

The use of consensus methodology in determining key research and practice: development questions in the field of intervention with children associated with fighting forces

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Over the course of a consultation meeting on best practice in care and protection of children associated with fighting forces, consensus methodology was used to identify appraisals of key areas where research was required to strengthen the knowledge base supporting programming policy. Nineteen leading practitioners and policymakers (drawn from intergovernmental and nongovernmental agencies working in the field) completed three successive rounds of a consensus rating task, based on themes identified in the course of the meeting. A wide range of issues were identified, but those suggested as key areas of priority for research and practice development were: scalable livelihood interventions; integration of girls formerly associated with fighting forces; improved monitoring and evaluation strategies; and documenting the comparative effectiveness of community based psychosocial and clinical interventions. Areas of required policy development were also identified.

Keywords: child soldiers, consensus methodology, reintegration

Introduction

Recent years have seen the rapid development of the humanitarian assistance professional, with increased emphasis on developing concepts of 'best practice'. Two

major forces shaping the understanding of 'best practice' are professional reflection (Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Wood, Apthorpe & Barton, 2001) and the development of an empirical evidence base on programme effectiveness (Overseas Development Institute, 2004). This report details a study exercise relevant to both of these forces, as it incorporated analysis of professional consensus on key areas where a stronger empirical evidence base was required for programme development.

Consensus methodologies (Jones & Hunter, 1995; Murphy, Black, Lamping, McKee, Sanderson, Askham & Marteau 1998; Bowling, 2002) have emerged as powerful tools to establish expert agreement on issues of practice. This is especially useful where evidence from formal research studies is inadequate and/or inappropriate to inform judgments. Consensus methods respect expert opinion as a product of diverse experience. They provide a formal structure for reflection on that experience and consider areas of agreement and disagreement. In particular, consensus methods seek to control the effects that can often bias the process of expert discussion. Such effects may include the potential for undue influence on those drafting conclusions, and the

premature loss of ‘minority’ opinions within discussions.

Consensus methods – such as the Delphi method and the nominal group technique (NGT) – share a number of important characteristics (Murphy et al., 1998; Bowling, 2002). First, they provide a means for participants to freely and independently propose what they see as key issues, or practices, in the field in question. By documenting all proposals no insights are lost through the potential timidity or uncertainty of some participants (this can be very useful with groups varying in either cultural background or professional status). Second, consensus methods provide an opportunity to discuss, debate and defend proposals. This broadens understanding of issues, and highlights areas of both agreement and disagreement. Third, these methods encourage some form of negotiation – using such processes as prioritizing and consolidation to establish areas of the greatest consensus.

Such methods are potentially applicable in a wide range of humanitarian action areas. The specific focus of the current review was work in the field of support to children (formerly) associated with fighting forces. This is an area of programming that has seen significant development in the decade following the formulation of the Cape Town Principles (see reference for full list; UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund), 1997), but empirical support for particular programming responses remains limited (Wessells, 2007). What, then, are the key research and practice development questions in this field at this time?

Methodology

The study exercise was conducted in the context of an expert review workshop convened to address progress in humanitarian interventions addressing the needs of children

(formerly) associated with fighting forces (also referred to as child soldiers). This workshop occurred a decade after the formulation of the Cape Town Principles (UNICEF, 1997). Nineteen attendees served as participants in the study exercise held in the concluding session of the workshop. Participants represented leading intergovernmental and nongovernmental agencies as well as academic programmes active in the field. Participants also had wide field experience of programme development and evaluation across a range of conflict-affected contexts.

The research design, as based upon the principles of consensus methodology, used NGT methods. Participants were individually presented with a list of 21 issues that had arisen in discussion earlier in the meeting (distilled from comprehensive notes taken in each session). They were provided with eleven ‘stickers’ and asked to place these against the issue that they considered represented the most important questions for research and practice development. ‘Stickers’ could be distributed across eleven issues or, through multiple ‘posting’, used to prioritize particular issues. Participants were also invited to add additional items to the list, if important questions were thought to have been omitted. Participants were given 10 minutes to complete Phase 1 of the exercise to set priorities.

Phase 2 of the exercise involved participants, in pairs or in one case three, discussing their selections in Phase 1. The pair groups were instructed to negotiate the placement of a further eleven ‘stickers’ on a fresh listing of the issues ensuring, as far as possible, that their selections represented consensual judgments after a further 10 minutes of discussion. Participants were again free to add new issues to the list, including items that they had added to the list in Phase 1.

Phase 3 involved pairs coming together to make groups of four, who were instructed

– after a further 10 minutes of discussion – to allocate a final five ‘votes’ across listed items (including items contributed by group members).

At the conclusion of the study exercise, all papers were collected, and responses tabulated as shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Results

The results of each phase of prioritization are summarized in Figures 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Frequencies represent the total number of ‘votes’ received for each issue during that phase of the exercise. Votes for issues added by participants are consolidated into a single item if content was judged to be substantially similar (e.g. ‘how to encourage release/exit during conflict’ and ‘what is good practice in dialogue and mediation with armed groups to return children?’).

The three figures suggest a broadly consistent pattern of prioritization across each phase of the study exercise. Although some items advanced in priority across the three phases (e.g. ‘documenting effectiveness of inclusive programming on social integration’ from rank 10 in Phase 1 to rank 3 in Phase 3) and others fell (e.g. ‘identifying the effective elements of community sensitization’ from rank 4 in Phase 1 to rank 7 in Phase 3), overall rankings were generally stable.

Although the exercise serves to outline a broad agenda for research and practice development in the field, selecting items that were ranked in the top five issues in each of the three phases of rating gives the following as the four top priority issues by consensus:

- what are effective approaches for supporting the integration of girls formerly associated with fighting forces?
- how can livelihood support be taken to scale?

- what are effective monitoring and evaluation strategies for identifying protection risks and evaluating interventions?
- what is the comparative effectiveness and sustainability of community based psychosocial vs. clinically focused approaches?

Although the majority of issues are focused on the evidence base for programming, the wider policy context was referenced in a number of issues, most saliently with the item:

- what policy developments can increase the effectiveness, visibility, and long term funding of children’s reintegration?

Conclusion

The study exercise suggests that consensus methodology can be an efficient and effective means for identifying shared views of priorities in research and programme development in the humanitarian field. The specific priorities identified here, alongside other consultation processes, will assist in the planning of work within the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF) funded by the Care and Protection of Children in Crisis Affected Countries initiative currently being developed by the research team (Program on Forced Migration and Health, 2006). This includes attempts to document promising approaches to the priority challenges identified, examine their effectiveness, and encourage joint agency learning regarding such developments.

More generally, the exercise provides a stimulus for discussion regarding areas where the field requires clearer evidence to inform effective programming that targets the needs of children associated with fighting forces. In this regard, the authors welcome comments from practitioners and researchers on the practice, development and research issues highlighted in this current exercise – and also those that that readers

Rank		Freq
1	How can livelihood support be taken to scale?	17
2	What are effective approaches for supporting the integration of girls formerly associated with fighting forces?	15
2	What are effective monitoring and evaluation strategies for identifying protection risks and evaluating interventions?	15
4	What is the comparative effectiveness and sustainability of community-based psychosocial vs. clinically focused approaches?	14
4	What are the effective elements of community sensitization?	14
7	What policy developments can increase the effectiveness, visibility and long-term funding of children's reintegration?	13
7	How do we build on the skills of children formerly associated with fighting forces in the reintegration process?	11
8	How do we channel funding to assist all war-affected and vulnerable children in the context of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes?	9
8	Can we document the benefits of prevention and integration planning early on in the DDR process?	9
10	How can we best capitalize on appropriate traditional practices (and minimize the impact of those that do harm)?	7
10	Can we document how inclusive programming is effective in aiding social reintegration?	7
10	How and why do girls and boys spontaneously demobilize and reintegrate?	7
13	How do we work effectively through elders and other community groups in supporting the integration of girls?	6
14	How to outreach to children still in armed groups to support demobilization?	4
15	(How) does formal/informal education provide protective mechanisms in the prevention of child recruitment?	3
15	What role, if any, is there for the provision of cash assistance to minors at the time of mobilization?	3
17	What factors predict whether families and communities are able to prevent child recruitment?	2
	What kinds of provision (e.g. kits) are useful in supporting the reintegration of demobilized children?	2
	In what ways can psychosocial support for child soldiers cause harm?	2
	How can we better understand the influence of cultural identity in the context of 'demobilization'?	2
	What is the best use of 'transitional time' between mobilization and reintegration?	2
22	How to successfully bring state and non-state actors to account for increasing protection activity?	1
	What are effective cross-sectoral ways of working?	1
	How to provide alternatives to recruitment which provide social status and participation for young people?	1
	What link needs to be established between justice/accountability mechanisms and child integration?	1
	What strategies and tools exist to support integrated, multi-sectoral prevention and integration?	1
	What are effective demobilization papers and when should they be used?	1
	What types of educational activity are most effective in the (re)integration process?	1
	How do we guide workers on verifying age?	1
	What is good practice in dialogue and mediation with armed groups regarding child recruitment?	1
	What are best practices in social integration?	1
	With constrained resources, how are programmes targeted without creating stigma?	1

Figure 1: **Phase 1 Prioritizations.**

Rank		Freq
1	How can livelihood support be taken to scale?	12
2	What are effective approaches for supporting the integration of girls formerly associated with fighting forces?	8
2	What is the comparative effectiveness and sustainability of community-based psychosocial vs. clinically focused approaches?	8
4	What are effective monitoring and evaluation strategies for identifying protection risks and evaluating interventions?	7
5	How do we channel funding to assist all war-affected and vulnerable children in the context of DDR processes?	6
5	What policy developments can increase the effectiveness, visibility and long-term funding of children's reintegration?	6
7	Can we document how inclusive programming is effective in aiding social reintegration?	5
7	How do we build on the skills of children formerly associated with fighting forces in the reintegration process?	5
7	How and why do girls and boys spontaneously demobilize and reintegrate?	5
10	What are the effective elements of community sensitization?	4
11	Can we document the benefits of prevention and integration planning early on in the DDR process?	3
12	How can we best capitalize on appropriate traditional practices (and minimize the impact of those that do harm)?	2
12	How do we work effectively through elders and other community groups in supporting the integration of girls?	2
12	What role, if any, is there for the provision of cash assistance to minors at the time of mobilization?	2
12	What are best practices in social integration?	2

Figure 2: Phase 2 Prioritizations Items that received one (or less) nominations excluded.

Rank		Freq
1	What are effective approaches for supporting the integration of girls formerly associated with fighting forces?	4
1	What is the comparative effectiveness and sustainability of community-based psychosocial vs. clinically focused approaches?	4
3	What are effective monitoring and evaluation strategies for identifying protection risks and evaluating interventions?	3
3	Can we document how inclusive programming is effective in aiding social reintegration?	3
5	How can livelihood support be taken to scale?	2
5	What policy developments can increase the effectiveness, visibility and long-term funding of children's reintegration?	2

Figure 3: Phase 3 Prioritizations Items that received one (or less) nominations excluded.

consider should have been prioritized but were not. Consensus methods may be most useful not so much in seeking a 'last word' on priorities, but in clarifying areas where there is genuine consensus and where there isn't. In the latter case, such analyses are a call to open debate and gain more evidence to inform such discussions.

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