

Chapter Four

Chad: Félicien Ntakiyimana's Story

Chad's post-independence history has been marked by civil war. From 1965 until the late 1980s, foreign troops have intervened in Chad's civil war to support one side against another (France, Libya, and the United States) or as part of an expansionist plan (Libya). During this period, national resources were used for military purposes with little or no investment in social and health services, with the inevitable result that poverty increased dramatically. Within this unstable security context, donors and international organisations have been reluctant to invest in Chad. The situation has therefore become an "overlooked crisis." The recent conflict in Western Sudan in the Darfur region resulted in a flow of more than 200,000 Sudanese refugees into Eastern Chad, exacerbating the already critical situation for families in the area.

In response, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and its partners mounted a major logistics operation to establish refugee camps in some of the most desolate terrains on earth for thousands of people. Family shelters, latrines, clinics, schools, wells, and other infrastructure were literally

built from the ground up. The first of these self constructed campsites opened in January 2004. These camps have created their own problems, however, not least in relation to tensions and conflict between refugees in the camps and those living in local villages.

In this chapter, Félicien Ntakiyimana relates the story of attempts to create safe environments for children in the midst of this turmoil and uncertainty. In discussing his recent experience working within the camps for UNICEF Chad as a United Nations Volunteer Program Officer in charge of child protection, Félicien highlights the role of child-friendly spaces and local community involvement in early childhood care and development. Félicien has extensive experience working in emergency situations. Before working in Chad, he worked as a foster care coordinator for CARE Australia in Katale Refugee Camp (Democratic Republic of Congo) and then as a social worker in charge of family tracing and fostering for UNICEF/Rwanda Emergency Operations in Goma.

Chad: La historia de Félicien Ntakiyimana

La historia post-independencia de Chad ha estado marcada por inestabilidad y violencia que surgen principalmente de tensiones entre un norte árabe musulmán, y un sur principalmente animista y cristiano. Desde 1965 hasta el final de la década de

los 80, tropas extranjeras intervinieron en la guerra civil para apoyar a uno u otro lado en contra del contrario (Francia, Libia, y los Estados Unidos) o como parte de sus planes expansionistas (Libia).

Durante este periodo, los recursos naturales fueron objetivo militar, y no hubo o fue muy escasa la inversión en servicios sociales y de salud. La pobreza se incrementó dramáticamente. En este contexto de

inestable seguridad, los donantes y las organizaciones internacionales han estado poco dispuestos a invertir en Chad. La situación se ha convertido en una “crisis no tenida en cuenta.”

El conflicto reciente en Sudan occidental en la región de Darfur, ha causado la huida de mas de 200.000 sudaneses que se han refugiado en Chad occidental, exacerbando la situación de crisis ya existente para las familias de esta área. Sin embargo, la situación de crisis generada por los refugiados sirvió para enfocar la atención en Chad, y para canalizar algunos recursos hacia el país.

En este capítulo, Feliciten Ntakiyimana relata la historia de los intentos por crear ambientes seguros para los niños y niñas en medio de la turbulencia y la incertidumbre. Al discutir su reciente experiencia con el Programa de UNICEF en Chad como el Oficial del Programa de Voluntarios de las Naciones Unidas a cargo de de la protección de la infancia, Ntakiyimana resalta el papel de los espacios amigos de los niños y del involucramiento de la comunidad local en el cuidado y el desarrollo infantil temprano.

Background

The Republic of Chad is a landlocked country located in North Central Africa. The population of 10 million incorporates 200 distinct groups, speaking over 120 different languages or dialects. The three main religions are Islam (51 percent), Christianity (35 percent), and Animism (7 percent). The economy is primarily agricultural. Over 80 percent of Chad’s population relies on subsistence farming and livestock raising for its livelihood. Chad is the fifth poorest nation in the world.

Life expectancy at birth in Chad is estimated to be 48 years. Approximately half of the population is under 14 years of age, with children 0-8 years of age accounting for 25 percent (about 2.5 million children). Infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world. An estimated 11,000 children are living on streets or in other oppressive circumstances which belie the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Chad in 1989). Thousands of nomadic children do not have access to any form of primary education. For thousands of other children, facilities are non-existent or in bad repair. Child care facilities are not available to the majority of the population. Most children of preschool age are cared for by their mothers or other family members who are likely to be

experiencing the deprivations of poverty. The majority of adults (especially mothers) are illiterate. Child trafficking, child prostitution, child marriage, and genital mutilation are common. Polygamy compounds the precarious situation of children and women (ECPAT, 2006).

The nature of the conflict

Chad has been enduring civil warfare amidst political and social disturbances since the 1970s, with concomitant displacement of populations, destruction of infrastructure, insecurity, and increasing pauperization of the local population. The country attained full independence from France on August 11, 1960, with Ngarta Tombalbaye as first president. Tombalbaye steadily strengthened his control over the country and by 1965, it had become a one-party state. In 1966, discontent among northern Muslim tribes with President Tombalbaye — a Christian southerner — developed into a full-scale guerrilla war. French troops helped battle the revolt, which ended in 1973. This undermined his rule and, in 1975, President Tombalbaye was killed in a coup led by Noël Milarew Odingar, who immediately passed power to yet another southerner, General Felix Malloum. Malloum also failed to end the war, notwithstanding his cooperation as Prime Minister in

1978 of the insurgent leader, Hissène Habré, head of the Armed Forces of the North (FAN). In 1979 Malloum was replaced by a Libya-backed northerner, Goukouni Oueddei. This precipitated the most anarchic phase of the Chadian Civil War.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Libya had occupied various parts of Chad and supplied the Chad National Liberation Front (FROLINAT) with arms. Libya invaded Chad in 1980 to help Oueddei remain in power and to forward an expansionist policy with the goal of politically unifying Libya and Chad. France and the United States responded by aiding Habré in an attempt to contain Libya's regional ambitions. Civil war deepened. In 1980, Libya occupied all of northern Chad, but Habré defeated Libyan troops and drove them out in November 1981. By this stage, France and neighbouring Libya were intervening repeatedly to support one side against another. In 1982, Habré conquered the capital, ousted President Oueddei, and assumed overall control of the state. His eight year rein led to immense political turmoil. Human rights organisations accused Habré of ordering the execution of thousands of political opponents and members of tribes thought hostile to his regime.

In 1983, the Libyan troops occupied all the country north of Koro Toro. With the aid of France and the USA, Habré continued to fight Libyan occupation and defeated Qaddafi in 1987. Libya moved out of Northern Chad, with the exception of the Aouzou Strip and parts of Tibesti. In 1994, the International Court of Justice rejected Libya's claims and returned these areas to Chad. Despite his victory, Habré's government was weak, accused of brutality and corruption, and seemingly disliked by a majority of Chadians. Habré was deposed by Libyan-supported rebel leader Idriss Deby on December 1, 1990. A semblance of peace was restored. A democratic constitution was drafted and Presidential elections were held in 1996 and 2001.

Refugees arrive in eastern Chad

While the country was still struggling to overcome its own conflicts, the war in neighbouring Sudan affected Eastern Chad. Since February 2003, Western Darfur in Sudan experienced one of the fiercest manslaughters with the Janjaweed (militia) forcing over 200,000 people into exile in Eastern Chad. Almost two million more escaped to camps in Western Darfur. The refugees from Sudan who flowed into the remote desert region of Eastern Chad, arrived in an area already marked by scarce water and fuel wood resources. Makeshift shelters were constructed just metres from the frontier. These camps were dangerously isolated during the rainy season and were subject to cross-border raids by marauding militia. Treacherous and dangerous conditions meant that aid deliveries were nearly impossible.

In response, a major logistics operation was mounted in order to move the majority of the refugees to camps at a safer distance from the volatile border. In some of the most desolate terrains on earth, UNHCR and its partners constructed small villages for thousands of people. Family shelters, latrines, clinics, schools, wells, and other infrastructure were literally built from the ground up. The first of these self constructed campsites opened in January 2004. By September, a total of 10 camps had been established. Emergency airlifts flew in thousands of metric tons of tents, blankets, plastic sheeting, soap, and other relief items. However, the response to the refugee crisis by the international community had been very slow. By late 2004, ten camps had been established within the semi-desert, impoverished region. Water, fuel wood, and food remained endemically scarce.

When the humanitarian aid did arrive, it became a source of tension and conflict. The refugees had been depleting the scarce resources of the local population and now only they were deemed eligible for aid and supplies. The refugees became relatively well

resourced compared to their national “hosts.” This created growing resentment and hostility. Tensions between the refugee population and locals were exacerbated by the fact that the humanitarian workers in the camps were mostly recruited from outside the country or from south Chad. These workers earned salaries much greater than those of the local civil servants and teachers.

As disparities increased, the refugee camps and humanitarian workers became the target of conflict and violence. In 2005, new rebel groups emerged in western Sudan and have made attacks into eastern Chad, in central Chad, and in the capital city, N’jamena. In June 2005, President Idriss Deby removed constitutional provisions limiting the number of terms he could run. He was re-elected in May 2006. In June 2006, Chad complained to the UN Security Council that Sudan was backing armed groups who were carrying out raids in eastern Chad. At the time of this writing, the fighting across the borders continues.

The situation for children

At the time of the Darfur crisis, child protection needs in Chad included attention to child trafficking and prostitution, widespread child labour and exploitation, juvenile justice reform, social and economic reintegration for homeless and street children, and a dearth of psychosocial supports for children of all ages. However, the refugee cohort brought a new set of needs. Long-term conflict and deprivation and the recent atrocities experienced in Sudan had created a population of injured, sick, and severely traumatised children. Large numbers of children reported having lost their families and/or having seen friends killed or taken away. The majority had psychosocial disturbances which were manifested in nightmares and/or terror at daily occurrences such as the sound of a plane overhead. Most children did not feel safe in the camps and believed that an attack was imminent. Over 35 percent of the refugees exhibited signs of acute malnutrition (U.S. Center for Disease Control and

Prevention, 2004). These children arrived into overcrowded and under resourced camps, often situated in areas polluted with land mines.

Several categories of children were shown to be particularly vulnerable in terms of safety, wellbeing, and access to support and services. These included children with disabilities, young boys who could be forced into army service, and girls of all ages at risk of rape. Separated and unaccompanied children were shown to be the most vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and the least likely to have access to available camp services (CCF Chad, 2006).

Programs to address children’s needs

When I arrived in Chad in 2004, the situation for the thousands of refugee children was as bad as anything I had ever seen. The Darfur crisis was gaining momentum, bringing thousands of children into a region already deprived of infrastructure and resources. During the briefing sessions I was given on arrival, I found many reasons to leave the country as soon as possible. The security situation was extremely volatile. I was advised never to walk in the streets and to take up security guards for my residence. I left immediately to visit the refugee camps in eastern Chad. What I witnessed there was beyond anything I had ever seen or imagined.

The region was semi-desert, with scarce water, food, and fuel wood resources. There was endemic malnutrition among the children. There were no recreational facilities or equipment. Some children had been so traumatized by bombings in their Darfur region that when a helicopter or a plane passed by, they screamed and sought hiding. As I had seen elsewhere, the refugee crisis in Eastern Chad was so huge, so problematic and, in many ways, so political, that the children — the silent victims — tended to be of little or no priority. When I left the camps to return to N’jamena, I was exhausted; but there was no question about my next directions. Perhaps I had

survived the Rwandan prisons in order to help other people overcome hardships and despair. I had decided to stay on.

The initial need for the children was obvious: they needed to survive. Thus, one of the priorities was to address the chronic malnutrition. After this we needed to ensure an environment of predictability and normalcy so that psychosocial healing could begin. There was also a desperate need for programs to support parents and caregivers. At the same time, we were conscious of the need to build in sustainable programs, so that outside intervention could be minimised as soon as possible.

These needs were addressed in three major programs:

- The establishment of therapeutic feeding centres and child friendly spaces
- The recruitment and training of Animators (unpaid volunteers with no certified qualifications) from within the refugee community
- The establishment of child protection committees

Each of these programs had spin off outcomes which went beyond original emergency interventions. In the sections following I describe some of our projects and outcomes. This represents only a small part of the historical and complex story of Chad and Sudanese refugees. It is a snapshot of conflict and desperate conditions, which at the time of writing still seem to be unending. Nonetheless, there is no doubt in my mind that the programs for young children which somehow got established in refugee camps and surrounding communities had, and continue to have, long-term outcomes. Beyond crisis intervention, the early childhood programs provided vehicles for addressing social justice, enhancing gender equity, and empowering communities. Despite the horrendous conditions then and now, this is my story about hope.

Therapeutic feeding centres and child-friendly spaces

The main strategy for dealing with malnourished and traumatised children was to support the establishment of therapeutic feeding centres where anti-starvation diets were distributed. Starving children mostly do not have the energy or desire to eat. For this reason food is given in small amounts, throughout the day. In the tents, food distribution took place at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. Most families had nowhere to go in between these feedings. They simply sat around and waited. In response, it was decided to support a program of child-friendly spaces attached to or close by feeding centres around Iridimi, Kounoungo, Touloum, and Mile refugee camps.

Child-friendly spaces are physical areas where children and their caregivers can feel safe and take part in structured and unstructured activities. The spaces are mainly aimed at children from ages 0-15 years, although adult programs are also available. Our child-friendly spaces served many purposes:

- They provided an oasis where children and family members could feel safe and relaxed.
- They kept children active and engaged in their environment during the long wait between feedings.
- They offered both free play activities and structured events to help counter trauma in children.
- They addressed the needs of mothers and caregivers. Classes and training were offered for adults on topics such as literacy, early childhood development, and income generation.
- They provided a place for distressed adults to discuss their issues and share their concerns.
- Since children could attend on their own, use of these spaces provided respite time for parents and caregivers and gave them opportunities to attend to chores and other activities.

The use of community Animators

The child-friendly centres were staffed by Animators, recruited from within the community. Most Animators were unsalaried volunteers with no certified qualifications. It was felt that the ability to communicate with the children and families, to reflect familiar habits and mores, and to model a calm outlook were more important traits for Animators than having had formal training in a far different context. The main task of the Animators was to develop recreational and other activities for all children within a relaxed and “normalised” atmosphere. Animators received a training program which focussed on creating structured, predictable, and healing environments for traumatised children. The use of refugees as staff members had benefits beyond the program for children. Becoming an Animator represented a taking back of control over

their own lives and a regaining of their self-image as competent caretakers for their children. Animators also provided positive role models for the children as capable, active adults with whom they could relate. In this way opportunities were opened up for the post-trauma effects of both the adults and the children to begin to be addressed.

Emergency situations can give rise to changed social conditions. In Chad, necessity and shortages resulted in the recruitment of both male and female Animators, working together. The teams represented a previously taboo situation in this Muslim region/community where gender segregation for workers had been the norm. Similarly, children in the child-friendly spaces, and subsequently in schools which were developed, were not segregated by gender.

Box 4.1 Child-friendly spaces in the Chadian refugee camps

The children in the camps have lost their homes, friends, schools, and sometimes their families. Child-friendly spaces provide psychosocial support to children and adolescents, stimulating their learning and well-being in a protective environment. Activities range from sports to learning about hygiene to parental sensitization. Also they give children access to adults other than their parents, who are likely to be suffering from trauma themselves. Staff are trained to observe children for post-traumatic stress disorder — and to refer any showing the signs to medical partners for counseling. There’s trust here, people to trust. And they gain confidence.

As Masumbuko (2005) has explained: “The most vulnerable children are those in therapeutic or supplementary feeding. Emaciated children have no appetite. They just want to sit or lie with their mother. But children learn from each other. Seeing another child sit upright, they will start to sit upright.

Then they say, “If they can run, why can’t I run?” When they start being interested in playing, they also get an appetite.

“The effects of child-friendly spaces are visible in many other ways. At first the children were drawing helicopters, guns, blood, violence, men on horses, houses on fire, bombs, and people with one leg — every type of violence you can imagine, including sexual violence against women and girls. This they brought out in their drawings. Now this is beginning to change; they are drawing nature, flowers, donkeys, rivers, beautiful faces, and classrooms. The child-friendly spaces have begun to change the way the children look at things.”

I’ve seen children arrive at the child-friendly spaces seeming really afraid, and then becoming much more relaxed. There’s a big change. Now the children smile, they’re happy, they play.

In September 2004, I visited a class in Kounoungo refugee camp where Animators were being trained. My first impression was that both male and female future Animators were happy to work together, regardless of sexual biases. I asked just one question to the males — whether they were at ease being trained by women (the trainers were women from the Chad Ministry of Social and Family Affairs). They told me that they understood that women were equal to men and that both sexes needed to contribute to the welfare of children!

Another special aspect was that female children attended the programs to the same extent as male children. Acceptance of this notion was helped by the fact that girls were not needed for household activities, since there were not many domestic chores which could be attended to in the camps. On my visit to a Farchana refugee camp, I met the Headmaster of a school and discussed the activities of his school. While I was still there, I saw a number of women running into classrooms after the children had gone home. The Headmaster told me that those were illiterate women who had decided to use the classes in the afternoons for literacy and numeracy activities. I also talked to a female teacher. She told me that she felt at ease working with her male colleagues, and that this would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, in Sudan.

Grassroots responsibility: Child Protection Committees (CPCs)

In our search for sustainable programs we facilitated the development of child protection committees (CPCs). All CPC members were from the refugee community. If needed, assistance and guidance from host country social workers was available. The child protection committees were established to assess and monitor children's rights within the camps. CPCs oversaw the child-friendly spaces. They made local and thus relevant decisions about locations of spaces, access to spaces, and which programs would be

developed. CPCs also had an advocacy role and organised awareness raising for refugee families and other decision makers about needs and rights of children.

Once again, the emergency situation resulted in a progressive approach to child protection. Under normal circumstances within Sudan, the CPCs (if they existed at all) would have remained in the hands of bureaucrats and professionals. In the camps, grass roots individuals, mothers, fathers, and others were mobilised in their quest to ensure that conditions for their children were as health promoting (and as equitable) as possible. The CPC volunteers received information, training, and support. This was unlikely to have been available in their homeland.

There were a number of unintended consequences of these programs. Increased attention to the plight of children in the camps inevitably resulted in attention being given to children in the local areas surrounding the camps. The need to extend the child protection program to children in the villages as well as those within the camps became apparent to all.

However, the needs of local children were very different from those of the refugee population. An intervention could not simply be extended from one situation to the other. After intensive assessments, three main elements for child protection were identified for the Chadian children. There were: 1) legal and legislative reforms, 2) social integration, and 3) mine-risk education. Thus, the refugee crisis in eastern Chad prompted progressive attention to and discussion on legislative reforms and on the situation of children in eastern Chad, which may not have otherwise been addressed. These included the situation of children in institutions, such as the Koran-memorizing centre of Dar-as-Salaam in Abéché.

At the central government level, new draft bills were prepared to reform the penal and labour codes, outlawing the worst forms of child labour; a national policy on orphans and other vulnerable children, including those affected/infected by HIV/AIDS, was developed; and national policy for the protection of children against sexual abuse and commercial exploitation was drafted. A study on the situation of children working as domestic aides was carried out. A number of other steps at the macro and policy level were also instigated. These included the development of national policy for early care and education, discussions around the development of a civil code, and attention to programs aimed at curbing violence in schools.

Another focus for Chadians targeted skills training and/or school reintegration for large cohorts of children who fell between the cracks of other programs. This included street children, child prostitutes, children in forced labour, children in institutions, detention centres, and in suspicious “religious training” centres. As such, a long overdue program for birth registration was initiated. At the time, less than 25 percent of children born in Chad were registered. The UN facilitated sensitization campaigns about this issue and developed birth registration materials which were widely disseminated.

Mine-risk education also became a new priority. A program was developed to integrate mine risk awareness into the school curricula. This was particularly important for the highly polluted east Chad region. Finally, a system of Garderie Communautaire (Social Care Centres) — similar to the child-friendly spaces of the refugee camps — was developed. This concept was developed with the assistance of the Government of Québec, Canada, in collaboration with UNICEF. An organizational and pedagogical guide for the Garderies has been written especially for Chad.

Box 4.2 Garderie Communautaire (Social Care Centres): A community-managed low-resource program for 3-6 year olds

Inspired from traditional practices, Garderie centers require minimal equipment. A group of 15 children aged between 3 and 6 years are cared for by three voluntary mothers on a rotation basis. The mothers form a kind of association that aims at taking care of the children of a village, especially the children from vulnerable households. The mothers receive training related to health, nutrition, and child development. They work under the supervision of a trained Animator. These centres are eligible to receive support and assistance from Ministry social workers, especially for technical assistance and for training local Animators, but are managed by communities themselves (Republic of Chad, Ministry of Social and Family Affairs, 2004).

Conclusions and lessons learned

The programs which were developed in the refugee camps of eastern Chad exemplify what can be done quickly, without trained staff or major resource support. The development of therapeutic feeding centres, child-friendly spaces, and child protection committees call upon organisational skills more than the need for resource deployment. Programs which ensure devolution of decision making to local grass roots agents and which model male/female integration and equity have long-term community development outcomes.

The refugee crisis created raised awareness for children’s needs throughout Chad. The

international aid agencies and the Ministry of Social and Family Affairs turned their focus onto sustainable support programs. The positive outcomes from the refugee programs have become a model for internal and international social developments. Thousands of children and their families living in Chad have been subject to the trauma of displacement, starvation, illness, violence, and continued conflict and hostility. There are no easy or quick fixes for their situation, but early childhood programs are helping.

The importance of child-friendly spaces

Child-friendly spaces can be established in the middle of difficult and hostile environments and can be organised and run with minimal resources. In the refugee camps in eastern Chad, members of the local community were given training and became responsible for ensuring a peaceful atmosphere in the designated spaces, despite conflict and danger close by. Children and adults understood that this was a judgment-free space where the only goal was to allow children to play and take part in activities in as normal a fashion as possible. The need to recruit from a small pool of eligible staff meant that some long-standing traditions were ignored. The use of both male and female Animators in the child-friendly spaces and the integration of girls and boys for play sessions represented a step towards greater social equity for females in Chad.

Crises can bring raised awareness

When the refugee situation within eastern Chad hit the western media and humanitarian aid began to flow in, the conditions of the general population simultaneously came to the attention of international aid agencies. The Darfur crisis prompted a focus on the need for systemic, sustainable child protection throughout Chad. While many oppressive conditions

remain, there are now articulated goals and a number of programs in place to address endemic needs.

Communities heal when they have opportunities to help themselves

Some of the most challenging post-conflict obstacles are the feelings of depression, pessimism, and powerlessness in adults. Children cannot heal when those around them reflect despair. Programs which are designed, organised, and implemented by the target populations themselves serve two important goals: They ensure that programs are relevant and appropriate to the community and they empower the community to take charge. The sense of being in control of one's environment and the ability to enact improvements are powerful healing processes. In this way, the development of early childhood programs in the midst of difficult and oppressive situations is a potent enabler of hope.

The needs of children extend beyond the conflict period

Often it is when the violence has stopped that repressed trauma emerges. The situation for children and families who return to their homeland after a refugee experience is often characterised by a lack of infrastructure, deprivations, hardships, and other factors which contribute to fear, paranoia, and trauma. On return, adults may have difficulty transcending their resentment and biases. There is a danger that these will, wittingly or not, be transferred onto the young children in post-conflict situations. The need for committed and qualified social workers and psychologists may be strongest at this time, but it is often when the humanitarian support stops. In order to build/rebuild local capacity, psychosocial support should be included in any human resource development plans for conflict affected areas.

