the likelihood of future access so as to minimise the risk of children being abandoned or abused. This is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

5D Removing children from foster families

It may be desirable or necessary to remove children for the following reasons:

- Family reunification (see Chapter Four)
- The protection of the child
- The best interests of the child
- The child's expressed wishes
- Voluntary repatriation or refoulement
- Security problems
- Infringement of their civil and political rights
- The government of the country of origin or host country demands their removal/return

Some of these reasons are only relevant to children in countries of asylum (see Chapter Six of this manual), but others will apply equally to children fostered in their country of origin.

1   Policy issues

Agencies working with separated children should make themselves familiar with local laws and conventions governing the removal of children from foster families. However, the application of such laws in practice can be problematic. The structures or capacity to enforce them may be lacking, and in some cases there may be no political will to do so. In all cases where there are concerns about government policy and its implementation and where questions of children's rights and best interests arise, the matter should be raised with government. It may also be appropriate to raise concerns with the committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child or other relevant human rights monitoring bodies.

Policy on the removal of children from foster care should be based on the well-established principles of protection and the best interests of the child, applied in the circumstances listed above. Policies should be formulated in consultation with the agencies working directly with the children concerned.

2   Who makes the decision to remove a child from foster care?

Legally, the parents of the child and the recognised government have authority to do

this. In countries of asylum, such decisions may also be made by UNHCR, which has a mandate to assist governments in these matters.

In practice, however, a number of parties may be involved, particularly where the political situation is unstable.

> **In the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1996–97 the decision to remove refugee children from Congolese families was reached jointly by the UN agencies, ICRC and national and international NGOs.**

Where there is a functioning legal system, agencies should work within this. Where children are fostered spontaneously and child protection issues are raised, the matter will normally come under the remit of the Department of Social Welfare or the equivalent authority.

If legal structures are not functioning, agencies should put pressure on local authorities to take responsibility for the protection of spontaneously-fostered children. UN agencies such as Unicef also have a key role in these circumstances.

5E Guardianship

In circumstances where children have no parents or known relatives, an adult or adults may assume a guardianship role. A guardian acts as a substitute for the absent parents in exercising some of the parental rights and duties. This does not necessarily involve a legal process, particularly where a relative becomes a temporary guardian in the absence of the parents.

Where there is an established system of guardianship, this is likely to include:

- *De facto* guardianship, private or public. Private guardianship usually involves a member of the extended family; public guardianship involves a state official, an agency or a charitable institution

- Legal guardianship. The guardian is appointed by the courts or through testamentary guardianship (that is, through a will)

Guardianship and physical custody (care and control) are conceptually different: guardianship may thus rest with one person or agency while the child resides with another individual who has 'care and control'.

In countries with a good social welfare infrastructure, procedures for the appointment of guardians for separated children are an important part of tracing programmes and of child protection.

> **This was true in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, where guardians were seen as a priority for certain groups, such as disabled children, and where the capacity existed to introduce such a system.**

The following principles should apply to guardianship:

- The guardian should be a person, such as a family member, a local authority official or a community leader

- An institution may not always be the most appropriate guardian; for example, if there is a choice between family life and a child continuing to live in an institution. This may give rise to a conflict of interests and a denial of the 'best interests of the child'.

- Where guardianship is relevant, a legal framework and appropriate procedures are essential. The responsibility of governments should be clear

Although these principles should apply to separated children in any situation, guardianship — which implies a one-to-one advocacy role — is less likely to be feasible under certain circumstances, such as large-scale refugee emergencies.

5F Adoption

Most separated children are not orphans, and their chief need is for reunification with their parents, not adoption.

1 Basic principles

Adoption, either during an emergency or afterwards, should only be considered if:

- There is no reasonable hope of successful tracing and of family reunification that is in the child's best interests

- A reasonable period (normally at least two years) has elapsed during which all feasible steps have been taken to trace the parents or other surviving family members

- The parent or guardian gives consent

- The child, if considered old enough, gives consent

Adoption in a country of asylum is not normally desirable. This is particularly true if there is the possibility of voluntary repatriation 'under conditions of safety and dignity' in the near future.

2 Inter-country adoption

Adoption should not be considered until it has been established that the child is legally free to be adopted. In practice, this means either that the parents are dead or that they have consented to the adoption. The consent of parents must be free and informed.

Placing children in an adoptive family in another country may only be considered if, in the words of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they 'cannot in any suitable way be cared for' in the country where they live (art. 21b).

Children who are adopted in another country are entitled to the same rights as any other children who are adopted; this means they should have access to information about their identity. Where inter-country adoptions are made, it is important that the children should always be accompanied by documentation of their identity (see Information Sheet 5 on page 110).

3 Adoption as a culturally specific concept

Within western societies, adoption is generally understood as a form of child care in which the child's parental rights and responsibilities are permanently transferred to the adopters, who are usually unrelated to the child by blood. The child normally takes the family name of the adopters.

In other societies, however, adoption may be understood quite differently:

- In some countries the idea of adoption is inconceivable; it is simply not considered possible for parental rights to be transferred to a person who is not related

- Adoption may indeed be practised, but in accordance with custom rather than as a judicial process

- In general, Islamic societies do not allow for adoption, but *kafalah* is a form of family care that does not involve a change in kinship status

- In some cultures where adoption is practised, the rights and needs of the adoptive parents take precedence over those of the child

If, during refugee emergencies, the question of the adoption of separated children arises, it is vital to consider the notion of adoption within the local cultural context.

5G   Institutional care

Residential institutions can rarely offer the degree of individual care a child requires in order to develop normally. Indeed, they often cannot even provide reasonable care and protection, leaving the children open to the risk of neglect and abuse.

But particularly during and immediately after conflicts, when mass killing and population displacement may be taking place, there is often a need for temporary care and protection. This should be organised in small groups and linked to the tracing system (see Chapter Two).

1   Addressing the problems of institutions

In Rwanda in 1994, when an estimated 20 to 30 per cent of the population had been killed or had fled, leaving behind many child survivors, there was little alternative to providing institutional care. However, one of the larger international organisations developed a model of care that attempted to address some of the inherent problems of institutions:

- Policy and practice to support family tracing and reunification. It was made clear to staff and residents that the institutions were only temporary; staff members were trained to participate in tracing, working closely with a group of children and following their progress

- Activities to support eventual family placement were initiated. For example, children were involved in the running of institutions and in the same kind of activities, such as carrying water or fetching wood, as they would have undertaken in their own home. This eased the transition when they went home

- Most importantly, systems were developed that prevented children from being forgotten if tracing was not successful. Such children were classified as 'hard to place' and a special team was formed to arrange alternative care for them

Some problems will always persist: one of the most intractable is the fact that staff depend on the institutions for employment and are understandably resistant to their closure. Projects that include an element of community support or outreach may help to solve this problem by providing alternative job opportunities.

2   Changing attitudes

Because residential institutions or 'orphanages' are a simple and apparently effective way of helping children, they provide an excellent focus for fund raising. The challenge for agencies is to raise awareness — particularly among religious organisations and some of the larger international agencies — of (i) the harm such institutions can do, especially to a child's prospects of social reintegration, and (ii) the need to find alternative ways of supporting entire families in emergencies and situations of chronic poverty.

The international community, donors and the media must also be lobbied if there is to be a real shift in attitudes. Examples of community-based alternatives to institutional care are an essential tool in this lobbying. Documentation of any innovative programmes should therefore be included in both the management and planning of work.

3   Integrating group care into the community

Institutions can, however, be transformed to promote community-based care of children, for example by:

- Supporting groups of children who have spontaneously come together to form household units
- Providing day care rather than residential care
- Providing care in small group homes

Other approaches have been developed to redirect resources from institutions to the community:

Income-generating support

In a project supported by a church group in Burundi, widows take care of very young separated children. Basic housing is provided and the women are given sewing machines and fabric. Profits from the products eventually enable the women to support themselves and the children.

Community-based foster homes

A small group of children is cared for by foster parents — often widows whose children have grown up — who are respected members of the local community. This 'family' is supported with housing, land, agricultural implements and household equipment. The aim is that they should become self sufficient with the support of the local community.

Home construction programmes

These programmes have helped groups of adolescents to find a long-term solution. In some instances, governments have provided the land and agencies have provided the building materials and technical support for the building of houses. Adolescents are able to remain living independently in small groups for as long as they need.

5H # Separated children living in other circumstances

Many separated children fall outside any form of family or residential care. These include children in child-headed households and street children.

1 Child-headed households

During recent emergencies, child-headed households have been found both in refugee communities and the country of origin. These households may consist of:

- Groups of children (sometimes siblings) whose parents are dead or missing
- Children who have come together and wish to remain living in a group

In these groups, the older children generally take care of the younger ones.

Life for these children can be very difficult; the older ones are faced with responsibilities beyond their years and the younger ones may be exploited. If the oldest child marries, the younger children may be left to fend for themselves. Where separated children wish to remain together this should generally be supported; but there may be circumstances — for example, where very young children are involved — when alternative arrangements should be made.

In refugee communities, members of child-headed households should be helped to gain access to the same food rations and services as the rest of the population. The households can be supervised and supported by appropriate members of the community, such as leaders, members of child-care committees or community monitors.

For children in their community of origin, remaining in the family home may be essential if they are to preserve their land rights. The children will need help to ensure that they have legal and social protection.

What is a child-headed household?

The definition of a child-headed household should be clearly understood when assessing the needs of children living independently in groups. Many of these groups are in fact supported by extended family living nearby or even in the same compound. The children may be living in separate buildings for purely practical reasons: perhaps because there are too many people in the main house, or for reasons related to inheritance. Identifying such groups as 'child-headed households' and targeting them for assistance risks encouraging more children to split from — or be abandoned by — their family or extended family.

All agencies and local authorities should agree on a definition of child-headed households and scrutinise carefully the way in which assistance is provided; the watchwords should be caution and flexibility.

Where support is required, this may be provided in a variety of forms:

- A food-for-work programme that enables children to prepare land provided by the local authorities and start up agricultural production
- Supervision of the households by selected members of the community
- Participation in co-operative farming ventures
- Giving the children training in various trades from local craftspeople and equipping them with the necessary tools

Programmes to support children in these households should be appropriate to their age and capacity, and should not interfere with their chances of attending school.

2 Street children

Children living on the streets are a familiar sight in many countries. Their numbers tend to rise significantly following conflict, famine or other events that exacerbate socio-economic problems.

Some children see living on the streets as their best option; others have no alternative. The fact that children are on the streets during and after emergencies may represent:

- A failure of tracing

- A failure to find family or other long-term placement

- An unsuitable placement without follow-up

- A failure to identify a child as separated and in need of tracing

- Socio-economic breakdown or other forms of stress within the family

> **Research recently carried out in Luanda, Angola, showed that many children living on the streets had family but simply could not cope with the difficulties involved in living at home. Poverty, alcoholism, physical abuse and changes in the family make-up were among the reasons children cited for leaving home. Young children were often faced with the responsibility of caring for very small children and performing all the household chores while the primary caregiver went out to work. These circumstances can be paralleled in many other countries.**

Children living on the streets may have survived conflict, spent time as soldiers, suffered physical and emotional hardship and been brutalised by their experiences. Life on the streets continues to expose them to the risk of hardship, physical and sexual abuse, rape and HIV/AIDS, and for girls, unwanted pregnancy. Girls who become sex workers have little chance of ever returning to a 'normal' life, and in many cultures will have become unmarriageable.

Projects for street children need to understand why children choose to leave their families. Access to health, education and training should be a priority in work with children who do not have the option of returning to their families or communities. In some cases, providing support for their families may offer a solution; for example, by providing crèches in urban areas so that older children do not have to take responsibility for younger children.

> **A project in Bujumbura provides food for street children; at the same time they are interviewed, in order to identify those who want help with tracing their families. Some children are encouraged to work — perhaps at the preparation of food or looking after younger children — and informal education is provided. Drop-in or day centres can give the children the base they need and contact with adults who can give them advice and information.**

For the purposes of this guide, the key message is that children living on the streets who do not know the whereabouts of their family should have access to information about tracing services.

Agencies working in this field can learn much from one another; as with all types of work with separated children, co-ordination between agencies is critical.

6 Working with separated refugee children

This section is for managers and programme co-ordinators, particularly those working in cross-border operations and with refugees.

UNHCR is the lead agency for the protection and assistance of refugee children in countries of asylum. Field-based management of work with separated children is usually undertaken by the UNHCR Community Services Officers (CSOs). The presence of an experienced CSO during emergencies involving refugees can be critical for successful co-ordination, as was demonstrated during the crises in Democratic Republic of Congo during 1996 and 1997.

CSOs are responsible for ensuring not only that the urgent needs of the most vulnerable groups are met, but also that they are met in a way which encourages families and communities to protect and care for those at risk. Hence CSOs are instrumental in guiding policy on work with separated refugee children.

The UNHCR protection officers also have a key role to play:

- In individual cases of concern
- In promoting and, where necessary, facilitating dialogue between agencies on more complex questions involving the best interests of separated children; for example, when repatriation means a child leaving foster care in a country of asylum

6A Working in refugee settings

Working with separated children in these settings requires an understanding of:

- How a refugee camp functions socially and politically, and the effect this has on work with separated children
- The practical implications of tracing in a camp
- Cross-border tracing and reunification

As elsewhere, co-ordination between the agencies involved in all aspects of work with separated children is vital. This applies as much to policies for preventing further voluntary separations as to the tracing activities themselves.

1 Understanding camp life

Refugee camps quickly develop their own social and political structures, and refugee leaders are usually elected. Agencies must try to understand the particular social and political dynamics in the camps where they are working, as these will have major implications for anyone providing assistance. It is also likely that the refugees themselves will be involved in work with separated children, either informally or as employees of agencies.

An assessment of how displacement has affected informal social networks and child-care arrangements should be made as quickly as possible. In the meantime, agencies should involve the community in work with separated children. Agencies should adopt a flexible approach until they become better informed about the situation; and they should aim to be as transparent as possible in their activities by holding regular meetings and maintaining a dialogue with community leaders and representatives of different population groups.

> **In Karagwe, Tanzania, in 1994, SCF UK set up 'child-care committees' to participate in work with separated children and to collaborate with the tracing staff employed by SCF. The aim was to build on the community's capacity to care for separated children. Incentives were offered to individuals, the committees grew to an unmanageable size and there were instances of corruption.**
>
> **The original committees were therefore disbanded and new, smaller ones were formed, with members largely from the same area of origin as the children. This time no incentives were offered and greater care was taken over selection; training was also provided. These committees remained in place until the refugees repatriated, playing an important role in the care of separated children. This second initiative was set up in a more participative way and therefore took longer to get going, but it seems to have been much more successful. The incident illustrates the importance of striking a balance between getting activities under way and taking the time to discover how a community functions.**

Employing refugees as workers has a number of advantages, not least the fact that it provides them with an occupation and an income. As members of the camp community, however, they will be affected by the prevailing attitudes and beliefs. This can in turn influence the attitude children take towards repatriation. Where ethnic or political tensions are high, staff should be carefully selected, supported and monitored.

> **During 1994–97, when Rwandan refugees were living in camps in countries of asylum, everyone, including the children, was subjected to a great deal of 'misinformation' and propaganda in the camps. Many children initially agreed to reunification, but during the period that elapsed before the transport was ready, they were persuaded to change their minds after being told, for example, that 'their heads would be chopped off' if they returned.**

Greater awareness of what is happening in the community and of how public opinion can be influenced may help to avoid such situations.

2 Tracing in refugee camps

In some respects, tracing in refugee camps is straightforward: there is a more or less closed community, so techniques such as photo tracing have been successful. However, the fact that everyone is dependent on aid introduces other problems, such as children being presented as separated in the hope of receiving extra assistance. This reinforces the need for:

- Clear information campaigns aimed at the refugees, outlining the objectives of documentation

- Clearly-expressed and widely-understood policies focusing on appropriate community-based care of children and family reunification

- Experienced staff to be deployed in emergencies

See Chapters Four and Five of this manual and page 78 of the training manual.

6B The question of repatriation

Refugees may repatriate themselves spontaneously, or their return may be organised for them. Organised voluntary repatriation is the responsibility of UNHCR, which will act when it considers that conditions in the country of origin are suitable for a return. Cases of forced repatriation are referred to as 'refoulement'.

1   Voluntary repatriation and separated children

Voluntary repatriation is usually viewed as the most desirable long-term solution both by the refugees themselves and by the international community. For separated refugee children, the guiding principle should be to find a long-term solution that is in the child's best interest. These solutions could include:

- Voluntary repatriation

- Local settlement or integration; this may involve foster care in a refugee or local family

- Resettlement in a third country; this is normally considered only when the first two options are not viable

The likelihood of family reunification should be the major factor in deciding upon which solution to adopt.

Separated children may repatriate individually or as part of a mass repatriation. In the latter case they may travel alone, in a foster family or in a group. Preparation for repatriation is discussed below.

2   Giving children the choice

Children must be given an opportunity to express their concerns about repatriation. There are various reasons why separated children may not wish to return:

- They may associate their country of origin with acts of violence they witnessed and fear that things have not changed

- They may believe that their current circumstances are preferable — in emotional, social or material terms — to those to which they will return

- Tracing may have been unsuccessful

- Children living in refugee camps can be the target of propaganda or they may be coerced by adults who do not wish to return.

- Adolescents in particular may have perpetrated or witnessed acts of violence and fear revenge

- Other adolescents may have married or entered into relationships with local people; some may have children

In order to make an informed decision, children must be provided with adequate

information in a form they can understand. Agencies working directly with separated children should collaborate with UNHCR in ensuring that children have access to all the information they need. A child's capacity to understand this information and make an informed decision will depend on age and maturity. It is generally assumed that children of 15–16 years and over should be able to understand the implications of the various options.

Agencies should also make provision for staff to spend time with children who do not wish to return, discussing their fears and future options. Additional measures to help children reach a decision might include exchanges of information, photographs and messages, testimonies from peers who have returned, and even visits.

But if large numbers of separated children are involved, it will probably be impossible to give each child the individual attention he or she needs to make an informed decision. Many will have little real choice about what happens to them.

In these circumstances, protection of the children must be the paramount consideration. There may be specific groups, such as adolescents, about whom there are concerns; these should be given priority in assessing what is in their 'best interests'. If there is evidence that children's basic rights to protection are being infringed, agencies should advocate on their behalf.

3   The principle of 'non-refoulement'

International refugee law outlines the principle of 'non-refoulement', which prohibits a state from expelling or returning a refugee home if the person concerned has a 'well-founded fear of persecution'. The threat of military recruitment or forced labour, resulting in family separation or exclusion from health and educational services, are all concerns particularly relevant to children. Adolescents may also fear revenge attacks or detention in prison.

All repatriation of refugees must be voluntary within the framework of international law (see information sheet on page 110 for a more detailed discussion of the legal framework).

6C   Organised voluntary repatriation

According to its 1950 Statute, UNHCR should 'assist governments and … private organisations to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of … refugees or their assimilation within new national communities'.

Information is central here: only an informed decision can be a voluntary decision. Campaigns to provide accurate, objective information to refugees are UNHCR's responsibility and a key means of promoting voluntary repatriation.

Programmes of voluntary repatriation should go hand in hand with programmes to:

- Provide monitoring and follow-up to protect the children on their return; it is the responsibility of UNHCR to ensure that systems for this are in place

- Increase local capacity to support vulnerable families on return

An inter-agency group of organisations working with children should be the forum for exploring how to meet this objective. There should also be dialogue with UNHCR on the monitoring of returning refugee children for the purposes of protection.

1 Preparation for large-scale repatriation

Large-scale repatriations require a co-ordinated response from all agencies on both sides of the border. Agencies working with separated children should:

- Establish links between agencies on both sides of the border; agencies may need to expand their capacity to process information on both sides of the border

- Establish programme links with the country of origin to ensure that adequate reception, care, protection and tracing will be arranged

- Ensure that all separated children are documented for tracing, and that this information is forwarded to the country of origin, so that intensive tracing can be carried out and reception and interim care planned

- Intensify tracing activities in both the country of exile and the country of origin. It has been found that some families who abandoned children during their exile are prepared to take them back when a return is imminent

- Set up procedures for transporting individual separated children and ensuring that their documentation accompanies them. (Be aware, however, that providing transport for specific groups can cause problems, including further separations)

- If necessary, make special arrangements for groups of children who have been living together — such as sibling groups or child-headed households — and have been maintained in these groups in the camp. Like the others, these children should be involved in decisions about their future

2 Preventing separation during repatriation

Children in foster families

- If there are children in foster families among the refugee/displaced community, the families should ideally be interviewed to check whether existing arrangements are satisfactory and if so, whether they can be maintained

- A mass information campaign should be launched to persuade foster families not to abandon children but to return with them to the country of origin. Information should be given about what assistance may be available on return

- This campaign should target priority groups of separated children — such as adolescents or very young children — as they are the most likely to be abandoned or lost track of

- In situations where incentives were previously given to foster families, there is a risk that children will be abandoned if these are discontinued. If families indicate that they do not wish to keep fostered children with them, the children should be identified and alternative arrangements should be made for them

- Close liaison with UNHCR is very important at this stage, as it has overall responsibility for organising the repatriation and will be registering refugees for return

- Prevention of separation work, as outlined in Chapter Two of this guide, should start as soon as a repatriation is planned. It should involve the affected population and staff of other agencies such as medical and logistics personnel.

As with emergency preparedness, a major investment of resources at this stage will prove to be cost effective in the long run

3 Forced repatriation or refoulement

This can occur when:

- Refugees are expelled in violation of the principle of non-refoulement

- They are compelled to leave by *force majeure* or unsatisfactory conditions in the country of asylum

UNHCR's primary responsibility is to offer individual protection. At the heart of this protection is the principle of non-refoulement. Therefore, when there is a threat of refoulement, UNHCR must do everything in its power to prevent it and to maintain individual protection.

Refoulement is an unsatisfactory context in which to deliver services and provide protection. In these circumstances, the presence of agencies working with separated children may give some protection and help to prevent further separations. Nevertheless, managers may be forced to decide between speaking out against refoulment and risking expulsion and keeping quiet and being able to continue with their humanitarian work. Decisions should be made in consultation with agency headquarters, and all activities should promote child rights and protection.

UNHCR has a mandate to ensure that a monitoring system is in place to protect refugees who have been returned to their country of origin. Agencies should discuss how they can assist UNHCR to carry out this mandate once the population has returned.

4 Repatriation to areas of conflict

Children may wish to repatriate in order to be reunited with their family in conflict areas. Responsibility for cross-border reunification lies with UNHCR or ICRC, but all agencies working with separated children may be involved in such decisions.

If a child's family has been traced and they want the child back, every effort should be made to help them reunite. But if agencies feel that the circumstances are too dangerous and that monitoring and follow-up cannot be provided after the child has returned, they may advise the family to wait until the situation stabilises.

Decisions of this kind should only be made after consulting the child, the family, national staff and the local community on what they believe is in the child's best interests. The situation to which the child will return should be compared with their current situation (which may also contain elements of risk).

Issues to consider are:

- Is the distress caused by separation less damaging than any potential physical danger?

- What are the opportunities for advocacy and monitoring in the country of origin?

- What are the child's long-term prospects in his or her present location?

6D Children in countries of asylum

Tensions can arise between government and agencies working with separated children over the fate of children in countries of asylum. In a number of recent emergencies, governments have called for the return of all children who were evacuated or who fled to countries of asylum, irrespective of their present situation or the situation to which they would return. At the same time, other governments have refused to allow children to be repatriated, even if they have family in the country of origin.

The law of the country where the child resides has jurisdiction over the child. All countries that have signed the CRC have a responsibility to reunite children with their families where this is possible; the principle of family unity is very strong in international law. Therefore, if children are in a country of asylum and their parents are in the country of origin, the law would normally support reunification. However, the judicial process in the country where the child resides may rule against reunification on the grounds that it is not in the child's best interests.

Whilst the principle to follow in all such situations is the best interests of the child, taking both immediate and longer-term factors into consideration (see page 63 on the removal of children from foster families), this can be difficult to determine. Where there is a dispute, however, each party should have an equal chance to be represented. Where there is not fair representation, agencies working with separated children may be able to advocate for this (see page 107 of the training manual).

1 Children in foster families in countries of asylum

Children may be in foster families in countries of asylum for a number of reasons:

- They were spontaneously taken in by the families (for example, Rwandan children in Zaïre during conflicts in the Great Lakes region)

- They were sent away by their families to remove them from danger (for example, children from former Yugoslavia)

- They were evacuated for medical treatment and then placed in families

The reasons why children may need to be removed are discussed in the previous chapter on interim care. Some of these reasons are particularly relevant to children in countries of asylum.

Wherever children are, the guiding principle for removing them from foster families should always be the best interests of the child. The situation is more complex for refugee children, for a number of reasons:

- Access may be more difficult

- Two governments are involved

- Children in families who are not from their own community may be at greater risk of abuse

See page 156 of the training manual.

Decisions about removing refugee children from foster families should ideally be made on an individual basis. The decision must take into account the broader social and political context within which the child is fostered, as well as the specific family

situation. This is particularly true where refugee children are fostered with host-country families in the country of asylum.

Where large numbers of children are involved, an individual approach to removal from foster families may not be possible. In this case, a situation analysis should be carried out to assess the overall position of the fostered children. In the case of both individual children and groups of children, factors such as their legal status, ethnic tension and their future prospects in the place where they are currently fostered should be taken into account and compared with their likely status and prospects in the place to which they would return. An agency should be appointed to act as a focal point for consultation between all parties concerned with these children.

Ideally, these factors should be assessed before attachments develop between children and their foster families. Events in the Great Lakes region in 1996–97 showed how complicated this kind of situation can become if it is not addressed quickly.

> **After the mass repatriation of refugees from Zaïre, agencies were left with the problem of deciding what was in the best interests of the thousands of children who remained in Zaïrian foster families. Some of these children had been living with the families for up to three years and had formed strong attachments to them. However, other children were living in difficult conditions and their long-term status was uncertain. Furthermore, the local security situation posed a threat to all the children.**
>
> **In the event, the agencies involved came to a consensus that the children should be removed and repatriated. Experienced local staff who understood the potential long-term problems played an important part in these debates. But for many of the children who were forcibly removed from families, sometimes to face an uncertain future, this was yet another harrowing ordeal. Had their situation been carefully assessed in 1994, when they were first spontaneously fostered, a less disruptive solution might have been found for the children concerned.**

No guidelines can apply universally, and in some circumstances, such as a refoulement, there may be no choice. Children may simply be removed from families and repatriated. In these circumstances, agencies working with separated children may have a role in raising awareness of the infringement of international law that is taking place.

6E Tracing and reunification across international borders

This section is for senior managers involved in inter-agency co-ordination and for programme co-ordinators in the country of asylum and the country of origin.

ICRC and UNHCR both have a mandate for tracing across international borders: the Geneva Conventions grant ICRC the right to work during conflicts, while the 1950 Statute and 1951 Convention give UNHCR the right to work with refugees. These international accords form the basis of local agreements — including free access and travel — to facilitate the work of these two agencies.

Agencies working with separated children will implement cross-border tracing through either ICRC or UNHCR. This is significant for child protection: for example, an

NGO employee carrying information about children might well have this confiscated at the border, whereas the ICRC or UNHCR pouch is generally respected.

A tracing system must be in operation on both sides of the border, and there must be channels for exchanging information. A centralised database is also essential. Where more than one agency is involved, they must all co-operate in passing information to the agency centralising the data. If this does not happen, time may be wasted duplicating tracing. Should this problem arise, it can be addressed through an inter-agency forum if this has been set up, or by referring back to any MOU in force.

> **During the repatriation from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Rwanda, an elaborate tracing system was introduced for children 'without address'. This was designed to ensure that the information collected from the initial identification of the children — information that could be critical to maintaining their identity — remained with them throughout their journey.**
>
> **Although steps had been taken to ensure that everyone dealing with the children on both sides of the border understood the system, it was only at a much later stage that a breakdown in the system was discovered. However carefully systems for the transfer of information are put in place, the 'paper trail' must always be tested — not just once but regularly, because as personnel change, so systems can break down.**

1 Practical issues in tracing across international borders

Tracing across international borders takes time, and it can be difficult to keep track of separated children during this period. By the time the family has been found, the child may have moved or been abandoned. Raising the community's awareness of tracing activities and recruiting a network of volunteers can help to overcome such problems. It is, of course, vital to have systems and adequate resources for tracing in place at an early stage.

Similar problems can occur when parents have been successfully traced in the country of origin. By the time arrangements for reunification have been finalised, the children may have disappeared; in some cases, they may have been persuaded not to return. One solution may be to move children to temporary transit sites whilst the logistics are organised. This should not be done, however, until the local security situation has been assessed; children could be at risk from a targeted attack.

In some cases, more than one international border has to be crossed in order to reunite a child with his or her family. This can present problems of cost and logistics — for example, in obtaining the requisite travel passes and visas — and may not be possible without programme support in each of the countries traversed.

Normally, the reunification of separated refugee children is only considered with parents (as opposed to any other family member) in the country of origin. If children are reunited with members of the extended family in the country of origin and their parents remain in the country of asylum, there is a possibility of permanent separation. Although family reunification should be a priority, some governments refuse to allow children to be reunited outside their country of origin (see Information Sheet 5 on page 110). See also page 105 of the training manual and the UNHCR handbook.

2 Children separated across internal boundaries during civil conflicts

To date, negotiating access to children or their families where separations have occurred across internal boundaries during civil conflicts has been both difficult and slow. NSEs have a poor record of respecting the right of children to reunification. In Angola, international and local negotiations continued for years without any real impact on the degree of access allowed by UNITA.

> **An initiative in Southern Sudan involved working through Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) to allow negotiations between members of the SCF Alliance, Unicef and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Following this, it became possible to start 'orderly return projects' in conjunction with the community and humanitarian wings of the rebel movements, and at the end of 1997 about 300 children were reunited with their families.**

In some circumstances where reunification is not possible across internal lines, there may be the possibility of restoring family contact either through the Red Cross message system (if this is in place) or through some other means of communication.

7 After reunification

This chapter is for senior programme managers and programme co-ordinators, and considers long-term strategies and the transition to development programmes. It covers (1) socio-economic issues linked to reintegration, (2) problems of access to health care and education that affect all children, (3) protection and community monitoring, and (4) dealing with information on human rights abuses.

For some children, no further action is required once family tracing and reunification have been completed. But for other children and their families, reintegration is problematic even when tracing has been successful.

7A Problems of reintegration

Changes in a family's circumstances caused by conflict, chronic poverty or major domestic upheaval — such as the death or remarriage of a parent — can lead to continuing problems with the reintegration of children. In some cases, better preparation before reunification can prevent these difficulties.

However, such problems are not unique to families who accept separated children; and many other problems, such as lack of access to services and chronic poverty, may affect the community as a whole. Hence it is more practical and equitable to consider the protection, survival and developmental needs of all children within the community, not just reunified children. As with all other aspects of family tracing and reunification, co-ordination between agencies working in a range of different sectors is essential. This may involve government and international agencies as well as local and international NGOs.

1 Analysing the problem

Not all the agencies working in family tracing and reunification will also be involved in development and reconstruction. However, those that are working to promote the long-term social and economic security of the community should:

- Have an overview of the services available in the communities to which children are returning

- Gain an understanding of the subsistence problems facing the different 'categories' of household into which children are being reunified, particularly the poorest households

- Seek to understand the main child rights and protection issues in the locality: these might include inheritance, discrimination linked to ethnicity or conflict, sexual abuse and other forms of physical exploitation, continuing military recruitment etc

Agencies responsible for tracing and reunifying children that also have long-term programmes are well placed to follow through rights, development and protection issues. As a first step, they should enquire into informal systems of social support and protection (see page 112 of the training manual). Secondly, they should make links with agencies working on agricultural rehabilitation and basic subsistence programmes to ensure that relevant information is exchanged about the poorest/ least food-secure households.

7B Preparing for reunification

As described in Chapter Four, the child, the family and the community each need to be prepared before reunification. Preparation should take account of the following needs:

- Support with the problems that might arise following a lengthy separation and a return to different, perhaps difficult, circumstances (for example, the remarriage of one parent following the death of their partner)

- Child welfare and protection issues: community monitoring and follow-up (see below)

- Economic support or access to resources

1 Reintegration

Reintegration is likely to be easier for children if they do not have to cope with a major adjustment in daily routines and living conditions when they go home. For example, children in residential care should be encouraged to carry out the kind of tasks for which they would normally be responsible at home — such as collecting wood or water — and the environment in which they live should be structured around normal household activities. Families should also be prepared for possible behavioural problems on the child's return home and given guidance that draws on a range of sources, including local practice. Children should be given information about changed family circumstances and given the opportunity to discuss ways of dealing with potential problems.

2 Child welfare and protection

Agencies carrying out reunifications must have a good understanding of politics and social attitudes in the community to which the child will return. They need to be able to assess whether the child is likely to be exposed to violence, insecurity or military recruitment, and whether special measures are needed to encourage acceptance of the child by the community.

Promoting positive attitudes towards children who are being reunified will involve spending time with community leaders and families to discuss problems and concerns, as well as the right of the child to live in a family. This should be done by trained people who are involved in the tracing programme; it will be most effective if they are of the locality and command respect within the community. Tracing teams should in any case be in touch with local authorities and leaders to keep them informed of their activities.

In addition, a campaign to raise awareness in the wider community to which children will be reunited may be necessary; this can be achieved through visits and meetings arranged via local leaders. Local theatre groups have been used to good effect, as have the local media.

In many countries it is very unlikely that long-term social welfare support or follow-up of individual cases will be possible. But any actions that highlight children's rights, make their needs more visible and encourage a sense of community responsibility will help to promote child protection. Continuity is very important in this type of work. Establishing systems that enable regular

interaction between community volunteers, *animateurs*, monitors or children's committees and local government should be considered as part of tracing and reunification programmes (see below).

3 Economic support, access to services

Children who return to circumstances where the level of services is similar to that available to them before reunification are likely to adapt more easily than those who return to very different circumstances. Agencies working with separated children should make enquiries into local social and economic conditions. Where there are major development and rehabilitation needs that are preventing the reintegration of separated children, this information can be used for advocacy at national and donor level.

Problems of reintegration are likely to be compounded where cost recovery programmes (for example in the health and education sectors) are being implemented, as these may deny access to basic services for children who are being reunified to poor households. Agencies working in tracing programmes should document cases where the exclusion of children from education or health services as a result of poverty is an obstacle to reunification, and advocate with donors and governments for solutions at a policy level.

Access to education is likely to be a particular problem, as many children in institutions benefit from a standard of education they would not receive if they were at home. Until resources are put into the community rather than institutions, this situation is unlikely to change. If assistance with school fees, uniforms etc is provided to promote reintegration, ideally it should be available to all children in need, not just reunited children.

Short-term material support can sometimes help to promote reunification. However, in circumstances where giving resettlement kits or a one-off material grant is considered to be appropriate, there should be discussion locally about how this assistance should be distributed, for example through local authorities, community structures etc.

All agencies working at community level should be aware of the needs of the most socially and economically vulnerable households — such as those headed by children or widows — and should ensure that they are not excluded from external assistance. Widows' co-operatives and associations of adolescent-headed households can raise income levels and prevent the further separation and abandonment of children among these least secure households. This is particularly relevant to the reunification of children who were separated voluntarily because of economic difficulties. Such children are unlikely to reintegrate unless there is an improvement in their material circumstances, otherwise they may end up living on the streets.

Some agencies working with separated children have focused on economic support in the aftermath of conflict. Their experiences should be critically examined and taken into account in future planning and funding proposals.

7C Long-term support of reunified children

Some reunified children may face specific problems: for example, ex-combatants and returning refugee children may be at particular risk of revenge attacks. If external monitoring is being carried out — for example, through UNHCR or OHCHR —

agencies operating at community level must be aware of and work closely with these monitoring activities. In Rwanda, lists of children believed to be at risk were passed on to UN human rights monitors, who were able follow them up in the course of their usual work.

1   Investigating local support systems

In the longer term, however — and especially where broader child protection and welfare issues are concerned — developing local capacity is more relevant. As in all work with separated children, a good understanding is needed of both the formal systems — such as legislation and social welfare — and the informal systems — such as extended family, elders and traditional leaders — that are relevant to child protection.

At the same time, agencies and local authorities need to understand the nature and causes of problems such as:

- Abandonment

- Military recruitment

- Exploitative labour

- Physical and sexual abuse

- Revenge killings

Agencies that are able to become involved with programme and policy work over the long term should assess the following:

- Which local structures are most appropriate for meeting the protection and developmental needs of the children most at risk of being marginalised and exploited?

- How can the relatively short period during which international funds are available be used to support existing structures or to introduce sustainable new ones?

- Where can support most effectively be targeted? This is likely to involve working with government at both central and local authority level; developing links between community structures and government; and supporting community-based mechanisms. The balance will vary according to circumstances, and may change over time

- What is needed to help build local capacity? If training is required, who is most likely to benefit from it: government employees, community groups or national NGOs?

Analysing what is happening in the community and how to support the long-term protection of children takes time. It also takes time for local capacity to reach a level at which it can take responsibility for child protection. This time factor needs to be built in from the outset, so that appropriate support for local structures and organisations is included in programming.

2   Community monitoring

Establishing a link between local networks or structures that already exist in the community and more formal structures linked to government or national networks is critical for the success of both tracing and follow-up programmes. In some countries,

the church will be a key player in local networks and will also be part of a national network. In other countries, social work systems function to district level and serve as a contact point for local networks.

Some international NGOs have started to work at community level to develop networks of monitors or *animateurs*, who represent the grass-roots level of larger systems of protection and monitoring. They are volunteers, selected, trained and supported by the staff of a tracing programme. This network provides a focal point within communities for family tracing, reunification and follow-up, as well as for child protection.

The role of monitors is to:

- Monitor problems of child welfare and protection and refer them to the next level in the system; this may be government social workers, NGOs or international agencies, depending on the situation in the particular country

- Identify vulnerable children and families and make referrals to other agencies: this may involve helping them to gain access to services, programme funds, etc

- Follow up reunited children

- Raise the community's awareness of children's rights

- Mobilise the community to find its own solutions, for example through self-help projects (construction of school buildings, latrines and wells, day care)

The role of the organisation working with the monitors is to :

- Collaborate with the community to select the monitors

- Provide them with training

- Introduce them to other agencies who may be able to provide assistance and facilitate networking

- Supervise the work of the monitors and support them by discussing cases etc

- Evaluate the impact of the monitors

These programmes need to have good links with the organisations closest to the community — such as churches and schools — so that through them they can be in touch with community leaders and ordinary families, as well as with families who have reunified or fostered children. These contacts will mean that work to prevent separation in a future emergency can be carried out in a way that does not create panic or unease in the community.

Community monitoring programmes can be run by government agencies or NGOs, or they can be semi-autonomous, with the potential for eventually being handed over to government as the bottom tier of a social welfare system.

3 Human rights abuses

Staff working on tracing programmes frequently encounter evidence of human rights abuses. During interviews, children often describe appalling events and during the course of their work, tracing staff may witness atrocities. In some cases, they themselves have been victims.

This can present a dilemma for managers of tracing programmes. They need to decide:

- Whether beneficiaries are best served by reporting these abuses immediately

- If so, how should they be reported

- How staff are best protected and supported in these situations

It is often difficult to decide how to deal with the reporting of human rights abuses. Saying nothing may allow the work to continue, and the presence of outside agencies arguably prevents the situation from deteriorating further; but the fact that international agencies continue to work in an environment where human rights abuses are taking place may be seen as legitimising or condoning those responsible. These are difficult questions that every agency will need to think through and debate. However, it is essential for staff in the field to have clear guidelines on their agency's position. Staff must be given training and information that enables them to respond appropriately to human rights abuses. This should take place through the agency's induction process before they go to the field and through regular discussion and support when they are in the field.

Management should ensure that a structure for dealing with human rights abuses is in place within the programme office and at headquarters. Before they take up their position, managers working in the field should be briefed about:

- Agency policy/guidelines on reporting human rights abuses: what should be reported, when and how

- Practical guidance on dealing with sensitive information (such as appropriate means of communication)

- How they can support all staff in the field. This may involve regular meetings or individual sessions, debriefing opportunities for expatriate staff on their return and end-of-contract debriefing for local staff

Information about individual protection cases and broader concerns about human rights abuses can be passed on to a variety of organisations, agencies and individuals, in particular UNHCR, ICRC or OHCHR. It may also be effective to make contact with bilateral donors or national government.

8 Information systems and technology

This chapter is for programme co-ordinators and managers and for all staff directly concerned with implementing the information systems. It should be read in conjunction with the module on information systems in the training manual.

Information is the essence of tracing. Agencies working in tracing will be seeking information as well as generating information of their own, and they may be sharing all this with partner agencies. It is essential therefore to create a structure within which the various layers of information can be organised, and then to ensure that all participants understand and use the structure.

Information systems relate to:

- The internal systems of an agency that enable it to collect, transfer and exchange the information necessary for tracing within the agency

- Systems that enable the sharing of the information necessary for tracing between agencies

In many cases, several agencies will be carrying out tracing work as part of one tracing programme, which means that information will need to be shared between those agencies. Moreover, where refugees are involved, the tracing programme may cover more than one country. Agreements on the division of roles and responsibilities and on information-sharing should be reached in the inter-agency forum (see Chapter One).

When individual agencies set up information systems, they must take into account this broader network; partner agencies must work together to plan how their information systems relate to one another. Key issues are:

- Information-sharing agreements (see Chapter One of this guide and the information sheet on page 101)

- Compatibility of the technology used, such as computerised databases

8A Planning requirements

Management and technical/professional staff should be involved in making decisions about the most appropriate systems. Resource implications and issues related to handover and sustainability must be taken into account.

Information systems set up during emergencies may need to be reviewed if they are to be used for longer-term work. Since such systems are fundamental to tracing, it is important to spend time analysing a programme's information requirements and the kind of technology it needs.

1 Types of information

The two basic questions to ask are:

(i)   What kind of information do you need?

(ii) What do you want to do with it, both now and in the future?

This in turn means considering detailed questions such as:

- What are the programme objectives? Are you collecting information both from parents searching for children and from children who are separated — and is there provision for matching the two kinds of information?

- What kind of filing system do you need for registration forms and photos? Do you have adequate secure space?

- How long will you keep the information? Do you have plans for creating an archive?

- Is the information you are collecting appropriate for your needs — for example, future statistical analysis — and is it accessible in its present form?

- Do you have the capacity to exploit fully the information collected, i.e. personnel with the skills to set up programmes for analysing data?

- Is the information in a format that will enable it to be shared if desired; for example, with other agencies carrying out related programmes?

- Will you receive information from other agencies with whom you are working? Do you have a system for collecting and storing this?

2 Where will you store the information?

The critical factor here is whether the information will be kept in more than one place.

The usual practice is to store forms in files arranged in alphabetical order of names and grouped according to where the child is currently living. Copies of these files may be kept in an identical manner at national and regional levels of the programme. In each case, the place where the forms are stored must be secure and their confidentiality must be guaranteed.

In the same way, photographs of children will have to be stored, and a system set up for their preservation, filing and retrieval.

8B What type of system?

Once the requirements of the information system have been defined, the next step is to consider which type of system is the most suitable. In practice, this means deciding between manual record-keeping or a computerised database. As with any other aspect of the tracing programme, the choice should take into account the wider operational framework and any agreements about information sharing.

1 Manual systems

A system using index cards punched with holes is the most common manual type of data management. It can rapidly select records according to specific criteria, such as place of origin; files can also be cross-referenced

A manual system has several advantages:

- It is cheap

- No power supply is required

- No specialised skills or IT support are needed

A manual system becomes difficult to manage where more than 1,000 cases are involved, however, and it is therefore most suitable for use in a small national programme or in decentralised tracing (where it can complement a centralised electronic system). But the manual system also has disadvantages; it is:

- Time-consuming

- Insecure

- Difficult to provide back-up for

- Less suitable for caseload management

- Less suitable for making cross-references

2   Computerised systems

A computerised database can be used for the following purposes:

- Storing data

- Organising data in a structured way

- Analysing data

- Printing data

- Statistical analysis

In tracing and reunification programmes, computerised databases have two broad areas of application: in the tracing procedure itself; and in the management, evaluation and monitoring of caseloads.

In tracing, computerised databases can be used for the following tasks:

- Listing children by area of origin — or area in which relatives are being sought — to provide a basis for tracing work

- Listing children by current location to help children's centres with their record-keeping and tracing

- Managing the caseload: for example, by enabling strategic planning, the follow-up of unresolved cases and the identification of specific groups as a priority for tracing

- Cross-matching tracing requests from relatives searching for children against children registered. This is effective only when all the data held by collaborating agencies is pooled in one centralised database

- Storing the visual material used in tracing

As regards the management, evaluation and monitoring of caseloads, a computerised database is capable of the following tasks:

- Collecting statistical information that can be used in

  – monitoring and evaluation

- reporting to donors and government
- giving feedback to field staff
- research

- Collecting information about the density of caseloads that can facilitate the deployment of staff and clarify the programme's transport and logistics needs

- Serving as a performance indicator that can be used in the management of teams in the field

- Serving as an aid to future planning: for example, in drafting proposals, linking with other programmes, calculating probability, contingency planning/ emergency preparedness and mapping population movements

There is potential for the more extensive deployment of computers in caseload and resource management, for example by using geographical information and mapping systems.

The advantages of a computerised database are:

- It is faster and simpler to use than a manual system, especially when dealing with very large caseloads

- It makes the cross-referencing of names far easier and enables more complex searches, thus increasing the likelihood of finding a match

- It is secure: computer files can be password-protected and back-up files can be kept outside the country if desired

- If programme staff have to evacuate the country, the information on the database can easily be destroyed if it poses a security risk to the children entered on the database

A computerised database does, however, have some disadvantages:

- It can be expensive, owing to the cost of hardware, software and maintenance and the need for computers to be housed in secure buildings, perhaps with guards. But a moderate-sized programme would require only one dedicated computer; costs only become really high when numerous computers are used and photo storage and desktop publishing applications are involved

- Skilled personnel or training opportunities are not always available

- IT support can be difficult to find locally

- The skills for analysing the material — and the time to carry out this analysis — are not always available, which means that the system's potential is never fully realised

- A reliable power supply is needed

If several different agencies are working in tracing and the agency responsible for centralising information has agreed to share that information, the other agencies involved will only need a computerised system for information management — but they should be absolutely sure they can make full use of such a system before making the investment. There is no point in buying expensive technology that is not really needed.

If more than one agency is using a computerised database, the software should be compatible, otherwise it may be very difficult to share information by importing from one system to another.

3 Decentralised tracing

This term denotes an operating system where information is stored and processed at a local level within an agency tracing programme. For example, within a country programme one agency might operate a computerised database in each province, entering data and printing tracing lists locally. This can be useful where separations are very localised and where it is difficult to get information to and from a central point for data entry. But there must be a link to a central database and there can be difficulties in ensuring that all the databases are updated. It can be a complicated and expensive way of working.

Where an agency relies totally on a manual system, this is likely to be replicated locally anyway. The problem with decentralised manual systems, however, is that they encourage people to create endless lists, forms and files of information.

The term 'decentralised tracing' should not be confused with 'centralisation of information'. The latter term means that all information about a tracing programme, whether from one or several participating agencies, is entered into one database.

8C Choosing the technology

Technology can play an important role in tracing, but there are limits to what it can achieve. It should also be appropriate to the situation: for example, children are unlikely to feel relaxed if they are interviewed by someone who is entering information into a laptop computer. Most importantly, technology should not become an end in itself.

1 The hardware

Once an agency has decided to use a computerised database, it will have to choose suitable hardware. The choice will largely depend upon how much storage space is required. Agencies must therefore:

- Estimate the number of cases they will be dealing with

- Decide on whether they wish to archive any of the material

- Estimate the total volume of data (number of cases per megabyte) and its type (i.e. text or images)

The most critical factor is whether photographic images — which require an enormous amount of storage space — are to be scanned and stored on the computer.

The number of computers a programme needs will depend upon:

- The amount of data that needs to be entered per unit of time to keep the database up to date

- Whether this data consists of text only or includes images

- Whether desktop publishing will be carried out

And, of course, on whether computers are being used to input or extract data at one central point or at a number of locations.

Since speed is essential when processing data, it is important to be realistic about the resources needed: for example, a computer cannot be used for the desktop

publishing of photographs when there is a backlog of cases to be entered into a database. Note that if images are to be used for desktop publishing, the computers should be equipped with large, high-resolution monitors.

2 The software

The choice of software will be influenced by the following factors:

- Selecting a widely-used commercial database means that training and technical support are more easily available; agencies should aim to standardise the equipment used in the field

- If information is to be shared between agencies, the software should be compatible with that used in the other computer systems; this will allow information to be exchanged on disk

- The software must enable regular back-ups to be made automatically; this is vital not only for security but also in case of systems failure

- If images are to be reproduced as photos or posters, desktop publishing software may be required in addition to the software that comes with the scanner. Commercial packages such as Adobe Pagemaker, Quark Xpress and CorelDraw are perfectly satisfactory

3 Printers

Most commercially-available printers are suitable for printing text from a database. If desktop publishing is to be carried out, however, the printer will require a larger-than-usual memory.

4 Photographs in tracing programmes

Most tracing programmes take at least one photograph of each child as part of the documentation process; this provides a record of the child and can be used for tracing.

Photographs taken during tracing should provide a reliable record of the child. A Polaroid Instamatic camera is often used; this produces images of adequate quality, so long as tracing staff are trained in photographic techniques. Because the image develops on the spot, a second photograph can be taken if necessary. The photographs can be immediately numbered to correspond with the child's records, and can even be attached to the form. For these reasons, Polaroid cameras are recommended for general use in most situations.

35 mm cameras can produce a high-quality photograph, but the image is not instantly available and facilities for processing film may not be accessible. Problems have also been experienced over the numbering system for matching up photographs with documentation forms; such mistakes are expensive and waste time. Unless the system for processing film and categorising photos is foolproof, 35 mm cameras should not be the method of first choice.

If photographs are to be used for tracing, more than one print will be required. The options are to:

- Take multiple photographs with a Polaroid Instamatic camera

- Take one photograph and scan it to produce multiple copies that can be printed in a variety of sizes

- Use a professional photographer with a 35 mm camera; any number of reprints can be made

The tendency has been to take multiple photographs of all children, most of which are never used for tracing. It may be more effective — and a more efficient use of resources — to target specific groups of children for photo tracing, such as those without address, and to concentrate on the quality of the photograph. Recent experience suggests that better-quality photographs or prints bring better results.

High quality can be achieved by:

- Using a professional photographer (but only if there is an efficient administrative system)
- Using a digital camera
- Using high-quality scanners, software and colour printers

An enormous range of capabilities is available among equipment used for taking and reproducing photographic images. Programmes must be absolutely clear about what they want to achieve and what the local capacity is before investing in expensive equipment.

Photographic images of children can be stored in the form of a photograph or a computer file (see page 125 of the training manual).

5 Scanners

There are various types of scanner available. The quality of the image, whether as a record on a database or as a printed poster, will depend upon the quality of the original photograph and the resolution of the scanner. Two types of scanners are commonly in use: hand scanners and flatbed scanners. Most scanners come with image-enhancing software.

7 Desktop publishing

Desktop publishing software can be used together with scanned images to reproduce photographs of children or to create photo posters. Having the capacity to produce posters in-house also avoids the problems over confidentiality involved in using local printers. However, setting up a workstation with a substantial desktop publishing capacity is expensive, and should be considered only if there is a demand for photo tracing on a large scale, using multiple posters for example.

This has been a brief overview of the technology commonly used in tracing programmes. Agencies should make sure that they are adequately informed before investing in equipment that may turn out to be unsuitable for their purposes or simply an expensive waste of time.

Computerised systems demand a broad range of skills such as database management, desktop publishing, scanning and printing. Agencies should consider carefully whether adopting such a system will bring real advantages, or whether a much simpler manual system would be enough.

A programme in action:

The mass exodus of Rwandan refugees from eastern Zaïre, November 1996

One of the largest-ever movements of people occurred in 1996, when more than half a million Rwandan refugees returned home from Zaïre. An inter-agency group including UNHCR, Unicef, ICRC, SCF (UK), Concern, Food for the Hungry International (FHI) and World Vision put into operation a contingency plan for prevention of separation and tracing which, considering the speed of the refugee movement and the scale of the emergency, proved to be very effective. Some separations were avoided through the prevention of separation activities; almost all the unaccompanied children were identified and documented near the border.

The effectiveness of the response was largely due to the intense efforts the participating agencies made to work in a co-ordinated way, based on several years' experience of collaboration and a detailed local contingency plan. Many problems did arise, but if possible they were tackled as soon as they emerged. The key lessons learned from this operation were fed into the planning for the further repatriations expected from Tanzania and Zaïre.

The context

In early November 1996 more than 600,000 Rwandan refugees crossed from Goma in eastern Zaïre to Gisenyi town in northern Rwanda. This enormous exodus took only a few days; at one point one thousand people per minute were counted walking across the border. The speed and scale of the population movement caught everyone by surprise, surpassing even the 'worst-case scenario' included in the carefully drawn-up contingency plans.

During this short period more than 6,000 separated children were registered (about 1 per cent of the total of returning refugees). But within two months more than 80 per cent of these children had been reunited with a family member; a remarkable achievement. Behind these impressive statistics lies a story of detailed planning followed by an emergency response — coupled with feelings of frustration, sadness, excitement and exhaustion.

This mass exodus was a tense time for everyone involved. The government of Rwanda was witnessing those who fled in 1994, including ex-military and the leaders of the genocide, return to their homes in the communes. The survivors of the genocide, the *rescapés*, were seeing the killers of their families coming back with handouts from UNHCR and guarantees of access to their abandoned houses and land. The returning refugees were themselves equally nervous of going back to their homes. Would their houses still be standing? Would people want to take revenge on them, regardless of their individual history? Would the government treat them as equal citizens?

The situation was also very demanding for the Rwandan employees of the NGO teams involved. They worked day and night, in the rain, the heat and the cold, and

each one of them had their own story to tell, their heads filled with their memories of the past and their worries about the future. Indeed, some members of the community showed hostility towards NGO workers who were seen to be helping Hutu children from 'the other side'.

Contingency plans

The national Repatriation Plan had existed since 1995, to cover the likelihood of repatriations from Rwanda's neighbouring countries of Burundi, Tanzania and Zaïre. It had been prepared by an inter-agency working group chaired by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The process was a long and complicated one, during which some agencies expressed the desire to produce their own individual plan rather than to work together towards a joint plan. Agencies involved in tracing also had some difficulty in ensuring that issues concerning child separation were taken into account in general repatriation planning. They felt it crucial for general interventions to be planned so as to prevent separations caused by badly-organised transport operations and food distributions or by medical assistance that involved moving parents or children.

Although this Plan was useful as a starting point, in practice what mattered most were the detailed sectoral plans of who does what and where that were drawn up at the last minute at a very local level. As far as agencies working with separated children were concerned, those operating on specific sections of the border drew up their own local plan as soon as it became clear where the refugees were coming from, where they were going to and what human and material resources were to hand.

Past experience had shown that, to be effective, the response needed to concentrate on preventing separation and maximising possibilities for the immediate reunification of newly-separated children. For this reason, it was clear that opportunities for quick reunification had to take precedence over long and detailed documentation. The hours spent carefully documenting hundreds of children could often be more usefully employed in carrying out a rapid registration simultaneously with activities to help reunification. Families may only be a few hundred metres away, so it is often possible to bring the child and the family back together again quickly, before the child is officially designated a separated child, transferred to a children's centre and put into the national tracing system.

So in October 1996, as it became clear that a mass repatriation was about to take place, the relevant agencies devised a contingency plan that would be put into action in the event of a massive movement of 10,000 or more persons a day.

FHI prepared a simple line map of the border area, showing the roads that returning refugees would be walking along, the planned transit sites and way stations, and which agency was responsible for what and where.

Organisations were identified for:

- Prevention of separation
- Identification of separated children
- Registration
- Immediate reunifications
- Child care in local transit sites
- Transport of separated children to their province of origin
- Subsequent child care, tracing and reunification in the children's provinces of origin

Factors included in the planning were the resources available, including agency teams and vehicles, and such possible complications as the blocking of roads by crowds of people, which would hinder vehicle movements.

Separated children would be 'leapfrogged' ahead of the walking crowds from the border to the Nkamira transit site approximately 20 kilometres further on. Adults would have been told to check here for any child they had lost, and it was hoped that some immediate reunifications could take place. It was planned to use motorbikes for the rapid transfer of information about children.

This planning stage was straightforward. Most of the NGOs involved, as well as the ICRC, had been working together on tracing in Gisenyi and the neighbouring Ruhengeri prefecture since 1994. SCF had provided training for all the teams in both normal tracing and emergency repatriation activities. The team members knew each other, and for the last two years had been meeting regularly to co-ordinate work on the 1994 caseload in the region; they used the same basic approach, and the forms were standardised. They had also had first-hand experience of emergency work following the events of 1994 and the Masisi crisis in 1995.

This local network complemented the Kigali network of core agencies: UNHCR, Unicef, ICRC and SCF (UK), with UNHCR and Unicef having a co-ordination role, and ICRC and SCF being the lead implementing agencies present in each province. The co-ordination systems had already been put into operation very successfully for the July 1996 repatriation from Burundi.

Immediate response

So what happened when hundreds of thousands of people, all heading for one small crossing point called the Petite Barrière, arrived on the edge of Gisenyi town in Rwanda, exhausted, weighed down with possessions and in many cases sick or injured? There was an urgent need for medical care and food, and in addition many children were found to be separated from their families. A small percentage had become separated while fleeing the refugee camps in eastern Zaïre, but about 90 per cent had become separated during the walk to the border.

On the first day the refugees were told by the local authorities to stop for the night on an old airfield just across the border within Rwanda, before walking on the next day towards their home province. Agency teams were able to take advantage of this halt to set up a site for the provisional care of separated children, and at around 5 a.m. the next morning they conducted intensive tracing for these children before the refugees moved on. The child carers were given emergency training in the basic principles of prevention of separation and the identification of separated children.

A couple of social workers were sent out to find out how and where any new separations were taking place. They quickly realised that owing to the sheer volume of people, the bottlenecks in the narrow roads and the fact that the families were exhausted, many more separations were probably occurring in the few hundred yards from the border crossing point and as people steadily tramped along the winding hillside roads back to their communes. Initially, however, the agencies were overwhelmed by the scale of the movement and those assigned to implement prevention of separation activities were not able to respond immediately .

For the first two or three days the agencies concentrated on this packed site at the border, where the highest concentration of people was found. NGO workers and specially-trained volunteers were stationed along the road, sometimes only 50 metres apart, on the lookout to prevent separations and to identify children who had become separated. If children were seen straggling behind their family, they were reminded to hang on to them.

Regular megaphone announcements reminded families of the importance of keeping together and told children and families what they should do if they became separated. The text of the announcement was drawn up jointly by the agencies and written out to ensure that it was consistent; vaguely-worded announcements can sometimes encourage the abandonment of children, especially if families or the children themselves associate services for separated children with material assistance.

Medical agencies had been briefed beforehand on the importance of ensuring that families were kept together and of liaising closely with tracing organisations.

Co-ordination and communication

In Gisenyi town, general co-ordination meetings were held each night by UNHCR, followed by a special meeting for organisations working with separated children. The day's activities were reported and plans were made for the following day.

Despite the contingency plan and these co-ordination meetings, agencies did sometimes make decisions in the field without consulting their partner organisations. After discussion, this practice was discontinued, but the incident showed the importance of focusing on joint activities rather than individual and separate operations. Co-ordination was also complicated by the arrival of many new agency staff who were not familiar with existing networks and structures, and did not always respect them. Moreover, some agencies were under extreme pressure from their headquarters to acquire a high profile in publicity terms, which sometimes worked against the collaborative spirit.

But of all the sectors, that dealing with separated children was regarded as the most organised and co-ordinated — though it did not always feel like it at the time. People would return exhausted from a long day in the field, attend inter-agency meetings and then their own agency's internal meetings, and then have to send regular communications to head offices in Kigali. Patience often wore thin and discussions could be tense.

Nevertheless, participants generally recognised the need for constant co-ordination and developed simple, practical ways to help things along. Brief minutes of the meetings were written down immediately, albeit by hand, quickly photocopied at UNHCR and distributed to participants. Where possible, the minutes were faxed through to Ruhengeri and Kigali to facilitate planning as the returnees gradually made their way towards Ruhengeri and on to other provinces, as far as Kigali.

The chairing of meetings was rotated to spread the responsibility.

As the days went on …

Day by day the column of people walking south grew longer and narrower, as the first to cross the border and the fastest walkers rushed ahead, and the later arrivals, the tired and the sick stopped along the way at transit sites and way stations. Children continued to be separated all along the road, because although the worst crush at the Petite Barrière was over, the families were still tired and sometimes sick, and were carefully balancing possessions on their heads. In such circumstances it can be difficult for children to hold the hands of their relatives; they lag behind, their small legs having to work harder than those of the adults, and they are often barefoot too.

In some respects this period proved to be the greatest challenge. All the resources possible had been sent north to Gisenyi. But the line of people was stretching further and further along the roads to the south. Enormous numbers of returnees were also now concentrated around the Nkamira transit site, 20 kilometres along the road from Gisenyi.

The plan had been to use Nkamira for a couple of days as the main site for transferring separated children, by checking to see if their relatives passed through the site. On the whole this worked well, thanks to the regular announcements at the border and along the road. In one day alone 600 families called in at the site seeking children they had lost. At the site, children had been carefully allocated to tents by prefecture of origin. One at a time, families were taken to the children, accompanied by an NGO social worker. This was to ensure the protection of the children, avoid large numbers of adults wandering around the tents and ensure that proper verification was carried out.

Around 1,000 children were reunited immediately in this way, thus preventing many longer-term separations.

The special facilities for separated children at the site were kept to a minimum. They received the same food rations as the other returnees and apart from extreme cases, the distribution of new clothes and other special assistance was avoided. This was to minimise voluntary separations where children with families pretended to be separated in the hope of receiving extra rations.

In the meantime, teams carrying out prevention of separation and identification work patrolled the main road, targeting the areas with the largest accumulation of returnees. The situation was likely to change from hour to hour. Resources were becoming increasingly stretched across a larger and larger area. Nevertheless, with the support of agency teams brought in from other parts of the country, a good coverage was achieved.

Problems

A major problem was the inability of agencies to keep up with the speed of events and their need constantly to redeploy resources, often from hour to hour, depending on where the returnees were concentrated and where the bottlenecks were. So much effort had been put into the response at Gisenyi that it was some time before agencies realised that urgent assistance was needed at Ruhengeri, 80 kilometres on, as people continued southwards. But this was hindered by difficulties of communication. The topography of the region meant that Codan radio contact was impossible between Gisenyi and Ruhengeri. Because of the crowds, co-ordinators and teams could only travel along the road before 7 a.m. or after 9 p.m. Basic problems of logistics hindered prevention of separation activities in the early stages.

Co-ordination, although helped by the nightly meetings in Gisenyi, was really put to the test. Sometimes key decisions had to be taken that could not wait until the evening; but as the tracing co-ordinators of the core four-agency group (UNHCR, Unicef, ICRC, SCF UK) were often distributed between Kigali, Gisenyi and Ruhengeri, it was not easy for them to contact each other.

Owing to the scale, speed and nature of the repatriation, the government was very sensitive to the effect of interventions. Agency activities were sometimes not supported, or not understood, by government repatriation officials who were not from the Social Affairs Ministry.

Dilemmas

As in most emergencies, the key dilemma was whether relief interventions actually create separations. Do children become separated because of the bottlenecks caused by badly-placed food and water distribution points, disorganised trucking and the activities of medical agencies? Do specific interventions for separated children, and the publicising of them, encourage families to abandon children? How should megaphone messages be worded so as to assist tracing while at the same time minimising voluntary separations?

It was soon clear that some of the children identified as unaccompanied had not become separated accidentally. At Nkamira transit site one of the SCF social workers simply asked a group of children if any of them had relatives outside the gates of the site; a couple of them immediately put up their hands. In such circumstances, it is often sufficient to ask the children themselves. Mealtimes were often the moment when families told their children to pretend to be separated. Some children seemed to have the family's entire possessions with them, suggesting that they had been sent to benefit from transport to their commune.

Given the urgency of the situation, the exhaustion of the people and the fact that they had come from a refugee camp where they had been dependent on assistance, it was not surprising that some children who had not in fact been accidentally separated were registered as such. To ensure that all genuine cases are detected, it is sometimes necessary to accept a few non-genuine cases, but they should be kept to a minimum.

What did we learn?

Prevention of separation
The old saying 'prevention is better than cure' remains true; priority should always be given to prevention of separation activities. It may not be possible to specify exactly how many separations have thus been prevented, but they will certainly be numerous.

Prevention of separation activities range from awareness-raising campaigns among communities, organisations and families through to practical precautions to ensure that interventions do not cause abandonments. This awareness-raising with communities should be a continuous process, whether it takes place in a refugee camp or in the home environment. After all, children can become separated in situations where there is neither conflict nor population movement, such as crowded markets or streets. Such long-term prevention work can therefore become a part of normal community child welfare activities.

Small children
More than 400 young separated children 'without address' were identified at Gisenyi. This group should be targeted for special prevention of separation work and immediate tracing; otherwise, any subsequent tracing can be difficult and time-consuming, with no guarantee of success.

Be creative!
Talk to the children themselves. Ask them how and where they became separated. At Gisenyi, the older children were particularly good at helping with the younger ones, putting them at their ease and encouraging them to give their names and addresses. One separated child helped by making prevention of separation announcements to the crowd through a megaphone; people immediately took notice of the child's voice, as it was such a change from the official adult voices usually heard in refugee situations. Incredibly, in this case the child's own father heard his son's voice and they were subsequently reunited.

Preparedness
Detailed but flexible contingency plans are essential. These must cover the principles and procedures of tracing activities but also such practical logistical considerations as transport, access to food and water for separated children, baby milk for the infants, and supplies of general materials. But even a perfect plan will not work unless there

are the people on the ground to make it all happen and keep in close contact with partners. Preparedness involves not only practical planning but also investment in professional and open relationships with government and other agency personnel so that you can work together in what can often be very stressful and demanding environments.

Co-ordination
The solid network that agencies have developed over the years formed the basis for the impressive achievements in November 1996. This network involved co-ordination mechanisms, lists of contact details (radio call signs etc), participation in meetings, professional personal relationships and above all a spirit of close co-operation and wishing to get a good job done.

This spirit continued after the repatriation, and led to several discussions about the lessons learned and recommendations for the future. This strong interest in constantly refining programmes was the most exciting part of the whole experience.

When events are changing by the hour, all the contingency plans in the world cannot guarantee a perfectly-organised response. But good preparation followed by close communication and co-ordination on the ground can at least get somewhere near it.

SCF Tracing Team, Rwanda 1996

Information sharing and security of information

Information is fundamental to tracing and reunification; during the course of such work a great deal of information about children and their families will be recorded. The sharing of information between individuals and organisations — both within and between countries — is essential for programme planning and implementation.

Information about individuals should always be treated as confidential. Those from whom the information is acquired should be told what it will be used for and with whom it will be shared. The basis of information sharing should be individual protection; information should not be shared if this poses a risk to individuals.

What are the risks?

Personal information should always be treated with respect, for the sake of the safety and privacy of the people involved. In many countries there is legislation that strictly controls access to personal information.

During or after a conflict, however, these concerns become particularly serious: in some cases, people's lives can be jeopardised if information gets into the wrong hands. For example, if a child has witnessed a killing, the perpetrators may wish to kill the child in order to get rid of a witness. Children or their families may be subject to revenge attacks.

Principles of information sharing

The following principles were agreed by the participants of an inter-agency meeting on family tracing held in London in 1995:

- The sharing of information within and between countries is essential in programme planning and implementation

- The basic principles governing confidentiality where individual children are concerned should be the protection and the best interests of the child

- Information sharing should provide the maximum information for tracing at the minimum risk to the child and the family. This principle also applies to the publication of information, including photographs of children for tracing. It is important when collecting information to be aware of who will have access to that information

- Decisions about the degree of confidentiality of information have to be made on the basis of a situation analysis. This will have to be reviewed regularly

Deciding who to share information with in the field

Every situation is different, and should be assessed so that procedures for the exchange and sharing of information can be established. Agencies working with separated children will have to make decisions about information sharing, which should be based on the above principles.

There are numerous provisions in international law concerning freedom of information and the individual's right to privacy. At the same time, however, the law relating to the best interests of the child and family unity should be taken into account. The principle of sharing the maximum information for tracing at the minimum risk to the child and the family is a way of giving practical expression to these various points of law.

Where more than one agency is working, account must be taken of the other agencies' mandates, since information will need to be shared with them. For example, the ICRC's mandate, which is based on individual protection, will determine the position it takes on information sharing. It will, on request and taking all the necessary precautions, share information with other organisations, but would not as a matter of course enter into

broad information-sharing agreements with national governments. This has implications for NGOs who work at this level with governments and wish to share information with ICRC.

Agencies working in unfamiliar circumstances where the political situation is uncertain and those in authority are an unknown quantity, should proceed cautiously.

The following are key points for agencies to consider with regard to sharing information:

1 Agreement should be reached between the agencies working with separated children about what information will be shared with whom. It is crucial for agencies to clarify their own position and their position in relation to other agencies before they enter into discussion with officials. It is equally important to reach a clear understanding with government which sets out their role in the system and therefore their precise need for information. If they are not implementing tracing work themselves, they will not need access to all information about individuals. They will, however, require statistical information to help them with planning, and provision should be made for this.

2 All staff working on tracing programmes must be trained in such a way that they understand the importance of confidentiality. They in turn should be able to reassure the people being interviewed. It may help to remind staff that each form represents the life of a child, so the utmost care must be taken. Clear procedures should be available to guide staff.

3 No information should be used publicly for tracing purposes unless there has been adequate consultation and a decision has been reached that, as far as is known, this use of the information will not threaten the security of the individual or his or her family. Such consultation may be carried out through joint agency meetings and should always involve people with local knowledge. The effectiveness of the tracing must be balanced against the need to protect the children concerned. It may be frustrating to proceed slowly, but this may be unavoidable until the issues are clear. The aim should be to maximise the potential for successful tracing while minimising the potential risk.

4 There must be a system for the safe storage of all paperwork generated. This requires a secure building with lockable cupboards or rooms, and perhaps the employment of guards and the limiting of access by programme staff. In an insecure situation, it may also be necessary to have procedures for moving or destroying information.

5 Information entered into a computer should be regularly backed up and disks stored in a secure place, ideally in a different building or even a different country. This provides a fall-back in case of damage to the main system or in case evacuation is necessary.

Legal principles of working with separated children

2a The child's best interests

All interventions on behalf of separated children should be based on the principle of 'the best interests of the child' enshrined in Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which states that 'in all actions concerning children … the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'.

It is important to examine the implications of this 'best interests' principle, which places the child's welfare above all other considerations: this includes respect for and promotion of the child's legal and human rights, an assessment of each child's circumstances, and the decisions based on that individual assessment. What is best for one child will not necessarily be best for another: the best interests of the child cannot therefore be determined by a general formula — the specific circumstances of each child must be taken into account.

Although putting the 'best interests' principle into practice begins with physical protection and material assistance, it is also vital to meet the child's developmental needs. For separated children, who have already suffered parental separation or loss, meeting these needs often requires immediate action to prevent further harm.

Firstly, the children's surviving family relationships must as far as possible be maintained, to alleviate the distress caused by parental separation or loss; from the beginning of their intervention, responsible authorities and relief agencies should support and strengthen these relationships.

Secondly, the child's ties to his or her own community and cultural group must be maintained; if a child is disconnected from familiar social, linguistic, cultural and religious practices, it may exacerbate the vulnerability caused by family separation or loss.

The global acceptance of the 'best interests' principle means that it should guide all actions on behalf of separated children and determine their protection, care and placement during emergencies.

2b Protection

Separated children are legally entitled to such protection as their individual circumstances require. This includes protection from armed conflict, military recruitment, sexual assault or abuse, prostitution, torture, hazardous working conditions and any other form of violence, abuse or neglect.

Most states have child welfare laws that may provide the necessary protection for children separated from their families during emergencies. In addition to national law, however, provision is made for the protection of children in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Although this is a non-binding instrument, it has been followed by regional and global treaties in which states have accepted formal legal obligations to guarantee a wide range of human rights. These include the 1966 Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. All provisions in these instruments apply to children (except for the articles that codify the rights to political participation extended to those over a certain age).

In addition, regional organisations have promoted local systems of obligations and supervision, for example under the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights,

the 1981 African Convention on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Even where a state has not ratified or consented to any particular treaty, it may still be bound by rules that have acquired the status of customary international law; for example, because of the convergence of the practice of states over time and the accompanying sense of legal obligation.

The following relate specifically to adoption:

- United Nations General Assembly 41/85: Declaration on Social and Legal Principles relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children, with special reference to Foster Placement and Adoption Nationally and Internationally (1986).

- The Hague Convention (May 1993): protection of children and co-operation in respect of inter-country adoption.

The remainder of this information sheet focuses on international conventions that provide children (and by implication separated children) with specific protection: the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two additional Protocols of 1977, and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1 Protection of children in international humanitarian law

The Second World War highlighted the need for the civilian population to be protected by international humanitarian law. Efforts in this field by the ICRC led to the adoption of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, on the protection of civilian persons in time of war. As members of the civilian population, children were entitled to benefit from the application of that Convention.

Since the Second World War, the nature of war has changed: there have been more internal conflicts in which civilians, including children, have become targets. Subsequently, two additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions were adopted. This considerably improved the protection of the civilian population and therefore that of children. Protocol I applies during international armed conflicts and

Protocol II during non-international conflicts.

'International humanitarian law provides general protection for children as persons taking no part in hostilities, and special protection as persons who are particularly vulnerable.'

'General protection'

In case of international armed conflicts, children come into the category of those protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war. By virtue of this, they benefit from the basic principle of humane treatment, including respect for life and physical and moral integrity, and the prohibition of coercion, corporal punishments, torture, collective penalties and reprisals etc.

During non-international armed conflicts, children are protected by article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions. Under this article, they at least have the right to be treated humanely.

'Special protection'

Numerous provisions of international humanitarian law establish and develop the principle of special protection for children in time of armed conflict. Article 77 of Protocol I of the fourth Geneva Convention explicitly mentions special protection of children during international armed conflicts. In Protocol II, there is a similar provision for non-international armed conflicts (article 4), which stipulates that children shall be provided with the care and aid they require.

Separated children

Here is an overview of provisions specifically concerning separated children and therefore embracing issues such as family unity and tracing.

Various articles stress the importance of preserving family unity during armed conflicts. According to article 82 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, interned members of a family shall be lodged together in the same premises and given accommodation separate from other internees, with facilities for leading a proper family life. Furthermore, internees may request that those of their children who are left at liberty without parental care shall be interned

with them.

In Protocol I, article 74 states the general duty of High Contracting Parties and Parties to a conflict to facilitate the reuniting of families dispersed as a result of an international armed conflict. In cases where families are arrested, detained or interned, they should wherever possible be accommodated as family units (article 75,5). Moreover, pregnant women and mothers having dependent infants shall have their cases given the highest priority (article 76,2). Very strict conditions apply to the temporary evacuation of children; family ties must be taken into consideration (article 78).

Protocol II lays down that all appropriate steps shall be taken to enable the reuniting of families temporarily separated (article 4,3,b). As in Protocol I, there is a provision stating that the evacuation of children is subject to the consent of their parents or of the persons who by law or custom are primarily responsible for their care (article 4,3,e).

Another important principle is keeping track of protected persons and informing them about the fate of their relatives. According to article 50 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, an Occupying Power shall facilitate the identification and registration of children, as well as setting up, within its Information Bureau for protected persons, a special section responsible for identifying children whose identity is in doubt. This is crucial in preventing separation and abandonment and promoting family reunification.

The Fourth Geneva Convention also contains an article which recognises that all persons in the territory of a Party to a conflict or in a territory occupied by it are entitled to give news to members of their families, wherever they might be, and to hear from them (article 25). Furthermore, when the usual means of communication have been disrupted, the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA) can help to maintain the exchange of family correspondence. Article 26 stipulates that each Party to the conflict shall facilitate enquiries made by members of families dispersed due to war, with the aim of renewing contact with one another and of meeting if possible.

2 Protection of children in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The CRC was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989 (UN Doc A/44/25) and came into force on 2 September 1990 as the guiding document for everyone concerned with the welfare of the child. The Convention has been signed and ratified by all states with the exception of the USA and Somalia.

The Convention also contains provisions relevant to separated children. Firstly, article 3 reminds us that, in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. To this end, States Parties undertake to give the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of parents, legal guardians or other individuals legally responsible for him or her.

With regard to separation, article 9 states that a child should not be separated from his or her parents against his or her will except when competent authorities determine that such separation is required for the best interests of the child. In any case, States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except when it is contrary to the child's best interests (paragraph 3). If separation results from any action initiated by a State Party (detention, imprisonment, exile, deportation or death of one or both parents of the child), that State Party shall, on request, provide the parents, the child or another member of the family with the essential information regarding the whereabouts of the absent member(s) of the family, unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child (article 9,4).

Article 10 addresses the issue of family reunification. If a child or his or her parents wish to enter or leave a State Party for the purpose of family reunification, this shall be dealt with by States Parties in a positive, humane and expeditious manner. Paragraph 2 stresses the right of a child whose parents reside in different States to maintain on a regular basis direct contacts with both parents. Towards that

end, and in accordance with the obligation of States Parties under article 9 paragraph 2, States Parties shall respect the right of the child and his parents to leave any country, including their own, and to enter their own country.

Under article 22 refugee children are entitled to special protection and assistance. If the refugee child is unaccompanied, States shall co-operate in tracing the parents or other members of the family in order to obtain information necessary for reunification with his or her family.

The emphasis on the participatory rights of children is one of the major innovations of the Convention. Article 12 stresses the right of children to express their views freely and to have their opinion taken into account on any matter affecting them and in accordance with their age and maturity.

Where separated children are concerned, participation of the child in decisions in his or her best interests is a basic right that should be exercised to the maximum extent allowed by his or her maturity, culture and circumstances. Ideally, therefore, unaccompanied children should be involved in decisions about their future, and specifically about placement.

Further reading

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Goodwin-Gill, G. *Unaccompanied refugee minors: the role and the place of international law in the pursuit of durable solutions*.

Refugee children: guidelines on protection and care. Geneva: UNHCR 1994.

Guidelines on policies and procedures in dealing with unaccompanied children seeking asylum. Geneva: UNHCR 1997

Disability and separated children

Children with a disability are frequently treated as a separate group; but it is important to remember that children who have difficulties in moving, seeing, hearing or communicating have the same needs as any other child, plus the needs arising out of their particular disability.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that children with disabilities are often left behind when there are population movements provoked by conflict; that such children are more difficult to trace and less likely to be reunited; and that they will probably remain in the institutions where they have been placed, or moved to institutions that have the capacity to provide specialist care (where this exists).

This evidence should not be taken at face value, however; families may indeed leave disabled children behind, but not because they do not care about them, rather because they lack the support and the practical means to take the children with them when they leave. The children may be difficult to place because of negative public attitudes or the ignorance of aid agencies. It is vital for programmes to take a positive approach towards the reunification of disabled children and to produce reliable documentation.

One NGO that provided interim care for children in Rwanda found that, after the genocide of 1994, children with disabilities were left behind when the population fled. Most of these children were not successfully traced and foster families could not be found for them; they have been transferred (or are awaiting transfer) to specialist centres. Following the population movements in the same region in

1996 and 1997, there were few children with disabilities among the separated children, which suggests that they did not survive the extremely difficult circumstances prevailing at that time.

There is, however, a global dearth of documented evidence on what impact disability has on separation and reunification. Since separated children with a disability are likely to be among the most vulnerable of children, further research is urgently needed. Every population includes people with disabilities, and the risk of becoming disabled increases in situations of violence and displacement.

Where tracing is concerned, children whose disability makes it difficult for them to communicate may be at a disadvantage if people with the skills to help them are not available. Agency personnel should have a basic awareness of disability; they should treat disabled children as children first, they should not discriminate or assume that families do not want to be reunited, and they should know how to communicate if the child has communication difficulties or mental disability. It is important for funding requests to take account of these requirements. Agencies working with separated children should also find what local expertise is available when they begin to operate in an area and draw on this.

All agencies working with separated children, whether carrying out tracing or providing interim care, could keep records of the incidence and types of disability — but they should ensure that these records are used positively, to improve the situation of disabled children.

Children and HIV/AIDS

Children and HIV/AIDS is an emotive and complex issue — which is perhaps why it is often ignored. Even when the subject *is* discussed, it tends to be seen simply in terms of 'AIDS orphans' and institutional care. However, targeting children in this way is likely to lead to discrimination; all children who are orphaned should be treated in the same way, whatever their circumstances.

According to UNAIDS criteria — which classify a child as an orphan if only one parent is alive — 8.3 million children world-wide have been orphaned as a result of AIDS.

HIV and AIDS can impinge upon the lives of children in two ways: either the children themselves are living with HIV/AIDS or members of their families are. *In neither case are agencies justified in separating children from their families or in refusing to arrange for reunification or fostering.*

Babies and children living with HIV or AIDS

In any country with a high rate of HIV infection, babies and children are vulnerable. Babies can be infected through transmission from the mother, either before birth, during birth or as a result of breast feeding. Older children may be infected as a result of sexual abuse or rape.

The incidence of HIV/AIDS in the general population (including children) is likely to increase during or after conflict. Rape is commonly employed as a 'weapon of war'; soldiers known to be HIV-positive sometimes commit rape with the deliberate intention of passing on the infection. In addition, military personnel may take advantage of the poverty of women and girls during conflicts to exploit them for sex.

Rape is also common in refugee camps and in other situations where normal social controls do not operate. Girls separated from their families are often without adult protection and are therefore unable to defend themselves against rape and sexual abuse. Others are assaulted by those who claim to be caring for them, either in families or in children's centres. Some girls become sex workers as a way of surviving; if their parents have died or are missing, such girls may have sole responsibility for younger siblings as well.

Unfortunately, in addition to the immediate distress and physical harm caused by these assaults, they often have long-term consequences: many babies are born to rape victims. Such babies run a high risk of being infected and also of being rejected by their mothers and the community; for example, girls raped by soldiers of the opposing forces will be stigmatised for having a child by 'the enemy'. Births are often hidden and the offspring may be abandoned or even killed. In some societies, however, young girls and women are penalised if they try to abandon babies in such circumstances; they may be beaten or imprisoned and forced to suckle and care for the baby.

Agencies working with girls and women should:

- Recognise the existence of such problems

- Work with the victims and their communities to raise awareness of the needs of rape victims

- Provide support and care for the girls themselves

Training and support should be provided for local agencies or for health and social workers so that they can help the girls explore the options for caring for their babies; the girls themselves should not be forced to look after children born under such circumstances. These options may include care by extended family or foster families.

Caring for children living with HIV/AIDS

Infection (or suspected infection) with HIV/AIDS is not a sufficient reason for removing children from their family and putting them in institutions or other placements, nor is it a reason for not reuniting them with their families. The family may need support in looking after the child if he or she is sick — as they would with any other sickness — and agencies should focus on this type of assistance.

Where the child cannot be cared for by the immediate biological family, the choices of alternative placement should be the same as for any other child; children will be far better off growing up in a family setting than in a large, impersonal institution.

Babies or children should not be tested for HIV as a condition of fostering; such tests should not be carried out without consent, and babies and children obviously cannot give their consent. *UNHCR, WHO and UNAIDS all oppose mandatory HIV testing.*

Although the life expectancy of infants with HIV/AIDS is increasing, it is still generally true that, in a developing country where access to health care is limited, an infected baby will not survive beyond about eighteen months; in other words, a healthy child older than this is unlikely to be infected. This is an important point to bear in mind where fostering is concerned: fostering should not be denied because there is a possibility of HIV, and the agencies involved in fostering should operate a rigorous non-discrimination policy. If children show symptoms suggestive of HIV, prospective foster-parents can be told that they have been sick and may become sick again in the future. This will prepare them and allow them to make an informed choice.

Where members of a child's family are living with HIV or AIDS

Increasingly, the trend is to place children in orphanages if one or both parents, or even other family members, are infected. But rather than being separated, children should be allowed to make the most of the time they have with their family. The family may well require support to stay together, and in many countries this is available in the form of home-based care. Children will need to be prepared for bereavement, and may need practical help with inheritance issues.

Where HIV or AIDS is present, a special effort should always be made to preserve family unity; the fact of infection should never be used as a justification for separation.

Prevention

During emergencies, young people are less likely to have access to sex education or information about HIV/AIDS and more likely to be at risk as a result of living in displaced persons or refugee camps, often without parental care or the usual social controls and with very little to do to keep them occupied. Young people should therefore be included in sex education programmes and given condoms; they should also be given safe living conditions and something to do.

Further reading

Refugee children: guidelines on protection and care. Geneva: UNHCR 1994.

Guidelines for HIV interventions in emergency settings. Geneva: WHO/UNHCR/UNAIDS 1996.

Caring with confidence: practical information for health workers who prevent and treat HIV infection. London: AHRTAG 1997.

Annual report on global HIV/AIDS epidemiology (updated on 1 December each year). Geneva: UNAIDS.

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5 Refugee status

Every child seeking refugee status has a right to 'protection and humanitarian assistance' in the enjoyment of the rights that are contained in treaties and declarations pertaining to refugees (art. 22.1, Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Determination of refugee status

The 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees define a refugee regardless of age, and make no special provision for the status of refugee children. Applying the criterion of 'well-founded fear of persecution' to children when determining refugee status does not normally give rise to problems when they are accompanied by one or both of their parents. However, determining the refugee status of separated children is more difficult and requires a special approach.

Depending on the law of the State, a child seeking asylum may be granted:

- Refugee status for having a 'well-founded fear of persecution', as defined in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol

- Refugee status as defined in the 1969 OAU Convention or the 1984 Cartagena Declaration

If the claim for refugee status is denied, the child might be permitted to stay with immigration status granted for another humanitarian reason, or be given a rejection or deportation order.

Regardless of the law under which a child is seeking asylum, there will be a specific procedure for evaluating the claim. The three basic methods are:

- Group determination

- Determination based on an adult's claim

- Determination based on the child's own claim

Group determination

If a refugee movement is too large to make the determination of individual status possible, the State might grant refugee status to the entire group. Each child in the group would then receive refugee status automatically.

Determination based on an adult's claim

When the head of a household is granted refugee status, it is usual to grant the same status to the dependants also. This is not required by any of the refugee treaties, but States do it in order to promote family unity (see *Handbook on procedures and criteria for determining refugee status*, paragraphs 181–188 UNHCR 1979).

When a child is with one or both parents, the need to maintain family unity is clear, and therefore in most cases the child will be accorded the same status as his or her parents.

But if the child is with an uncle, a cousin or other relative, the State may not necessarily consider them to be a 'family' and could therefore require each person, including the child, to make an individual claim. This could result in the relative being granted refugee status, based perhaps upon their 'well-founded fear', but in the child's claim being rejected. When this happens, the child is separated from the relative, and may become an unaccompanied minor. In practice, dependants should be considered for refugee status if they are living in the same household (see *Handbook*, paragraph 185).

Even if a child is with someone who is not a relative, a claim of 'family unity' can be made if the nature of the relationship is equivalent to that within a family. In some cases, the claim might describe the relationship as an informal, traditional or *de facto* adoption.

A child's individual claim

If a child in the care of a parent, relative or other adult care-giver makes an individual claim, the adult can help by providing factual information to support the claim, speaking on behalf of the child, helping the child to understand the claim procedures, giving emotional support, offering advice, or making a decision on behalf of the child. By contrast, a separated child will have none of this support when making an individual claim.

Separated children

Although procedures for determining refugee status exist in many countries, they do not normally take into account the special situation of separated children (all field offices should be aware of this fact and sensitise governments to it).

In view of the effect that a prolonged stay in a camp (or in a camp-like environment) can have on a child's physical and psychological development, the determination of status or the decision about the child's 'best interests' must be made as quickly as possible, and following the appropriate procedures. Keeping children in limbo over their status, and hence their security and their future, can be very harmful.

Determining the status of separated children should be guided by the following principles:

- An expert with knowledge of the psychological, emotional and physical development of children should be called upon to make the assessment, bearing in mind the fact that children may manifest their fears in ways different from adults. Whenever possible, the assessor should have the same cultural background and mother tongue as the child. NGOs can often provide such experts. See guidance *Supporting unaccompanied children in the asylum process* (SCF UK 1998) and *Guidelines for interviewing unaccompanied minors and preparing social histories* (UNHCR 1985).

- If it is decided that the child is mature enough to have — and to express — a 'well-founded fear of persecution', the case may be treated in the same way as for an adult

- If the child is not sufficiently mature for a 'well-founded fear' to be established in the same way as for an adult, it will be necessary to examine in detail such objective factors as the characteristics of the group the child left, the situation in the country of origin and the circumstances of family members, inside or outside the country

- As children are not legally independent, they should be represented by an adult whose task is to promote a decision that is in the child's best interests. In some situations, this function may be carried out by persons carefully selected from the refugee community

- Proof is a major stumbling block in every determination of refugee status, and especially so in the case of children. For this reason, they should always be given the benefit of the doubt. Even if there are misgivings about the credibility of a child's story, he or she should not have the burden of providing proof

- In view of the special vulnerability of children, the determination of refugee status should be followed up by the determination of appropriate and durable solutions in their best interests

Legal representative

A legal representative should be appointed immediately to ensure that the interests of an applicant for refugee status who is a minor are fully safeguarded. In many countries, however, the appointment of such guardians has been unsatisfactory: it has been found, for example, that the appointment of a legal representative takes too long, sometimes several months, or that the representative does not have the time or the skills needed to protect the best interests of the child. Support or training for guardians may be necessary.

Interviewing children

An interview to determine status can be extremely distressing for a child. A trusted adult — a family member, a family friend or an

appointed independent person — should accompany the child during the interview. Trained and independent interpreters should be used when the interviewer does not share the child's language, even if the child appears to speak the interviewer's language adequately (see *Interviewing unaccompanied minors and preparing social histories* for more information).

Keeping children informed

Minors old enough to understand what is meant by status determination should be told about the process, where they stand within it, what decisions have been made and the possible consequences. Uncertainty will cause unnecessary anxiety; if not accurately informed, minors will be receptive to rumours and bad advice, and they may as a result harbour unrealistic expectations and falsify information.

Determining age

A country of asylum often needs to determine the age of a young person who has (or is claiming) refugee status. There may be different procedures for refugees below a specific age, such as 16 or 18 years. Laws that apply to the general population may also have age limits, such as those concerning juvenile offenders. In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child only applies to persons under 18 years.

There are practical problems in determining age. A refugee's birth might never have been registered, or identity documents might never have been issued. Identity papers are sometimes lost, forged or destroyed. Even when the papers are in order, the authorities might question their validity.

When identity documents are not being used to establish age, the authorities usually base their

assessments on physical appearance. Sometimes supposedly 'scientific' procedures are used, such as dental or wrist-bone X-rays. Precautions must be taken if such methods are used. Since these methods only estimate age, the authorities must ensure that they are accurate and preserve dignity. Special procedures usually aim to help younger persons, as their needs are often greater; when the exact age is uncertain, the child should be given the benefit of the doubt.

The family vaccination cards used in some countries give estimates of age, and there are also traditional methods of approximately determining the age of a child. If the child is with the mother, the latter may relate the birth of the child to a local event or a local calendar, such as the Year of the Sheep, the year of the war between countries X and Y, the year for the migration from one place to another, the locust year or the year of an international event such as the Gulf War.

Because States face so many practical problems in applying laws that have age limits, agencies must keep the issues of accuracy, safety and dignity under constant scrutiny.

Further reading

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This information sheet is based on the UNHCR publication Refugee children: guidelines on protection and care *(see Bibliography).*

Household food economy analysis

Household food economy analysis is a method of assessing the needs of areas or population groups facing acute food insecurity. A family only becomes food insecure if, having lost access to one or more food sources, it is unable to expand other sources to make up the deficit.

Household food economy analysis is based upon an understanding of the various methods people employ to gain access to food. It goes beyond traditional production-based assessments by exploring, in a systematic fashion, the other food sources that people rely upon and the extent to which these can be expanded at times of crisis.

In a bad year, for example, can people increase their consumption of wild foods? Or can some members of the family migrate in search of employment? Can the most affected households turn to their better-off kin for gifts or loans to help them get by? Or do they have food stocks they can draw on?

The results of this kind of analysis lend themselves to simple visual presentation in the form of pie charts; a chart for the war-affected Akot area of Southern Sudan is given on this page. In a 'bad' year — in this case, when production fails — a typical household may lose half its food-crop production, equivalent to 30 per cent of its annual food consumption. Before the war this could have been made up by increasing the consumption of fish and wild foods and the slaughter of cattle for meat.

The war has, however, undermined some of these strategies: the lack of fishing equipment limits the catch of fish, the loss of livestock means that fewer animals can now be slaughtered, and so on. These days, therefore, families are likely to go hungry when their crops fail.

A 'normal' year pre-war

milk 25%
exchange 5%
fish 5%
meat 5%
other food products 10%
own grain crops 50%

A 'bad' year pre-war

milk 25%
exchange 5%
fish 15%
meat 10%
wild foods 15%
other food crops 5%
own grain crops 25%

In Akot, Southern Sudan, before the war, more fish, meat and wild foods were consumed if the crops failed. Since the war began, however, the catch of fish has been limited by a lack of fishing equipment. Providing such equipment is a realistic alternative to food aid.

Alternatives to food aid

One way to tackle the problem of hunger is to provide food aid. But household food economy analysis also recognises that this may not be the only solution. By focusing on the mechanisms used to gain access to food at times of crisis, the analysis can suggest interventions other than food aid — interventions that will support rather than replace local initiatives.

Because they take into account people's own efforts to obtain food in times of crisis, the estimates of food needs derived from household food economy analysis tend to be lower than those generated by other approaches.

Where food aid has a role to play, food economy analysis allows a better estimation of needs than a production-based assessment. In the case of Akot, food aid needs could be calculated from the pie charts as follows: if the typical family cannot afford to slaughter any more animals, they will face a deficit equivalent to 5 per cent of their annual food needs; if they cannot expand fishing, they will require an additional 10 per cent; and so on.

Undertaking similar analyses for poor and rich households — in addition to the 'typical' household represented in the pie chart — will enable a quantitative analysis of total food needs to be built up.

In a food economy analysis, vulnerability is linked to economic circumstances, rather than to pre-defined group parameters, such as 'elderly' or 'disabled'. Household food economy analysis also has a significant contribution to make in terms of targeting assistance, since it allows a clearer definition of who is vulnerable and why.

Household food economy analysis also helps us to define more clearly what food aid is for. All too often, outside observers will ask, 'Where are the dead bodies?' when food aid fails to arrive in the quantities originally requested. But in the case of Akot, for example, the objective of providing food aid might not simply be to save lives, but also to save assets — and preserve future livelihoods — by enabling families to retain livestock they would otherwise have had to slaughter for food.

The effects of conflict and insecurity

Household food economy analysis can be used to examine any problem that reduces access to one or more sources of food, be it production failure resulting from natural causes (drought or flood) or the disruption caused by conflict.

In the case of Akot, for example, conflict and insecurity could have a variety of effects on household access to food:

- Looting and destruction of crops or food stocks would reduce access to the 'own grain crops' and other 'food crops' slices of the pie (see chart on previous page)

- Looting of livestock would reduce access to 'milk' and 'meat'

- Reduced access to areas affected by conflict could reduce access to 'wild foods' and 'fish', if these are to be found in the areas concerned

The use of key informants

Household food economy analysis draws as much as possible on existing documentation, but also taps into the knowledge of local people by using 'key informant' enquiries (indeed, it would in most cases be unrealistic to expect information needs to be met in any other way, such as through expensive household surveys). The aim is to construct a plausible picture of the situation, and this can be arrived at by a combination of information and judgement.

Depending on the type of information required, key informants can be found at any level: village, district, or regional. They may be government workers or NGO employees (working in agricultural, veterinary or other types of programme), teachers, representatives of village organisations (farmers' union, women's union), traditional local leaders or traders. Above all, they are people who, by virtue of their position or their experience, know the answers to most of our questions.

The use of key informants is becoming more common in many fields, and the validity of the information obtained in this way is increasingly recognised. Our experience has been that, subject to appropriate selection and proper cross-checking within and between interviews,

the judgement of key informants on quantitative questions – such as the typical livestock holding in an area – deserves the same confidence as we instinctively have in their judgement on qualitative questions – such as the types and uses of livestock. The fact that this is not a statistical confidence by no means negates the value of the information.

The rigour of the method comes from its focus on food, and from the fact that if people are surviving, they must, in most circumstances, be consuming close on 100 per cent of their calorie requirements. The task is to estimate the relative importance of the various food sources to different families, based on an understanding of how much of each source a family may have access to and what that food's potential calorific contribution is. By grounding the investigation in nutritional principles and an awareness of what is needed in order to survive, the method encourages an ongoing analysis that gives a tightly-constructed final picture.

7 Roles and mandates of agencies

7a The International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement

The Movement began in 1864 with the founding of what was to become the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and with the signing of the Geneva Convention, the first of a series of international treaties designed to protect non-combatants during conflict. The States signatory to these treaties formally recognise the ICRC – which is a private organisation – and mandate it to monitor the implementation of the Geneva Conventions by the States; they further recognise the ICRC's role in protecting and assisting people affected by armed conflict.

The years following the signing of the first Geneva Convention saw the creation of national Red Cross societies in many countries. Initially set up to help people in need during conflicts within their respective countries, these National Societies later expanded their remit to meet the needs caused by natural and man-made disasters.

It was soon found that the concerns of National Societies could not be confined within national frontiers, and so after World War One the various national Red Cross societies – and in Muslim countries, Red Crescent societies – created a joint forum, the International Federation (formerly League) of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement thus consists of three components:

- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

- The 175 national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies

- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Each of these components has its own particular role – recognised by individual States and by the international community – in assisting vulnerable individuals, including placing a special emphasis on meeting the needs of children and preserving family links. States are co-signatories to the Movement's statutes and participate formally in its conferences and resolutions.

It is important to note that, although both the ICRC and the International Federation have observer status at the United Nations, no component of the Movement is part of the UN system. The Movement's stated principles include impartiality and neutrality (and by extension, non-discrimination) and it is therefore independent of political interests.

1 Statutes of the Movement

As already mentioned, States confer rights and obligations on the Movement and its components. Thus the ICRC's right of humanitarian initiative is established in Article 5 para 3 of the Movement's statutes: the right to offer its services for 'any question requiring examination by such an institution'.

2 Resolutions of international conferences

The international conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent bring together the components of the Movement and the States. The following resolutions on children and tracing were adopted by recent conferences.

At the 25th International Conference, held in Geneva in 1986, Resolution XVI reaffirmed the role of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA) as co-ordinator and technical adviser to national societies and governments. This resolution also acknowledges 'the International Red Cross and

Red Crescent Movement's responsibility in helping to re-establish or maintain contact between members of families separated as a consequence of armed conflict, tensions or natural disasters.' At the same conference, Resolution XX urged governments, the Movement and other relief agencies to 'take appropriate measures to identify unaccompanied minors as soon as possible, establish and maintain an individual file and ensure that tracing efforts are made with a view to family reunification.'

At the 26th International Conference, held in Geneva in 1995, Resolution 2/D carried the title 'With regard to the reunification of families'. It stated: 'From the outset, and as codified in the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has had a particular role as to prisoners of war (POWs), which includes the collecting and tracking of individual POWs. The necessary centralisation thereof led to the creation – and recognition by States – of what is now called the Central Tracing Agency. Part of the CTA's tasks includes the re-establishment and maintenance of relations between individuals separated by conflict, and often implies tracing of family members and family reunification.'

Several articles of the four Geneva Conventions refer to the CTA, but special mention should be made of:

- Article 123 of the Third Geneva Convention
- Article 140 of the Fourth Geneva Convention

These create the obligation, in times of armed conflict, to set up an agency to collect all the information available through official or private channels on prisoners of war and all other persons protected under international humanitarian law, including civilians (particularly those who are detained).

The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions are treaties that further elaborate the 1949 Conventions by taking account of changes in the nature of conflict in the second half of the twentieth century – notably the era of decolonisation and its related conflicts – and that further strengthen the role of the CTA.

Certain categories of particularly vulnerable victims enjoy special protection, namely:

- Prisoners of war
- Civilian internees
- The wounded
- The sick
- The disabled
- Women
- Children

As a consequence of its mandate under international humanitarian law, the ICRC is often the first humanitarian organisation on the ground when conflict breaks out, and frequently the only organisation that can gain access to conflict areas. The ICRC is the lead component of the Movement in all activities relating to tracing and allied services, such as Red Cross messages. The CTA of the ICRC supervises the implementation and maintenance of a network within the conflict area – or between a conflict area and elsewhere – and forms the link with national societies in the Red Cross messages international network.

3 Red Cross messages

The ICRC uses the Red Cross message system primarily as a means of communication between individuals – usually relatives – who are separated by conflict. This system can be used when telephone, postal and other normal types of communication break down or are unavailable; it frequently provides the first contact between separated family members, thus alleviating the need for tracing and often leading to family reunion. Red Cross messages are an essential component of the active tracing process, whereby family contacts can be re-established and subsequently maintained.

4 Unaccompanied children

Under international humanitarian law, refugee law and the rules governing the rights of the child, unaccompanied children enjoy special protection. The ICRC specifies the following actions as priorities:

- Identifying the children and keeping track of them at all times in order to avoid disappearances and unauthorised adoptions

- Re-establishing and maintaining contact between these children and their parents

- Reuniting the children with their parents

- Providing care for the children until they can rejoin their parents

These objectives can be achieved by distributing Red Cross Messages, carrying out tracing activities through the Red Cross network, and cross-matching information from parents searching for children. This is often, but not exclusively, done with the help of a computerised central data system.

The databases set up by the ICRC to record personal details are designed for the following functions:

- To monitor the situation of specific categories of victims by keeping track of them at all times with a view to ensuring their protection

- To help to re-establish family ties

- To help clarify the fate of persons reported missing

In all conflict situations, the centralisation in a single database of information about unaccompanied children is the key to ensuring the children's protection, to restoring contact between them and their families, and to reuniting them with their parents if possible.

Just as a network for the re-establishment of family ties cannot function properly without the involvement of a large number of people, so centralisation requires the sharing of data among those people – provided that this is not prejudicial to the individuals concerned and that the protection of personal data is guaranteed. The ICRC can thus provide other organisations with the information about unaccompanied children recorded in its database.

5   Family reunification

The ICRC facilitates and organises family reunifications when and for as long as its services as a neutral intermediary between the parties to the conflict are required. The CTA co-operates with the competent government authorities, National Societies and other organisations – including UNHCR and the International Office of Migration (IOM)) – in order to realise the measures necessary for carrying out reunification (travel authorisation and guarantees for the journey etc).

6   The Federation

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies works throughout the world to encourage, facilitate and promote the humanitarian activities carried out by its member National Societies to prevent and alleviate human suffering. The Federation co-ordinates international assistance to victims of natural disasters and to the victims of man-made disasters outside conflict areas. It also helps National Societies to plan and implement disaster preparedness programmes, emergency response and long-term projects designed to reduce vulnerability and contribute to sustainable development. The Federation has published *Guidelines for Tracing in Disasters.*

Broadly speaking, the activities of the Federation and the ICRC are complementary: the ICRC works in areas of armed conflict, and the Federation supports this work outside war zones and responds to natural and other disasters, in co-operation with National Societies where appropriate.

As part of the Movement, the Federation shares the common concern of National Societies and the ICRC over family reunification, family unity and the vulnerability of separated family members. By helping National Societies to develop their operational capacities, the Federation contributes to family reunification and the assistance subsequently provided, thus enabling families to rebuild their lives. Recognising that the process of family reunification does not finish when members of the family meet and that further assistance may be required, the Federation places a strong emphasis on meeting psycho-social and social welfare needs.

The ICRC and the Federation Secretariat give National Societies guidance about appropriate initiatives to help vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied children. Inappropriate responses by organisations and individuals may exacerbate the problem and reduce the longer-term likelihood of family reunion.

7 The National Societies

There are more than 175 national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies across the world. The activities of each society vary according to the needs of the country concerned, and include national and international relief, youth activities, disseminating information, development, health and social welfare work, nursing and blood transfusion services. Each National Society is required to offer tracing and Red Cross message services, and to operate in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Movement.

All National Societies have a role in disaster preparedness, working in conjunction with statutory agencies and linking into co-ordinated national plans. Tracing and Red Cross family message activities are an important component of planning and preparation.

National Societies offer various services that assist family reunification: help with tracing missing persons; advising and assisting applicants for tracing; providing support, particularly at the time of reunification. In this context, many National Societies maintain links with other components of the Movement and with international organisations such as UNHCR, IOM and International Social Services (ISS). The need for co-operation, within their respective mandates, between the major organisations working towards family reunification has been underlined and supported by the Movement.

The National Societies also have an important role outside the immediate area of conflict or disaster, and in this they form part of an international network. The identification and registration of unaccompanied children in countries of asylum helps to ensure that they receive protection and care; details of children are forwarded to the ICRC's centralised database. Also, National Societies frequently play a part in the reception and social integration of refugees into the country of asylum.

7b United Nations (UN) agencies

Two UN agencies share responsibility for international assistance to separated children:

- Unicef has a mandate to ensure the survival, care and protection of children in both emergency and development situations; it acts as the lead agency on children's issues in countries of origin and in national emergencies

- UNHCR has a global mandate to protect and aid refugees and returnees, among them separated children; it acts as the lead agency on matters related to refugees in countries of asylum

Both agencies work in collaboration with, and at the invitation of, host governments, and according to their respective mandates are responsible for advising and assisting government or authorities in the development of policies, standards and guidelines. They also work closely with NGOs.

The mandates of Unicef and UNHCR make them responsible for co-ordinating international assistance and providing protection. Within this context, both agencies have undertaken to help separated children and have therefore set up internal systems, policy frameworks and programme mechanisms for responding.

1 Unicef

Unicef was set up by the UN General Assembly in 1946 'for the benefit of children and adolescents of countries which were victims of aggression and in order to assist in their rehabilitation.'

Unicef's original global mandate to meet the 'emergency and long-range needs of children' was reaffirmed in 1950 and widened indefinitely in 1953. As the UN agency responsible for co-operation to ensure the survival, protection and development of the child 'without discrimination', Unicef has a long-standing mandate on behalf of children world-wide. That mandate was reaffirmed in the revised mission statement adopted by the Executive Board in 1996 on the occasion of the agency's fiftieth anniversary: 'Unicef responds in

emergencies to protect the rights of children. In co-ordination with United Nations partners and humanitarian agencies, Unicef makes its unique facilities for rapid response available to its partners to relieve the suffering of children and those who provide their care.'

Two types of activity are set out in Unicef's founding principles: health and child welfare. Until the early 1980s, child health and survival remained the agency's central focus; since then, greater attention has been given to child welfare, including special action for separated children.

Specific mandate with regard to separated children

A specific programme for separated children began in 1986, when Unicef's Executive Board endorsed a policy framework for assistance to children in especially difficult circumstances (Resolutions E/ICEF/1986/CRP 33 and CRP 37). Both resolutions recognise the need for a more active role in alleviating the impact of war on children, and they focus world-wide efforts on children for whom extraordinary action is required to guarantee their rights and well-being. Separated children, as well as child soldiers, have since then been identified as the groups of children most at risk and most in need of protection and assistance.

A policy paper on Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances (CEDC) (CF/PD/PRO-1986-004) was issued to all Unicef offices to advise them on the likely need for tracing and early action towards family reunification. Directives were also issued to guide national efforts in assessing the needs of children in situations of armed conflict. Within Unicef, an office was established in collaboration with the Emergency Programme to lead the global initiative on behalf of children in especially difficult circumstances. This office remains a major point of reference inside the organisation for efforts on behalf of separated children.

The CEDC policy was reviewed in 1996, when the Board approved the proposed framework for programme interventions in six key areas, including the care and protection of children affected by armed conflict and other forms of violence.

Within the Programme Division at Unicef's headquarters in New York, the Child Protection section has a programme officer dedicated to providing technical assistance to country offices and regional offices concerning the care and protection of children affected by armed conflict and other forms of violence. In addition, regional offices provide technical assistance and policy guidance to country offices, with the aim of ensuring that country programmes address the needs of the most vulnerable children, including separated children.

Unicef has also provided policy development support, through initiatives such as the UN Study on Children in Armed Conflict prepared by Graça Machel; support to the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children in War; and support to regional and sub-regional governmental bodies, such as the Organisation of African Unity and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

2 UNHCR

The UN relief agencies were set up after World War Two, and of these, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) was the first to offer assistance to separated children. By 1948, the problem of separated children was recognised and specifically mentioned in the mandate of the International Relief Organisation (IRO), successor to UNRRA. In 1952 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) replaced the IRO.

UNHCR's mandate is founded on :

- The Statute of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (GA Resolution 428 (v) of 14 December 1950)
- The 1951 Refugee Convention
- The 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees
- Relevant subsequent General Assembly Resolutions

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is also fundamental to UNHCR's efforts on behalf of refugee children.

According to these documents, UNHCR is mandated to provide international protection to refugees and to promote durable solutions

to their problems. The agency is also responsible for international protection and welfare of refugee and returnee children, in co-operation with host governments in accordance with their international obligations.

Specific mandate with regard to separated children

The protection of separated children and the reunification of refugee families have been part of UNHCR's efforts since these activities were specified in the Final Act of the UN Conference on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, adopted in July 1951. The General Assembly explicitly approved the High Commissioner's assistance to separated children in Resolution 35/187 of 15 December 1980.

Within this mandate, UNHCR has been induced by its Executive Committee (in Conclusion No 24 of 1981, No 47 of 1987, and No 59 of 1989) to widen the care and protection it gives to unaccompanied children by :

- Making every effort to ensure the reunification of separated refugee families

- Ensuring that the reunification of separated refugee families takes place with the least possible delay

- Facilitating family reunification by encouraging countries of origin to grant exit abroad

- Making every effort to trace the parents or other close relatives of unaccompanied minors before they are resettled

- Facilitating special measures of assistance to the head of family so that economic and housing problems in the country of asylum do not unduly delay reunifications

- Continuing to give special attention to the needs of unaccompanied minors

- Ensuring that individual assessments are carried out and adequate social histories prepared for unaccompanied children

- Promoting the best possible legal protection for unaccompanied minors with regard to forced recruitment into armed forces and to the risks associated with irregular adoption

UNHCR has a Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children at headquarters who is responsible for advocating for, and developing policy on, refugee children and adolescents. In order to promote and consolidate this work, Regional Child Policy Officers are deployed in Africa, the Caucasus and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with the task of strengthening UNCHR's capacity to respond to the needs of children.

Within UNHCR field offices, the key personnel involved with separated children are: community services officers; technical specialists who provide advice to, and co-ordination of, programmes for separated children; and protection officers concerned with the rights of these children and related legal issues. They have complementary roles.

Additionally, the field officer – the eyes and ears of UNHCR on the ground – may be the first to identify problems concerning separated children. The programme officer is responsible for planning, budgeting and monitoring projects set up with implementing partners. All these staff are accountable to the head of sub-office, and through him or her to the representative.

UNHCR's policy and guidelines on unaccompanied refugee children are set out in its 1994 publication *Refugee children: guidelines on protection and care*.

Definitions

Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (art 1) defines a child as 'anyone below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'.

The African Charter on the Rights of the Child 1990 (art 11) states: 'For the purposes of this Charter, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years.'

Emergency

There is no generally-accepted definition of the word 'emergency'; it depends upon the context. For the purposes of these books, the word refers to the context – conflict, mass movement of refugees, famine or natural disaster – in which children become separated.

Famine

A imprecise term, but one that is commonly used to describe any situation of possible or actual starvation. In practice, it is associated with a wide range of events, including military siege, mass rural starvation, drought, migration due to food shortage and others.

Foster family placement

The placement of a child with a non-family member through a tracing programme. It does not necessarily denote a formal fostering arrangement: in some cases, separated children are placed with neighbours, for example, who they may have known, or even stayed with, before the emergency.

IDTR (Identification, Documentation, Tracing and reunification)

The *Identification* process establishes which children are separated from their parents or carers and where these children are to be found. The information gathered at the point of identification must be sufficient to lead those carrying out the documentation back to the child.

Documentation is the collection of information about the child, his or her family and place of origin, the circumstances of separation and the wishes of the child. The term is used in preference to 'registration' in all three volumes of *Working with Separated Children*.

Family *tracing* is the process used to find the parents or other relatives of the child.

Verification is the process of validating the relationship between the child and the family member who is claiming him or her, and confirming their willingness to be reunited. Verification must be carried out in every case; it is vital for child protection.

The ultimate aim of family tracing is *reunification*: to reunite the child with his or her parents or with other members of the family. The term is used when the child goes to live with any family member, even if he or she has not lived with them before.

Institution; residential institution; children's centre

These terms all describe collective forms of care for children, where the children do not have contact with their families. For the purposes of the three publications making up *Working with separated children*, these terms do not refer either to boarding schools – from which children will return home for the holidays – or to day-care centres.

Orphan

In many countries, children are described as 'orphans' even if only one parent has died; it is therefore important to be aware of local terminology and traditions. In most societies, children who have lost both parents are cared for within their extended family or the community according to traditional rules and practices.

In tracing work, the term 'orphan' should be

avoided as a general description for separated children; most of them are not orphans. Moreover, to label children as orphans may encourage the creation of orphanages – which attract funding but at the same time encourage further family separations – thus distracting attention from family tracing and community support. The result may be adoptions and permanent separations.

Refoulement

The forced repatriation of refugees. Any act of refoulement contravenes international refugee law.

Unaccompanied child

The UNHCR publication *Refugee children: guidelines on protection and care* (1994) defines unaccompanied children as 'those who are

separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so'.

The term 'separated child' is now widely used in preference to 'unaccompanied child'. This is because, in practice, relatively few children are truly unaccompanied, even though they may be separated from their usual carers. Based on the above definitions of a child, UN agencies and most NGOs (including SCF UK) register separated children under the age of 18 for tracing purposes.

According to ICRC Doctrine 14 (1981), 'unaccompanied children' are 'those children less than 15 years who are separated from their mother and father and have no one who by law or custom is principally responsible for them'.

Abbreviations

CEDC:	Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances
CRC:	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO:	Community Services Officer (UNHCR)
FHI:	Food for the Hungry International
ICRC:	International Committee of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IDTR:	Identification, Documentation, Tracing and Reunification
IOM	International Office of Migration
MOU:	Memorandum of understanding
NGO:	Non-governmental organisation
NSE:	Non-state entity
OCHA:	Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance
OHCHR:	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PIN	Personal Identification Number
SCF:	Save the Children Fund
TOR:	Terms of reference
UN:	United Nations
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Unicef:	United Nations Children's Fund

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working with
separated children

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Save the Children

working with separated children: field guide

Separated children are a recurring feature of emergencies. When whole populations are on the move – driven by conflict, famine or natural disaster – it is inevitable that some families will become dispersed and that some of their younger members will be left to an uncertain fate.

The three volumes of *Working with Separated Children* together form the complete guide for NGOs on how to work with other NGOs, local authorities and the community to help children who become separated.

Based upon the authors' extensive experience of working with separated children in Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the three volumes look at:

- How to prevent family separations from occurring in the first place.

- Where children are already separated, how to organise a programme to trace relatives and reunite the child with them.

- How to organise interim care for the children awaiting tracing.

- Finding long-term care solutions for children whose families cannot be traced.

The two main themes running through *Working with Separated Children* are that prevention of separation is better than cure, and that reuniting separated children with relatives is almost always a better solution than placing them in institutions.

This Field Guide gives a concise overview of the subject, targeted particularly at the staff who will have to set up and co-ordinate family tracing programmes: for example, senior managers in NGOs, international agencies and government departments. Each chapter of the book opens with an indication of its target audience.

Sarah Uppard has a background in health and psychiatry, and has worked in emergencies in the former Yugoslavia and Africa. She was involved in setting up tracing programmes for Save the Children Fund in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and is currently in the policy unit of SCF, supporting its work with separated children.

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Mary Tamplin has a background in health and social science, and has training experience in child health and welfare in Africa, the Middle East and Romania. Her work has focused on equipping a range of national workers during and after emergencies.

Save the Children is the UK's leading international children's charity, working to create a better future for children.

In a world where children are denied basic human rights, we champion the rights of all children to a happy, healthy and secure childhood.

We put the reality of children's lives at the heart of everything we do.

Together with children, we are helping to build a better world for present and future generations.

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