Alliance for
Child Protection in
Humanitarian Action

MEASURING SEPARATION IN EMERGENCIES

Community-based monitoring in rural Adwa, Tigray, Ethiopia

SUMMARY

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Families are the basic protective unit for children in society and, in almost all cases, provide the best environment for meeting a child's developmental needs. The separation of children from their families is one of the most significant impacts that humanitarian crises have on individuals' lives worldwide. Identifying safe and supportive interim care for children, and undertaking family tracing and reunification activities to reunite them with their family following onset of an emergency, are two of the most significant protective and psychological interventions that humanitarian actors can carry out during an emergency.

Background to Measuring Separation in Emergencies

The Measuring Separation in Emergencies (MSiE) project is an interagency initiative under the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, funded by the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and coordinated by Save the Children in partnership with Columbia University. The overall aim of the MSiE project is to strengthen emergency response programmes for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) through the development of practical, field-tested methods to enhance the assessment of the scale and nature of separation in emergencies.

To address this gap in data on UASC, in 2014 the Assessment and Measurement Task Force of the Global Child Protection Working Group (CPWG)[1] launched an interagency initiative to develop a project to generate rigorous statistics about UASC across a range of emergency settings. The project had several components each of which had specific methods to measure separation. Three components were initially explored with a fourth component, the residential care approach, being included following the initial pilots in 2014:

1. **Projection approach** aims to use existing population data from a given location, combined with empirical data from comparable emergencies, to generate models of UASC risk profiles characteristic of certain emergency types and phases, and to test or validate those projections against actual data in existing or evolving emergencies.

2. **Population-based estimation approach** aims to provide a population-based estimation of the prevalence, number and basic characteristics of UASC in a defined area, affected by the same emergency, at any given point in time.

3. **Community-based monitoring approach** incorporates a community-based monitoring system capable of continuous, ongoing measurement of trends in the frequency and basic characteristics of UASC in defined areas over time.

4. **Residential care approach** is designed to capture the scale of movements of children into residential care facilities as a result of an emergency.

This report focuses primarily on the community-based monitoring approach, developed by Columbia University, and the field testing of this approach in the Tigray region of Ethiopia from June to December 2016. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) office in Ethiopia hosted the pilot research with the support of Save the Children.

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[1] Later renamed the Assessment, Measurement and Evidence Working Group upon transition from the CPWG to the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action in 2016.

Ethiopia context

The monitoring system was established in 10 villages in the Adwa district of the Tigray region. The Adwa district is located adjacent to the communities most severely affected by drought, and therefore local partners expected significant movement of children throughout this area. The government also contributed to identifying locations for the monitoring system based on expected numbers of child separation cases moving through the region as well as accessibility and cell phone network reliability. Through engagement with the government, five kebeles (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, generally composed of approximately 2,000 households) were identified and deemed as appropriate for the study.

Focal point selection process

Community-based monitoring relies on selected community members to act as **focal points** to provide regular reports about the situation where they live. The rationale is that community members will be privy to insider knowledge about the people who live close to them, and with proper organisation, training and incentives this knowledge can be routinely gathered and centralised to get a picture of a given issue.

During visits to the villages with the kebele chairperson, residents were given an overview of the pilot and asked to provide feedback as well as give their consent to participate in the research. Residents in all 10 villages gave their consent to the process. Each village then held an election to choose three focal points per village. Two focal points came from the existing village leadership structure and one came from outside that structure. It was required that at least one focal point from each village be a woman.

The next step was for the research team to meet with the focal points to identify and agree upon a clearly defined reporting area of 100 to 200 households within which the focal points would be responsible for reporting cases of separation. In some villages, this reporting area covered a small, relatively densely populated geographic area, while in other villages the reporting area encompassed large fields and farms. By including both types of communities, the project was better able to represent the diversity of conditions in the region.

Reporting protocol

When a focal point learned of a case of separation in his or her reporting zone, she or he was asked to send a text message containing a numeric code to the project coordinator's central phone. Whenever possible, this six-component code provided the following information about each child:
- age (exact or approximate)
- sex
- whether the child arrived in the community, departed from the community, or was remaining in the same community
- whether the child was separated or unaccompanied
- reason(s) for the separation
- current caregiver(s).

Data retrieval and verification

All of the text messages were sent to a central smartphone connected to FrontlineSMS, a free, open-source software that enables automatic transmission of coded text messages to a special web-based inbox. This set-up allowed project and research staff to remotely retrieve and monitor reports from villages.

Every time a case report was received via the FrontlineSMS system, the project coordinator phoned the focal point who had sent the case information to verify their report and, if necessary, request that a corrected code be sent.

Findings

The findings from this pilot suggest that a community-based monitoring approach using mobile phones has the potential to generate important information for programmes responding to child separation in slow-onset humanitarian emergencies. Over the course of the six-month study period, 48 individual cases of unaccompanied and separated children were reported and verified. Of these 48 cases, 21 were children who had arrived in the community, nine had become separated without changing communities, and 18 were children who had left their community; 19 children (40%) were classified by focal points as unaccompanied. Distribution of reporting varied across months, ranging from 23 cases in July to one case in October. Most departures occurred in July and September and most arrivals occurred in July, August and December. There was also wide variation in the number of cases per village, with one village reporting no cases throughout the study period and another village reporting more than 10.

Lessons learned and conclusion

The lessons learned from piloting the community-based monitoring approach in Ethiopia include:
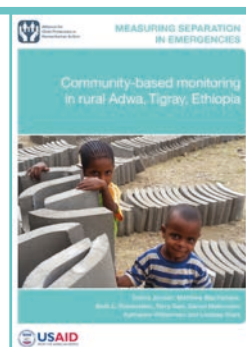
1. Clarify definitions of an unaccompanied child and a separated child, both to align with international definitions and to understand and align with local definitions and how these intersect with vulnerability. Nearly 40% of the reported separations were unaccompanied children. Despite conducting training that included a specific module on definitions of both unaccompanied and separated children, it is possible that focal points did not fully grasp the concept of separation, and did not include children who were separated but under the care of a relative.

2. Take steps to ensure that focal points are motivated to maintain engagement potentially by taking a more structured approach to case identification. Over a longer time period (for instance 6–9 months) a small stipend may help maintain focal point motivation. In addition, a more structured approach to case finding, such as visiting each home on a regular basis or selecting focal points that already visit each household, could improve overall accuracy of the monitoring system. Motivation and case finding appear to overlap: finding cases contributes to improved motivation, which indicates that it may be possible to improve both accuracy and motivation over time.

3. Consider the reliability of network service on the technology used and plan for alternative solutions.

4. Ensure that focal points are elected at community level by community members. The pilot found that the most significant predictor of consistent reporting in Ethiopia was whether or not a focal point was elected by their community.

5. Link the monitoring approach to active case follow-up and to family tracing and reunification efforts.

This study describes a second pilot survey that aimed to determine the efficacy and feasibility of a community-based monitoring system in a slow-onset emergency context. The findings from the survey have important programming implications for emergency responses in the Ethiopian setting and beyond.

Given the increasing interest among practitioners to have simple, low-cost approaches to better identify unaccompanied and separated children in emergencies, the findings from this study suggest that the monitoring approach may provide useful information, while also pointing to the need to adapt and contextualise the system with different levels of support and focal point selection. The potential for such an ongoing source of data to complement family tracing and reunification activities presents new opportunities for programme planning and emergency responses to support vulnerable children and families.