Community Child Protection Mechanisms in Protracted Refugee Settings in Rwanda: Findings and Recommendations

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Research partners

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Research questions

• Primary research question: which community-based child protection mechanisms exist in protracted refugee settings in Uganda and Rwanda?
  – Explore what community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) exist in selected refugee settings and to learn how such mechanisms link, or act in parallel, with other more "formal" components of the national child protection and education interventions.

• How can UNHCR and its partner organizations (esp. international and local NGOs) engage with these mechanisms for more effective and sustainable results for children?
What do we mean by CBCPMs?

- Groups or networks that respond to and prevent issues of children protection at the grassroots level.
- They range from family and peer group supports to women’s groups, religious groups, and youth groups.
- They also include traditional community-based processes and formal mechanisms initiated by government and national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).
- Examples of CBCPMs are Child Welfare/Protection Committees, religious groups that support orphans and other vulnerable children, family responses to problems such as teenage pregnancy, and traditional processes where a chief and/or elders use by-laws to respond to violations against children.
Methodology

- Qualitative and ethnographic in nature – “rapid ethnography”
- Six to seven researchers in each site for approximately four weeks
- Aim of ethnography: to describe scientifically a specific society or culture.
  - to understand the world and the beliefs and practices of participants through participants’ own eyes (the "emic" approach), without the imposition of outsider categories such as "child protection."
Research sites – protracted refugee settings

– Two sites each in Rwanda and Uganda
– Uganda: urban sites
  • two Congolese refugee communities: Nsambya Kirombe and Makindye Luvuma
  • one Somali community was included: Kasaato, in Kisenyi
– Rwanda: two of the four refugee camps in Rwanda – Gihembe and Kiziba Camps (around ~15k people per camp)
  • Two quartiers per camp
Rwanda findings: protracted nature of refugee setting leads to family and community breakdown

• The protracted refugee camp situation has led to the breakdown of normal family and community structures.
  – Adult respondents and community members reported that they felt distressed by their inability to provide for their children and to protect them from harms.
  – Adolescents also felt distressed by the perceived ‘weakness’ of their parents and saw very few alternatives available to them outside of school.
Voices from the field

• “We try to advise them, tell them that we understand that life here is hard. Someday God will help us, and we shall have a better life. Children do not listen to us as they think it cannot get better than this; they have lost all hope for better future, and in the end they get involved in bad behavior.” –Adult woman

• “I am not that old; I fled DRC when I was five years old. If I said I knew what life was like then, I would be lying; I wouldn’t know. I don’t know how they used to take care of children. All I know about culture is what I have witnessed here; I don’t know anything else.” –Young woman
Rwanda findings: out-of-school adolescents

• The lack of support for education after secondary three (S3) greatly increases the vulnerability of adolescents to harms.
  – For girls the primary risks were early pregnancy and prostitution (sexual exploitation).
  – Boys were vulnerable to falling into delinquent behaviours, including drug and alcohol abuse, stealing and fighting.
Rwanda findings: lack of programming for adolescents

• Despite the vulnerability of adolescents and young people to serious harms, there is a lack of programming targeting this group.

• Community members overwhelmingly reported that the main harms against children concerning them related to teenagers and young people. The top harms identified through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and group discussions, and by adults and young people, men and women, included early pregnancy, prostitution, delinquency and being out of school after S3.

• Although community members were concerned for the wellbeing and safety of their teenagers and young people, this was not necessarily reflected in the services and programs targeting this group.
Rwanda findings: “formal” CBCPMs

• CBCPMs and formal actors are limited in their effectiveness by negative community perceptions and a lack of trust.

• Respondents reported:
  – that camp committees including village, quartier and executive levels did not always deal with advocacy around their cases fairly and that corruption existed, including bribes being accepted in order to deal with cases faster or preference given to those of a particular ethnic or tribal group over others.
  – dissatisfaction with the activities and support provided by international agencies and NGOs. For example, there was a lack of understanding about why UNHCR only funded school up to a certain level.
Rwanda findings: lack of attention to existing preventive mechanisms

• Parents emerged as one of the most important preventative factors, teaching their children good behavior, encouraging to them to stay in school and often supporting them through troubled times, such as early pregnancy.

• Other significant preventive factors were churches who spread important child protection messages through their congregations, organized economic support for vulnerable members and allowed their buildings to be used for ECD and secondary school classes (in the case of the Hope School in Gihembe).
Guidance point #1

• To assist refugee parents to better protect their children, we recommend the following:
  – Support income generating activities for parents to enable them to protect their children effectively, not expose them to harm, and send them to school.
  – Build the capacity of key community members and CBCPMs to work with parents to help them support their children by raising awareness on the importance of the parent-child relationship; helping parents to maintain good relationships with their children, helping parents to identify strategies to prevent their children being exposed to harms; and giving information on how to respond if a child experiences a particular harm.
Guidance point #2

• To enable community-based child protection mechanisms to better protect refugee children, we recommend the following:

  – Refugee-assisting organizations support CBCPMs to identify and monitor children in their communities who are particularly vulnerable and may find it difficult to report their problems (e.g. those living without their biological parents).
  
  – Refugee-assisting organizations support CBCPMs to undertake awareness raising activities, using multiple approaches, focusing on the issues affecting children in their own communities.
  
  – Refugee-assisting organizations support CBCPMs to undertake an advocacy role, helping refugee children and caregivers to access the services they need.
Guidance point #3

To enable refugee children to access formal education, we recommend the following:

– Strengthen appropriate income generating activities and livelihoods programmes for parents to enable them to care for their children effectively, and send their children to school.

– There be adequate funding to assist children from particularly vulnerable families to go to school. It will be important to have clear criteria in place for administering this fund, and for decision-making processes to be transparent.
Guidance point #4

• To enable refugee children to access formal education, we recommend the following:
  – CBCPMs raise awareness in their communities of the importance of sending all children to school, and challenge attitudes and beliefs which contribute to children not being sent to school.
  – CBCPMs identify children likely to be excluded from education (e.g. children not living with their biological parents; child mothers; children with disabilities) and support them to go to school.
  – Where refugee children are entering a mainstream education system (e.g. in urban settings), particularly where the official language of the country is new to the refugee children, provide ‘foundation classes’ either before the children join the formal education system, or alongside it.
Guidance point #5

• To prevent refugee children from dropping out of school, we recommend the following:
  – Strengthen school structures to help teachers support refugee children to continue with school. In urban settings, where refugee children attend school along with national children, addressing teachers’ lack of understanding of refugee children’s experiences and challenges is particularly important.
  – Refugee parents are supported to participate in school decision-making bodies, such as school committees/PTAs.
  – Schools attended by refugee children, especially in settings where refugee children attend alongside national children, have a policy to manage discrimination, and a formal complaints system.
Thank you!

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