



## Conference report

# Innovations and challenges in protecting children in armed conflict

## New approaches to psychosocial support and education

Report from a roundtable discussions, 20 November 2017

### Key messages

- Develop a more nuanced approach to programming in conflict-affected settings, recognising and addressing the different age-segmented needs of young children, adolescents and youth.
- Develop a global Theory of Change to guide integrated programming across education, mental health and psychosocial support and child protection to guide the work of practitioners, researchers and evaluators.
- Create a global partnership and information-sharing platform across practitioners and researchers linking education, mental health and psychosocial support and child protection experts, including active engagement with Southern-based NGOs and research institutions to support the synthesis, dissemination and implementation of good practice in integrated programming to improve the well-being of children affected by armed conflict.
- Invest in a mixed methods evidence base that reflects the perspectives, priorities and experiences of children and adolescents which does not misrepresent or exploit them.



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## Introduction

### Background

In 2016, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 250 million children live in countries and areas affected by armed conflict. The consequences for these children can be deep-seated and long-term, including physical and psychological effects. Protecting the rights of children in armed conflict entails protecting their present and future well-being by developing programmes that provide the psychosocial, protection and educational support children require. Humanitarian organisations have struggled to address this issue. Key challenges include: the scale of unmet needs; implementing interventions that are cost-effective and fit for purpose; identifying those who are not accessing critical services; accessing those children and adolescents who are most isolated geographically (because they are in hard-to-reach areas or in volatile conflict environments) or socially (due to child marriage, child labour, etc.); the ethical challenges linked to researching children and child protection; and the challenges of ascertaining impact among populations that move often due to armed conflict. While some innovative approaches are emerging, multiple challenges remain.

### Rationale

Given the scale of needs, psychosocial support and education programming require innovative approaches to address existing challenges as well as strong evidence of impacts to identify what works and the opportunity to scale-up. In this vein, innovative programming needs to be twinned with innovative research on psychosocial support and education programming. On 20 November 2017, War Child UK, the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) organised a roundtable discussion focusing on innovative tools and approaches of both programming and research to identify ways to unlock existing challenges and suggest ways forward. The roundtable brought together experts in child protection, psychosocial support and education in emergencies as well as academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN representatives and donors.

### Objectives

The roundtable provided an opportunity to explore and debate current innovations to reduce violations of the rights of children affected by armed conflict, with a focus on psychosocial support and education. It aimed to identify the challenges and ways forward for developing innovative approaches based on research and evidence to better support the psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents affected by conflict. Specific aims were:

- to share experience and evidence about what is working and what is not when trying to uphold the rights of children affected by armed conflict, with reference to their protection, education and emotional well-being;
- to promote learning by sharing evidence and lessons learnt through innovative practice to reach children in remote, hostile and highly insecure environments; and
- to support further collaboration, understanding and networking among practitioners, researchers and policy-makers to improve the reach, impact and quality of programming.

## Roundtable discussions

The roundtable, held under the Chatham House Rule, focused on four key themes: access, risks and assumptions, learning and ethics. In this report, the discussion around risks and assumptions has been incorporated into the other three themes. This report highlights the main discussion points and concludes with concrete recommendations arising from the event.

### Discussion point 1

#### **Innovative approaches to access: reaching marginalised children, children in armed conflicts and hard-to-reach areas.**

'Access' can be interpreted in many ways – not only physical but also cultural, psychological and socio-political. Cultural challenges may include parents preventing their children (especially girls) accessing education. Recommendations to address this challenge included: supporting programme activities at religious centres to provide social legitimacy (for instance, the use of Islamic centres in the Middle East to work with Syrian refugee children or internally displaced Iraqi children); strong case management of dropouts; and organising sessions with parents/caregivers (ecosystem/ecological approach) to help them understand the value of activities being undertaken with children.

Addressing the education, protection, mental health and psychosocial needs of children on the move was a challenge in many ways. Targeted children and youth are often on the move and may leave such interventions without completing programmes. Those living in informal tented settlements tend to move with labour market opportunities. When they arrive in a new setting, they may not be included in similar programming, thus the assistance they require is interrupted and never completed. Those in need of special professional assistance may never get it in settings where such facilities are not available. Designing mobile units to support children and youth on the move would help improve the well-being of these children. A good example is the UNICEF-Jordan Makani programme in Jordan,<sup>1</sup> which uses a mobile-based integrated programming model to

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1 For more information see: [www.unicef.org/jordan/overview\\_12172.html](http://www.unicef.org/jordan/overview_12172.html).

provide non-formal education and psychosocial support to children and adolescents from informal tented settlements.

The discussion also highlighted the difficulty facing practitioners in meeting the needs of all age groups included in the ‘child’ category, which covers younger children but also adolescents. Adolescents and youth thus often find themselves falling through the cracks between child and adult programming. One way forward would be to develop a more nuanced approach, recognising and addressing the different needs of younger children (under 10 years), adolescents (10–19 years) and youth (15–24 years).

Children living in conflict zones and between the lines, as well as those directly engaged in conflict (children associated with armed forces), face difficulty accessing education, psychosocial support and protection. This is often due to security issues but also to the stigma associated with children living in such areas – for instance, perceived association with ISIL around the Syrian border. Participants highlighted the possibility of working more closely with military personnel – carefully and ethically with a ‘Do No Harm’ approach – to deliver interventions, working with local NGOs that can physically access both sides of the border to deliver awareness-raising activities, and using tablets and new technologies to extend reach. Vice versa, some children are not able to access certain programmes due to the stigma and negative perception attached to some youth programming, increasingly entitled ‘combating violent extremism’ or ‘combating gender-based violence’. Changing the labels of such programmes could help address this issue.

### **Box 1 The securitisation of child-related programming**

Participants felt increasingly worried about the securitisation of child-related programming and the increased calls for using child programming as a way of combating violent extremism rather than protecting and increasing the well-being of children affected by armed conflict. Future policy engagement work on programming for children affected by armed conflict could further interrogate this new development and the implications for the sector. It would be important to identify whether the securitisation of child-related programming is reflected in changes in the policies of donors more widely, a symptom of less sympathetic politics and/or public opinion, or whether it reflected an opportunistic categorisation to maximise funding opportunities. For the group brought together during the roundtable discussion, the categorisation of child-related programming under the umbrella of combating violent extremism was a worrying and negative development.

School-based approaches to delivering services and assistance to children continue to be the norm and can be effective as a platform for engaging with the wider ecosystem. However, they fail to reach those who are out of school – often the most vulnerable and marginalised children. There remain challenges in locating the most vulnerable children in large camps, especially unaccompanied and separated children. Most child-friendly spaces and children’s programmes run during the day, failing to catch those children and youth that are engaged in child labour and those children (particularly girls) who feel unsafe in or en route to school. Among other solutions, participants identified the following ways forward.

- Implementing programmes in the evening for children engaged in child labour, although recognising the continued advocacy to reduce reasons for perpetuating child labour.
- Building a collective sense of responsibility among the community, using peer-to-peer pairing (whereby boys who can be trusted to escort girls to and from schools) to allow girls to feel safer.
- Monitoring children who were not being fetched by parents/carers from school or safe spaces at closing time.
- Increasing children’s participation in programme design.
- Scaling up children’s helplines along the lines of War Child’s Child Helpline, which allows children to access support and remain anonymous.
- Working more closely with the government and relevant ministries to scale-up programmes and to ensure sustainability.
- Scaling-up TV programmes such as Search for Common Ground’s *Madam President*,<sup>2</sup> which act as a good role model for home-bound adolescent girls.
- Ensuring conflict-sensitive education and programming, regarding targeting and curriculum content.

### **Discussion point 2**

#### **Assessing, evaluating and learning: improving protection, psychosocial support and education programming for children in conflict-affected settings.**

This discussion centred around the challenges to assessing, evaluating and learning from current approaches to child protection in armed conflict. They include: the risks and assumptions in replicating and scaling-up programmes and research findings in other contexts, and fast-changing conflict dynamics; current evidence gaps, how they can be filled, and how research and evidence can better inform the replication, transfer and adaptation of innovative programming in psychosocial support, education and child protection in situations of armed conflict; and finally, how collaboration among researchers and practitioners could be enhanced to improve outcomes for children affected by armed conflict.

2 For more information see: [www.sfcg.org/madam-president/](http://www.sfcg.org/madam-president/).

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The discussion highlighted the many challenges regarding the state of evidence on programming and research on education, psychosocial support, and protection for children affected by armed conflict. While some felt that there was a general lack of evidence in these sectors, others pointed out that a large body of evidence existed in academia but it was not being translated into practice – either because this evidence was not synthesised and disseminated at all levels of practice and policy or due to a lack of collaboration between researchers and practitioners. As evidenced by the fact that many in the room were meeting for the first time, the roundtable discussion quickly identified that the challenge of collaboration was not just between researchers and practitioners but also across the education, psychosocial support and child protection sectors. In fact, participants highlighted that while standards existed in these distinct sectors, there was no global Theory of Change linking education, psychosocial support and child protection. It became apparent that such a global results framework would help identify how an integrated approach to child protection linking with education and psychosocial support could improve the well-being of children affected by armed conflict, how different approaches can come together for greater results, and how learning from research and programming in each of these sectors could support the case for an integrated approach to child protection. Related to this was the lack of clear success indicators for these three sectors of intervention.

Participants also highlighted the lack of incentives around learning, assessing and evaluating. Some felt a tension between investing resources to report to donors versus using these resources to create evidence of what works and what does not. In addition, research is often included in programmes to satisfy donor requirements rather than to truly improve the programme. Related to this was the worry that evidence of what does not work and learning from failures went undocumented and thus ignored, partly as evidence is linked to reporting to donors and the lack of incentive that this entails. Equally, while all stressed that good research, evidence-making and learning take time, the nature of humanitarian work means that research is too often reactive (rather than planned and thought through), with funding constraints and short time spans requiring quick deliverables. This intensifies the issue of collecting longitudinal data since, on occasions when funding cycles and donors would allow for long-term projects, accessing the same children for several years is inherently difficult. Some of these challenges are common to other research, and more effort is needed to design programmes that draw on the available research in terms of challenges around access to education, psychosocial and child protection programming and dropout rates. There are few tools and little guidance on how to work with mobile populations, particularly in providing psychosocial support.

Things that are working well in learning include efforts to encourage practitioners to include data collection as part of their daily work and creating space for debriefing and reflection. One good approach identified

is multi-professional research commitments such as the partnership between DFID and the University of Manchester. This shifts the perception of research from only occurring when researchers are on site to becoming more integrated into projects, and it allows practitioners to modify their own programmes when they see things that are not working. Although there is a challenge of asking too many questions and upsetting the power dynamic between adults and children, much of this data collection could take place through observation. Furthermore, participatory action research, in which the children and community help set the questions, is good since people tend to learn and listen more if they are responsible for programme research. This should be combined with other forms of monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

Lack of collaboration, research in silos, donor funding streams and deadlines based on donor demands rather than research needs were also mentioned. Specific issues around psychosocial support include where it fits in the broad child protection sector. Currently it is labelled as ‘life-saving’, but is this true, or is it considered as such solely to bring in institutional funding? Where does psychosocial support fit on the life-saving spectrum? Does it fit better with reconstruction than protection? More evidence is needed to answer these questions. Similar issues surround the distinction between children, adolescents and youth. Adolescents and youth have until recently been less visible among programming intervention target groups, as they may be deemed too old for nutritional health or basic education programmes but too young for employment programmes. Finally, there is a need for researchers to address recent trends (such as conflict becoming more urban and protracted) and to create long-term partnerships with practitioners with better and more secure funding streams.

Finally, in terms of recommendations, evidence should be synthesised and disseminated more at the regional and national levels to inform discussions in different languages, including through multi-sectoral information platforms. Dissemination should also occur within the targeted populations (including children and young people), host states and affected states. This can be done more easily through local research partners since they know the language and context and programmes often do not have money to invest in costly dissemination of research and evidence. Thus, researchers should be encouraged to work with local research capacity by partnering with local universities and other local organisations as well as using resources such as community-based child protection networks.

In addition, M&E needs to be more than merely a donor requirement; it should directly influence practice, yet currently most programmes do not adapt their design or implementation based on research findings. Meaningful evaluation must be included from the beginning of programme design, the people implementing activities should be involved in the M&E process, and research outputs should be rethought. Quantitative as well as more

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qualitative and participatory research evaluations that capture young people's emotional lives are needed. Outputs must be used to hold policy-makers accountable and to show that education and psychosocial support are not the responsibility solely of donors and NGOs. More innovative tools are needed for dealing with transient populations, such as using social media and emerging technology to follow those who drop out of the programme or move to a different area. Programmes should link to the referral system, and more research is needed on the impact of referral pathways. Lastly, there is a need to develop a more holistic global theory of change that can be contextualised.

### Discussion point 3

#### **Ethics in researching and implementing innovative approaches to child protection.**

Participants identified a range of challenges and ethical dilemmas facing practitioners and researchers supporting children affected by armed conflict, especially around psychosocial support.

At the outset, participants emphasised that broad challenges had to be acknowledged and addressed if real change in programme design, implementation and outcomes is to be achieved. More specifically, there was a general recognition that, while the psychosocial support sector is growing, it suffers from fragmentation, duplication of effort and limited lesson-learning among practitioners. A critical component of this challenge is a lack of clear leadership to guide and provide directions for concerted and sustainable development and action.

A second broad challenge relates to definitions and understandings of psychosocial support. Because the concept emerged first in Western settings, there is still considerable debate about what 'psychosocial' means and how psychosocial needs can be effectively met in different cultural contexts.

A third broad challenge pertains to the diversity of needs and vulnerabilities of young people throughout childhood and adolescence. To date, there has been a greater focus on support for younger children, and adolescents and youth thus often find themselves excluded from programming.

The ethical dilemmas facing programme designers and implementers stem from the above-mentioned macro-level challenges. One important ethical dilemma that participants emphasised was the growing pressure on NGOs implementing psychosocial support programmes to link this type of programming with counter-violence and counter-extremism work. Government agencies and donors tend to associate marginalised youth's emotional vulnerability with an increased likelihood of radicalisation and participation in extremist groups. Youth radicalisation has thus emerged as a safeguarding and vulnerability issue for donors; how to handle this issue sensitively and appropriately requires further thought and discussion.

A second important ethical dilemma raised by participants relates to the fact that governments have

a statutory responsibility to help their citizens, but they may also be perpetrators of violence and abuse. Governments increasingly insist on getting involved in psychosocial support programming (e.g. Syria, Yemen) and there is no specific guidance or established good practice for such engagement, which simultaneously allows for the protection of vulnerable populations. Similarly, there is increased involvement of international armed bodies, such as NATO forces, in child protection work in humanitarian settings, but limited consensus on how best to engage appropriately in such contexts.

A third important ethical dilemma relates to the availability of funding to meet the needs of children and young people affected by crisis. Practitioners emphasised that targeted children and youth are often on the move and may leave prior to the completion of the programme and are not able to regain access to support at their destination. Programmers also find it hard to show results due to the interrupted assistance. Compounded by this, sustainable funding for longer-term programming is also often absent and thus children and youth in need of continuous psychosocial support assistance may face interrupted services until more funding is received. This is especially problematic in the context of support which can be highly stigmatised and which requires trust and confidentiality built up over time (e.g. in the case of sexual violence).

A fourth ethical dilemma is linked to the short-term nature of funding. Most psychosocial support programming is carried out by international NGOs with their own staff, frameworks and practices, with little attention paid to local institutional capacity and issues of sustainability. While local volunteers are often used, there is limited systematic effort to build local capacity and volunteers may lack relevant knowledge or experience. Moreover, while the need to involve local communities and to develop some local capacity is widely acknowledged, the focus is on lower-level programming; yet there is a need to develop a whole system able to respond to all levels of issues, from first aid and basic psychosocial support to more serious problems that require specialist input.

Researchers seeking to improve understanding of the triggers and drivers of children's vulnerabilities in conflict-affected contexts, as well as those aiming to strengthen the evidence base on what works, also face a range of ethical dilemmas. Overall, participants agreed that there was currently a strong appetite for better data, but that there is not always enough attention paid to how best to collect such data in insecure settings. This may result in poorly designed surveys or lack of a response system and referral services for traumatised children and youth who have been identified through the research process. Institutional ethics review boards are often unable to deal with these challenges, or lack members who have sufficient real-world experience to provide nuanced recommendations.

As psychosocial support interventions proliferate, a key ethical dilemma is how to put in place fit-for-purpose systems that provide relevant and timely feedback and ethical approval. Data are urgently required to show

what works in each specific context, and there is a need to change the current tendency within the sector of operating by implementing interventions from other settings (but without robust M&E data to support this work). There is an urgent need to develop more systematic evidence about how best to involve children and youth as active participants, and how best to combine and sequence intervention strategies and, equally importantly, what does not work and should be avoided. Within this context there are also questions that require more nuanced discussion – for instance, about the use of randomised control trials (RCTs) to assess programmes and how to ensure that control groups also eventually receive support.

Last, but certainly not least, there are important ethical questions on how M&E and research of programme interventions should be funded and managed to ensure rigorous and timely evidence. Partnerships with external research agencies may be more challenging to manage but face fewer challenges in terms of conflicts of interest around data collection and analysis objectivity.

## Conclusion

### **Ways forward for designing, implementing and evaluating innovative approaches to child protection, psychosocial support and education for children and adolescents in conflict-affected settings.**

Overall, the roundtable discussions demonstrated a pressing need and strong enthusiasm to support more cross-cutting work: between academics and practitioners working to enhance the rights of children and adolescents in conflict-affected settings, and across the child protection, psychosocial support and education sectors.

In terms of the challenges identified, there was a consensus that the humanitarian sector has limited evidence on what works and that there is a pressing need to demonstrate the impact to practitioners, researchers, donors and children in need. Fortunately, there is both a real appetite for the emerging evidence base and exciting and innovative practice that merits further attention.

There was also a general agreement that we should be engaging children and young people in programme design, implementation and evaluation processes. There are still a range of questions on how to do this most effectively, but there is consensus that efforts to engage young people substantively need to be made and then monitored, evaluated and debated to generate better evidence on what is working well, what should be avoided and where we could improve.

Efforts to improve the psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents in conflict-affected settings remain an undeveloped part of the humanitarian response. Considering this, there are important leadership questions about global standards and about how to share ideas more effectively. Initiatives such as the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme can make an important contribution to the sector and we can all play leadership roles within our own niches in the sector.

## Recommendations

To advance this important conversation, four broad recommendations to be actioned by all involved (academics, researchers, practitioners and donors) emanated from the roundtable.

1. Develop a more nuanced approach to programming in conflict-affected settings, recognising and addressing the different age-segmented needs of young children, adolescents and youth, considering that:
  - a. Children and youth on the move constitute a specific access challenge – mobile teams with integrated approaches including protection, education and psychosocial support are critical
  - b. Efforts to work with young people from refugee communities need to be sensitively developed to also support vulnerable young people from host communities to foster greater social cohesion.
2. Develop a global Theory of Change to guide integrated programming across education, mental health and psychosocial support and child protection support to guide the work of practitioners, researchers and evaluators, including:
  - a. Developing common standards of success to support M&E as well as research on the impact of interventions as a basis for ethical fundraising and programme design.
  - b. Identifying funding mechanisms for objective, independent and timely research to inform the global theory of change and the development of common standards of success.
3. Create a global partnership and information-sharing platform across practitioners and researchers linking education, mental health and psychosocial support and child protection experts, including active engagement with Southern-based NGOs and research institutions to support the synthesis, dissemination and implementation of good practice in integrated programming to improve the well-being of children affected by armed conflict.
4. Invest in a mixed methods evidence base that reflects the perspectives, priorities and experiences of children and adolescents which does not misrepresent or exploit them.
  - a. Consider creating a year-long task force of research and NGO organisations working on these issues to prepare a group statement and guidelines about what is good practice and meets common minimum standards, and what practices violate such standards, to improve representation of child protection issues.
  - b. Educate donors and funding bodies about the importance of child protection and the use of an ethical approach to programming and research.
  - c. Evaluate interventions by using mixed methods, including surveys, and qualitative and participatory research.

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## Annex 1: List of participating organisations

Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action  
Ashoka Youth Venture: #MeWeSyria  
Asian Development Bank  
Children in Crisis  
DFID  
Child Soldiers International  
East African Playgrounds  
Evidence Aid  
FRIDA: Young Feminist Fund  
Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE)  
International Development Research Centre  
Institute for Global Health and Development (IGHD), Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh  
Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, University of London  
Johns Hopkins University  
The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
Overseas Development Institute  
Save the Children, UK  
Search for Common Ground  
Tavistock Centre  
UCL Institute of Education  
UNICEF Jordan  
University of Sussex  
War Child Holland  
War Child UK  
World Food Programme  
World Vision International



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