

Rajaram Subbian, PhD
Save the Children
Sri Lanka

Working with Children Affected by the Ongoing Conflict In Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the armed conflict has gone through many phases in the last 18 years, bringing drastic changes in the social structure and institutional functioning. Due to these changes of events, life for the common man has become extremely strenuous. This chronic atmosphere has affected everyone living in this island, especially those in North and East of Sri Lanka.

Although glimpses of modernization and globalization are perceived in these areas, life in general is in shatters as traditional atmosphere of human settlement and socialization is in shambles. This has severely affected the socio-economic support of families and deprived the children of opportunities for their rightful development.

Nearly all the children under the age of 18 living in conflict areas are born in extremely strained and difficult circumstances. Yet, their adjustment to the surroundings is so resilient, that it reflects the strength and support they draw from the same environment that has been de-established now.

The Government infrastructure and the International and National NGOs have jointly contributed significantly to the redevelopment of physical and social structures / systems, yet inadequately. However, the psychosocial development of children affected by the ongoing-armed conflict has had only fragmented attention.

The sense of Civil Society is slowly disappearing in these areas.

Main observations

- The armed-conflict that's on in Sri Lanka for the last two decades has dwarfed the significance of the words "LOSS", "CRISES", and "TRAUMA" into nothing
- Thousands of families who were displaced in north and east remain "unsettled" socio-economically, culturally and psychologically, as the conflict continues.
- The near absence of interaction in functioning between Government and Local NGO service delivery systems at the grass-root level and the constraints laid by Government and LTTE on the organizations that work in conflict areas, make the situation difficult and more complex.
- The increasing number of women headed families, women migrating on employment, and alcoholism corrode the families further and fosters violation of child rights
- Being socialized in this chronic conflict torn community, deteriorating social order and broken social networks, children and the young youth subsist with confused identity, struggling to cope with their depleting resources.
- Bargaining to exist, children give up their childhood and fill the vacuum in family leadership and assume 'adult like' social and economic responsibilities.

- In given situation, the services rendered by INGOs, NGOs, and the Government is laudable, yet inadequate. The support to children is minimal and that too reaches a very small number of children either in welfare centers or those severely affected by the conflict in the form of nutrition, health and education.
- As the word of peace gains audibility, so the eruption of intense armed fights in the north and east, raising doubts and uncertainty in the minds civilians over future

Having a strong commitment to promote the rightful development of children, SCN's keen interest in Sri Lanka's East was to understand what children go through and then to strengthen those who could support their psychosocial care.

To achieve this, it's imperative that we understand various concerns of children living in East.

Everywhere, the literature is dominated by adult version of what children feel or go through. Primarily the existing research lays more emphasis on the impact of war and trauma, ignoring the strength within. There is no documented research on the life of children in the Eastern Sri Lanka as perceived and reported by the children. Since there is little objective reality existing for us to understand how children who are born in the ongoing conflict circumstances perceive the surrounding, the only and the best way available is to know from the children on what they think, feel and say.

Understanding daily life and activities from children's subjective point of view is THE reality for us to take ahead to work with them. While listening to children, the multifaceted circumstances bring forth following diverse dimensions to be kept in mind in such an attempt:

Ethnicity; Religion; Internally displaced; Resettled; Newly settled; Living in border / conflict areas; Living in Cleared / Uncleared areas; Living near camps; Settled in Refugee camps; Working children; School going children; Non-school going children; Institutionalized children; Separated children; Children with disabilities; Sexually abused children, and so on.

In order to reach out more number of children, families and adults living or working with them, this study used different methodologies to collect information. They were:

- Observation
- Talkshops with Children
- Self-made Questionnaires
- Interviews with families
- Dialogue with GO / NGO
- Workshops with formal and informal community based groups
- Discussions with Schools
- Standing Workshops with Research staff
- Reflecting with academicians

A Research Team of 71 (seventy-one) members consisting of 38 graduates (called as Graduate Trainees - GTs) and 33 teenagers (called as Teenage Volunteers – VTs) gathered data for the Child Study. Training was given to GTs and VTs on various components of child development, the importance of family and society in their growth, the influence of ongoing armed-conflict especially on families and children, relating with children respecting their voice & feelings and on qualitative research and different methodologies that could be

adopted. Training also gave emphasis on understanding self, as one must be aware of one's own feelings and responses.

With this preparation, each GT was assigned a DS Division either at Ampara or at Batticaloa, depending on their background and acquaintance. In case of large DS Division (DSD) or a DSD where transport facilities are poor, two GTs were posted. One or more VT/s also worked along with the GT/s.

GT's work involved gathering of information by meeting different Government Officers, field officials, teachers, principals, non-government organization personnel, local leaders and groups of parents, youth, and women within DSD to

- Discuss with them on the children and families they work with
- Understand their perception on possible difficulties they may go through
- How the children adjust with the existing situation;
- Know how they view children; what services are needed / best appreciated and how / where helps are drawn
- Recognise the overall support that children get in day today life

GTs teamed up with Teenage Volunteer (VT), utilising the VT more to interact with children and in understanding them. GTs and VTs conducted two two-day Talkshops (one with school going children and the other with non-school going children) at each DS Division of both Ampara & Batticaloa. For smooth conducting of Talkshops, the GTs and VTs of nearby DS Divisions joined together to hold Talkshops in their DSD.

Through this process they gave opportunities to children to share their opinions / ideas, feelings, adjustments and coping on various aspects of life. For their convenience, overall life was divided into sixteen areas (Family, father, Mother, Siblings, Friends, Education, Food, Play, Neighbors, Employment, Health, Death, surroundings, Sadness, Happiness and Leisure time activities), and Talkshops encouraged children to express whatever they felt like sharing without any pressure: how they perceive self, what they feel on the services that are available, what they feel about others living around them.

It was possible to reach out 1800 children directly and 7000 children through their parents & teachers to understand their concerns.

Problems faced by the children and their families

- Death of Parents
- Death of siblings
- Death of relatives
- Trauma in parents
- Trauma in self
- Loss of house
- Loss of property
- Loss of livelihood
- Loss of community
- Loss of social status
- Displacement
- Status of a refugee

- Resettlement
- Relocation
- New settlement
- High rate of Suicide
- Over burdened Social Institutions
- Extortion
- Security check
- Addiction in family
- Disappeared family members
- Family member in detention
- Family member in armed group
- Family break ups
- Drifted families
- Separation/Divorce in parents
- Family disharmony
- Second marriages /hidden marriages
- Losing family network
- Parents' worries on unknown future
- Restricted job opportunities for families
- Underpaid for hard work
- Loss of values / beliefs
- Sexual abuse/ violence
- War atmosphere
- Destruction of natural environment
- Lack of health facilities
- Getting married in young age
- Child labor
- Too much of Control imposed on children
- Inability to cope with repeated loss
- Absence of affection, care & love
- Emotional problems: Loneliness, Dejected, hatreds, fear, anger
- Physical problems: disability, illness
- Social problems: ethnic Discrimination, mistrust in friendship, withdrawn,
- Economic problems: poverty, unemployment, begging
- Health problems: undernourished, lack of health facilities
- Lack of educational opportunities/facilities; Drop outs, change of schools
- Legal problems: Loss of birth/ death certificates, compensation
- Loss of free movements for children
- Living away from families
- Forced to stay in “children’s homes”
- Callousness / apathy in those they live with
- Behavioral changes in family members

The main concerns expressed by children were:

- They see mothers to be most important, than father because in many families fathers are alcoholic, quarrelsome and non-available due to long hours of work away from home.
- When mother is also not present, because of death, separation, foreign employment, and second marriage life is said to be sad.

- Children with disabilities in “Homes” find their life better than other children, who had to come away due to socioeconomic & conflict related reasons
- Every child, who is supposed to be in school but not, feels extremely sad.
- Children in school would like their teachers to be friendly.
- School children are very much scared of the Army camp being inside or nearer to their schools
- They miss visiting relatives and experience loneliness
- Many expressed interestingness to eat variety of food
- Being with friends and playing are found “most wanted” but missed terribly.
- Lack of freedom to move around and fear over detention and arrest were the main concerns in adolescents
- Every other child had lost someone close due to the conflict
- They are concerned about trees being cut away in their areas
- Children also convey their responsibility while saying “no jobs are available for parents”
- Quite a few are worried what might happen when they are taking care of their younger siblings at home while their parents are away.
- They are also disturbed by quarrels at home, between parents.
- Many stated they would like the neighbors to be more trust-worthy.
- They are very happy while participating in school activities, on birthdays, during festivals, being with friends and in meeting relatives
- Many are worried about their sick parents and on lack of medical facilities
- The above facts strongly indicate the exigency of strengthening the capacity of providing psychosocial care in those systems that offer services to children and families so that more opportunities are created for healthy development of children.
- Incorporating the concerns raised by children, programs have been developed with the following

Main objectives

- To reduce the vulnerability and promote the development of children affected by the armed conflict
- To develop competence in those who have particular responsibility for children and families, especially in the local service-delivery systems
- To build ownership (sustainable partnership) among those organizations working with severely affected children and integrate the psychosocial aspects of development into existing child-related activities
- To construct an effective networking between GO and NGO systems working with / for children and families
- To advocate for the rights of children and ensure their participation in all relevant aspects of the project

The program activities target these groups:

- Children affected by the armed conflict, with a special focus on children living in Welfare centers and recent settlements
- GOs, NGOs, INGOs, CBOs, University, SCN partners and other child centered organizations, to build ownership of integrated Psychosocial Care, and infrastructure network.

With the following expected results:

- A survey report on the status of children in conflict areas is prepared and organized feedback is given to representatives of those responsible for the care of children. All observations and learning are incorporated in training activities.
- Officials from Government / Non-Government Organizations working with children and families are trained as Sensitizers, who would actively incorporate psychosocial care components into their service in order to offer basic support to affected children and families.
- These Sensitizers, in turn sensitize their colleagues and peer officials to offer psychosocially congenial atmosphere to the development of children affected by the conflict and on protecting them from HIV/AIDS and land mines.
- Children's Participatory camps are conducted by these Sensitizers at different places, widening the opportunities for children to participate, play, meet, share ideas with children from far away places within each District taken up for programs, and are imparted with information on protection from mines. In these events children of all ethnic background, with differing abilities and different geographical areas to get equal opportunities.
- Selected Officials speaking Sinhala and Tamil, from Government Institutions, Departments/Organizations, CBOs, Children's Homes, University and local NGOs responsible for children and families are trained in Child Centered Counseling and on psychosocial care / reintegration of children within their families and society. Thus, the capacity of the local delivery systems is strengthened.
- Psychosocial Care services are integrated into the existing services, simultaneously protecting children from HIV/AIDS and land-mines
- Formal / informal and horizontal / vertical Networking is done among the Sensitizers, Child Centered Counselors, and responsible GOs and NGOs locally and at district level
- Affected children with higher needs are benefited through the partnership with GOs/NGOs trained by the program
- All components of the program is monitored and evaluated locally and from outside, regularly.