Conference on Protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Children

Displaced Children in Africa

October 24, 2008

Chair and Moderator: William Fitzgerald, PRM/DAS
Panelists:
   Clotilde Kiriongi, Mapendo International -- Kenya
   Virginia Hasson, Jesuit Refugee Services -- South Africa
   Rebecca Symington, UNICEF, -- NY
   Eric Peasah, IOM – Ghana

After brief introductions by PRM/DAS Fitzgerald, each of the panelists reviewed the efforts of their organizations to assist and protect displaced children in Africa.

Clotilde Kiriongi: Ms. Kiriongi provided a general overview of Mapendo International as well as the refugee situation in Kenya. Kenya now hosts an estimated 500,000 refugees including 240,000 in the Dadaab camps, 40,000 in Kakuma Camp, and as many as 175,000 in Nairobi (GOK estimate). Refugees hail mainly from Somalia, Sudan, and the Great Lakes region. The GOK policy of providing assistance to refugees only in camps results in very limited services for urban refugees. Mapendo, formed in 2007, works primarily with this urban caseload where unaccompanied children faces issues such as forced labor, lack of education and social services, sexual abuse, forced marriage, and abduction. Mapendo tries to identify these vulnerable children and refer them for services. Some of the challenges Mapendo faces includes the difficulty in identifying unaccompanied children and the limited accommodations and services available for them. Key recommendations:
   • We need a more robust system for the identification of UAMs
   • Increased research and resources are required, especially to address urban-based displaced children.

Virginia Hasson: Ms. Hasson of Jesuit Refugee Services discussed JRS’ Safe School Initiative which is being piloted in Malawi, Namibia, and Rwanda. The goal of this initiative is to ensure that schools are a safe environment for children and that there is a system in place for children to talk if they are being threatened. She noted that schools play an important role for children including providing a routine, hope for the future, a safe environment, and a sense of belonging. In Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, JRS tracks students who are absent from school, sending social workers to visit families to ensure the child is safe. JRS/Namibia also conducts group and individual counseling sessions for school children. In Osire refugee camp in Namibia, JRS is supporting boys and girls clubs, with a special focus on children who have been left behind by parents who have repatriated. JRS/Namibia is also providing training to teachers to respond to traumatized and stressed children. In Rwanda, in Byumba and Kibuyi Camp, JRS works with American Refugee Committee to provide income-generating activities for children heads of household. In all programs, JRS has a strict code of regulations to protect
children. Ms. Hasson also briefly noted JRS' efforts South Africa, working with urban refugees, and in Zimbabwe, working with vulnerable children. In Angola, JRS is focusing on training of police, border guards, and other non-traditional actors and has seen a major decrease in violations against vulnerable children. Key points:

- Importance of schools as a means of protecting vulnerable children
- Importance of training groups like police and border guards in an effort to reduce violations against vulnerable children

Rebecca Symington: Ms. Symington of UNICEF focused on her work in northern Uganda with children displaced by the conflict between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan Peoples Defense Force (UPDF). At the height of the crisis from 2002-2004, some 1.5 million Ugandans were displaced of whom 935,000 were children. An estimated 66,000 youth were abducted by the LRA, of whom 25,000 were registered by UNICEF. Early in the crisis, there was a complete lack of services for children. As attention was raised to the issue, especially the “night commuters”, more resources poured in although efforts by IOs, NGOs, and local organizations were not well coordinated. UNICEF focused on developing a more comprehensive system for displaced children that included the following:

- Community-based child protection committees
- Common guidelines used by all service providers
- A network of organizations working together

Ms. Symington noted that the system remained very fragile but she was optimistic that it had resulted in better service delivery (although there was no clear proof of this).

Eric Peasah: Mr. Peasah, of IOM/Ghana, discussed IOM’s efforts to assist trafficked children. Ghana faces both internal trafficking (children coming into Ghana from neighboring states) as well as external trafficking (Ghanaian children being sent to neighboring countries as well Europe). In West Africa, trafficked/vulnerable children include child soldiers, children given to religious leaders (marabouts) for begging purposes, Fulani migrant children, and children sent by their parents to Europe. IOM employs what it calls “The Five Rs” strategy that includes:

- Research and Registration – identifying vulnerable/trafficked children
- Rescue and Release – removing the children from the unsafe situation
- Rehabilitation and Recovery – providing shelter and services to the child for roughly three months to prepare them for return to families
- Return and Reunification – tracing families, assessing the return situation, assisting the families to prepare for the child’s return, and actually returning the child
- Reintegration – following up on cases to ensure the child is successfully reintegrated (staying at home, attending school, etc.)

One of the major challenges IOM faces is the UAMs identified in Europe. Tracing is difficult because children don’t always provide honest information on their names and countries of origin. Even if the families can be found, generally the family refuses to accept these children back, banking instead on the child remaining in Europe and providing eventual support to the family. Mr. Peasah categorized this dilemma as “To be or not to be?”
Questions and comments from the audience:

1. In response to the dilemma of unaccompanied African children in Europe, the question was asked “Should we be focusing so heavily on children rejoining their families, or do we need to think more broadly of what is in the best interest of the child and family?”

2. In response to IOM/Ghana’s work, the question was asked, “Once the children are returned home, do they stay or do you find that they are trafficked again?” Mr. Peasah noted that IOM had reunited over 3,000 children, following up on their cases. The majority were still at home and attending school. IOM also works to change the mentality of families in Ghana via information campaigns and support for vocational skills training for returnees.

3. A representative of a new organization working with displaced children noted the challenges posed by not knowing the scope of the problem and how to best identify displaced/vulnerable children. She also noted the lack of community awareness on services available and said that more work needs to be done to educate communities.

4. A representative from LIRS asked UNICEF about the consistency of systems to track unaccompanied children in urban areas. Ms. Symington noted that the phenomenon of rural to urban migration was very complex and that it was very difficult to identify children. She advocated for stronger referral systems for all children. Ms. Hassan added that JRS is facing the issue of urban displaced children, especially from Zimbabwe, in South Africa. These children are very vulnerable, as witnessed during the xenophobic violence in May 2008. These children and their families are trying to reintegrate into South African communities but face enormous challenges. Ms. Kirioni noted the overwhelming influx of Somalis into Nairobi and the challenges of trying to identify unaccompanied children amidst this influx, adding there are never enough resources and agencies to respond.

5. One audience member noted the challenge of monitoring individual children and asked Mapendo about its ratio of staff to workers. Ms. Kirioni said that Mapendo employed three social workers serving some 8,000 refugees. They try to visit each case once per month, providing health care and accommodations. They lack sufficient resources to support additional necessities such as clothing and school fees.