

Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) – Prevention and Reintegration

Desk Review to inform the “Growing Stronger Together!” parenting program



Acknowledgements

Authors

Maria Rosaria Centrone, Francesca Viola, Chiara Massaroni

Consultancy

This is an independent consultancy as part of the Strengthening Prevention and Reintegration for Children (SPARC) project to develop a parenting intervention and training package to support caregivers to protect children and adolescents from recruitment in armed forces and armed groups and to promote their reintegration in families and communities. The present desk review has been elaborated to inform the approach and the design of both the curriculum and training package. It is one of several tools developed within the framework of the consultancy. The consultancy was commissioned by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and conducted by Articolo12 Società Cooperativa di Servizi.



www.articolo12.org
September 2020

Articolo12 would like to thank the staff of IRC for their support, suggestions, and availability. We also warmly thank the stakeholders of the SPARC project, including all members of the reference group. Special acknowledgments go to our colleague Alessandra Alloni who supported us in the mapping process and the elaboration of the final recommendations and suggestions.

IRC SPARC Project Team

Yvonne Agengo, Alexandra Blackwell, Annalisa Brusati, Kathryn Falb

Special thanks to the IRC Democratic Republic of Congo and IRC Central African Republic teams who were instrumental in supporting the research design, data collection, piloting, and analysis.

Technical Reference Group

Theresa Betancourt, Mark Canavera, Simon Kangeta, Brigid Kennedy Pfister, Suraj Koirala, Sandra Maignant, Sharon Riggle

With gratitude to the women, men, girls, boys, and community members who took part in the research and made this project possible.

Funding

This study was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the International Rescue Committee and Articolo12 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Suggested citation

Articolo12 and International Rescue Committee (2020). Children associated with armed forces and armed groups – prevention and reintegration: Desk review to inform the “Growing Stronger Together!” parenting program. Washington DC: IRC and USAID.

Acronyms

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CAR	Central African Republic
CDF	Civilian Defense Forces
COMPASS	Creating Opportunities through Mentorship, Parental Involvement, and Safe Spaces
CPN-M	Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist
CSI	Caregiver Support Intervention
CBO	Community Based Organization
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KRI	Kurdistan Republic of Iraq
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SFP	Strengthening Families Program
SPARC	Strengthening Prevention and Reintegration for Children
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
ToT	Training of the Trainers
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

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INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and use of girls and boys in armed conflict is one of the most egregious violations of children's rights and it remains a huge protection concern in several countries in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Middle East. According to the most recent report of the United Nations' Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, a total of 13,200 children were separated from non-State actors and armed forces globally in 2019, while almost 8,000 children (some as young as 6 years old) were verified as having been recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups during the past year (90% of them by non-State actors).¹ Peace remains the *condicio sine qua non* and the most powerful means to reduce violations against children, to prevent the recruitment of at-risk-children and to guarantee the successful and sustainable reintegration of those involved in armed forces in their communities and families. However, even within the circumstances of ongoing conflicts, the international community must act to end their impact on children wherever possible, prevent their future involvement and assist affected children to recover from violent conflict.

Both academic literature and evidence from Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs highlight a strong relationship between the support a child receives from his/her family and the effective prevention of recruitment or reintegration at home and the community. The child's role within the family and the community, the interest and involvement caregivers show in his/her upbringing, and the guidance families can offer young people in managing social relationships all impact children's and adolescents' sense of belonging in the community and their broader contribution to society. "*Childhood happiness*" is a critical factor influencing violent extremism among adults: for example, the evidence shows that lack of parental involvement during childhood is a common factor among men recruited by violent extremist groups in Africa (UNDP, 2017).

Starting from the above-mentioned considerations, IRC contracted Articolo12 to develop a family-based intervention toolkit to promote reintegration following child recruitment by armed forces and groups as well as to address the drivers of recruitment. The final product will be a parenting curriculum for caregivers and a related training and monitoring and evaluation package to be used by practitioners in various geographical areas after piloting in two countries. This desk review constitutes the theoretical backbone of the final product, and, building on existing research and programs, aims at providing recommendations for the content and implementation of each component of the toolkit.

¹ UN General Assembly, Seventy-fourth Session, A/74/845-S/2020/525.

The next section provides an explanation of the materials and methodology used, including the composition of the documents reviewed. Paragraphs 3.1 to 3.5 outline the results of the analysis. They elaborate on theoretical issues related to reintegration and prevention of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) that emerged from the desk review. The paragraphs also present findings from an analysis of interventions and their evaluations to highlight examples from field implementation. The final section summarizes recommendations and ideas for the development and implementation of a parenting program.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this desk review is two-fold. On the one side, it highlights the most important issues within the debate around the reintegration of CAAFAG and the prevention of their recruitment which are functional to the development of a parenting intervention. On the other side, it analyses interventions implemented by various organizations and their related evaluations to underline best practices and challenges that can inform the development of a parenting curriculum and training package.

The materials used were collected through web searches and through key informants, in particular IRC staff and the members of the reference group of the SPARC project. The documents comprise publications by academia, international organizations, and International and National Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs and NGOs). All documents published between the 1st of January 2010 and the 31st of July 2020² and corresponding to the following criteria were mapped and included in the analysis:

- (i) Parenting curricula and trainings on CAAFAG (reintegration and prevention);
- (ii) Curricula and trainings on CAAFAG (reintegration and prevention) for other stakeholders (e.g., educators, teachers, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), community leaders, etc.);
- (iii) Curricula on positive parenting practices in relevant geographical areas and relevant contexts (political instability, war zones, natural disasters, etc.);
- (iv) Curricula building specific parenting skills considered relevant for the context(s) of CAAFAG.
- (v) Evaluations/evidence generated on curricula/trainings (all types indicated above);
- (vi) Program evaluations and piloting for rehabilitation/reintegration of CAAFAG;
- (vii) Program evaluations and piloting for prevention of CAAFAG;
- (viii) Systematic reviews on curricula/trainings/programs on CAAFAG and positive parenting practices in relevant contexts;

² In some instances, documents published prior to 2010 were also included if considered as particularly relevant.

(ix) Relevant research with both secondary and primary data.

A total of 119 documents (85 evidence documents and 34 relevant interventions) were mapped and reviewed. Additionally, preliminary considerations and lessons learnt from research carried out by the IRC in Central African Republic (CAR) were included.

Out of the 85 evidence documents reviewed, 20 are program or curriculum evaluations and 65 reports, strategic frameworks, or research studies. Most of them are publications from academia (48), and others from local and international NGOs and international organizations (19 and 19 respectively). Overall, 51 documents treat specifically the topic of CAAFAG children (28 focused on reintegration, 8 on prevention, and 15 on both topics); 17 documents look at positive parenting, and the remaining look at specific themes, such as child and community participation, gender, violence, education, etc. (20). Some of the documents reflect on areas of additional vulnerabilities for children, such as adolescence, girl children, migration, and displacement (36 documents). Finally, most of the evidence reviewed regards case studies in specific countries (57 documents, of which 39 are on African countries), some is not geographically focused (25) or focuses on regions or economic subdivisions of countries, i.e., Latin America, Africa, or low- and middle-income countries (3)³.

For what concerns the 34 programs mapped, 19 programs look specifically at parenting interventions, and 15 at other types of programming in the community. A few of the interventions are CAAFAG specific (5), while the rest looks at positive parenting (22) and other themes (5) that are relevant for contexts of protection during conflicts and crises. They tend to be country specific, with only a few of them implemented in multiple country contexts or not developed for a specific context. Most of them involve local or international NGO actors (28 programs), some of them involve international organizations (7), academia (5) or governmental organizations (3). Overall, they are either targeted solely at caregivers (15) or simultaneously at caregivers and children (12), with a few of them relevant also for other actors such as teachers and educators, CSOs, and other community stakeholders.

The following paragraphs highlight the concepts emerging from the review of the above-mentioned documents; each paragraph taking the cue from the literature to further elaborate on specific implications for the parenting intervention and making related recommendations.

³ The overall list of evidence mapped and reviewed can be found in the References section as well as in Annex 1.

2. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

All documentation mapped and reviewed was analyzed with the approach of literature thematic analysis, to understand which research questions and concepts recur across the learning sources that could be of interest to figure out the most suitable approach for the development of a parenting intervention. In particular, the following research questions guided the analysis:

- (i) How are themes approached and discussed in the literature?
- (ii) What are influential debates and theories that are relevant for the development of a parenting intervention?
- (iii) What are the trends and patterns in CAAFAG research and programming, and which approaches have become more or less popular over time?

Whenever possible, programs, curricula and training have been analyzed *vis-à-vis* their evaluations (or case studies) to highlight best practices and challenges in implementation.

The following paragraphs report the research findings and highlight key areas and themes that emerged from the analysis, and that can inform the development of programs and interventions in the context of CAAFAG.

3.1 The relevance of context(s)

As mentioned beforehand, the majority of studies reviewed within this report focus on one (or a limited number of) geographical context(s).⁴ This makes it difficult to highlight universal patterns as well as to generalize findings and apply them to an international program. Haer (2019) underlines how the effectiveness of international interventions within the field of CAAFAG is an area of research that requires further investigation due to challenges in drawing similarities among the numerous contexts explored by the academia.

Each conflict zone where a program is implemented has specific characteristics affecting the way children and adolescents are involved in conflict, which might in turn require first and foremost a reflection on how an international approach might respond to all contexts at once. The major differences across contexts emerging from the desk review are the following:

- In some contexts, children and adolescents are **abducted and/or forced** to join armed forces and armed groups, while in others they are **recruited, to various extents, voluntarily**.⁵ The way in which a child is

⁴ 60 out of 85 documents reviewed.

⁵ Para. 3.2 elaborates on CAAFAG's agency within the process of recruitment.

recruited may have an impact on their psychosocial wellbeing and therefore influence their reintegration. (Kohrt et al., 2016).

- The **push and pull factors favoring recruitment** are extremely various. Lack of employment and/or educational opportunities, low-socio economic status of the household, and abusive situations in the household (Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), sexual abuse and exploitation, harsh punishment, etc.) are among the push factors mentioned in several documents. Monetary incentives provided by the armed forces and armed groups, belief in the ideology of the group and its fighting purpose, wish to revenge a family member, security, the desire to become famous, the promise for status or marriage, and peer pressure are among the main pull factors emerging from the literature. Several of these factors are common to various conflict contexts; however, it is **their interaction** that plays an important role (World Vision, 2019; Denov, 2009) and consequently might lead to variation in the way prevention and reintegration interventions work.
- The **consequences of association with armed forces and armed groups** are numerous and mainly **negative**. Those prominent in the documents reviewed include difficulties in family and community reintegration up to actual stigmatization, lack of peer-support, negative economic and educational impacts, physical disability, and negative mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, aggression, etc.). However, several scholars highlight **children's positive response and resilience mechanisms**, and emphasize the context-dependency of the effects of war, especially in the psychological realm (Medeiros et al., 2020; Wessells, 2016a; Annan et al., 2011). For example, not all CAAFAG show aggressive behavior towards their caregivers; there is evidence that those who had been abducted present no hostile attitudes and tend to avoid confrontation rather than react aggressively (Annan et al., 2011). Furthermore, some literature reflects on the few but **"positive outcomes"** of the experience of being involved with armed forces such as increased political participation (Hauge, 2011; Denov, 2009; Mason, 1992), empowerment (Medeiros et al., 2020; Haer, 2017; Peters, 2011; UNICEF, 2017), the construction of a network (Carayannis & Pangburn, 2020), and learning new skills (de Silva et al., 2001).
- When involved with armed forces or armed groups, children and adolescents cover **multiple roles which relate to different responsibilities and tasks** and to a different level of physical and psychological involvement with the conflict (combatants, cleaners, wives and sexual slaves, cooks, etc.) (Revkin, 2018; UNODC, 2018; Plan International, 2017a). Those who have been active on the front-line (and their parents) might need a different kind of assistance for rehabilitation and reintegration than those who are survivors of sexual violence or those who were marginally involved in fighting. The latter are generally

welcomed back into the community, while others might face stigmatization or encounter problems reintegrating (Haer, 2017; Harvard University, 2013).

- **Gender differences** are a considerable variable when planning interventions for CAAFAG prevention and reintegration. Girls who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups have specific experiences and needs, especially in terms of reproductive and mental health as well as vocational training, so *“it cannot be assumed that traditional socioeconomic support is an option for most girl returnees”* (Haer, 2017). Furthermore, they might face stigma strictly connected to their true or potential sexual experience.⁶
- During their period with armed forces and groups, some children are **completely separated from their families and communities** because they are denied access to them by the armed forces and armed groups or because they prefer not to have any interaction with their relatives for several reasons. In other instances, some conflicts see children and adolescents **coming and going from camps** and never losing contact with their caregivers.
- Processes and outcomes of reintegration might vary consistently across the **rural-urban spatial divide**. For example, in Liberia, former combatants who returned to a rural life and opted for agriculture were over time more self-sustainable and integrated within their communities compared to those who remained in Monrovia and opted for vocational training schemes (Özerdem & Podder, 2011a).

Parents and caregivers of CAAFAG might also have different needs and experiences which are context related. The literature reviewed highlights the following concepts:

- The **attitudes** of caregivers and parents **towards the armed group** might range from hate and resentment, especially for those whose children had been abducted, to ideological alignment with the cause and played an active role in children’s recruitment.
- Parenting **styles and practices** might differ considerably in terms of **communication, discipline, and gender dynamics**.
- The **composition of the household** is also context related. Some might be quite large, comprising other relatives beside parents, such as uncle and aunts, grandparents, and cousins, who would probably play key roles in adolescents’ reintegration or prevention of recruitment.
- The **relationship of the household with the rest of the community** might be more or less harmonic. For instance, several mothers of adolescents’ foreign fighters in Iraq have expressed their frustration since they face constant stigmatization because of their children’s actions⁷; on the other side, evidence from some Sub-Saharan African countries shows that community-leaders and neighbors, enjoying a

⁶ Para. 3.3 elaborates on the importance of taking into account gender dynamics.

⁷ Information received from IRC following a participative workshop with caregivers held in Iraq.

relationship of trust with CAAFAG's parents, might play the role of facilitators in the process of family reintegration.

Conflict zones are not only different from each other, but some of their characteristics might change over time. During the past years, the nature of conflicts shifted considerably from civil wars within national borders to small, often ongoing, conflicts carried out by fluid non-State actors. This means interventions are not always embedded in a linear DDR process, but they might require to be implemented in situations of on-going conflict. Furthermore, there are contexts where children's and adolescents' participation into conflict is fluid. For example, "side-switching" is commonplace in Syria and other multiparty civil wars. Pathways into and out of non-State armed groups are rarely linear and unidirectional, and the roles that children perform within groups are fluid and evolve over time (Revkin, 2018). Moreover, for some CAAFAG, side-switching is key to reintegration. In Sierra Leone, many of the children who were demobilized from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) or Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) joined the Civilian Defense Forces (CDF) immediately upon returning home. While on its face this type of side-switching appears to undermine the goals of DDR, some children were motivated to do so precisely to facilitate their reintegration back into their communities whose concern *"was clearly not that they were child soldiers, but that they had been fighting for the wrong faction"* (O'Neil, 2018, p. 77).

These aforementioned considerations have important practical and theoretical implications for a potential parenting program as well as for other projects, and they bring a reflection on terminology. As mentioned above, there are situations where parents encourage and agree with their children associating with armed forces and armed groups, or when the whole family is actively involved in the conflict. This might see CAAFAG never breaking their relationship with caregivers and it challenges the use of the terminology "reintegration" per se (UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, considering the on-going nature of several contemporary conflicts and the instability of the contexts where programs are implemented, another question might come up: *reintegrating children into what?* (O'Neil, 2018).

The literature draws attention to terminology also when discussing issues related to radicalization and terrorism, underlining that the perception of what is radical and what is an act of terror at local level might differ from international definitions (O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, 2019). Therefore, reintegration and prevention programs should be sensitive to the values and beliefs of their participants and should be cautious in the use of specific words.

Furthermore, an in-depth reflection on the concept of *Childhood(s)* is needed, especially when talking about CAAFAG, to avoid a *clash* between international and local understandings which might hinder programs'

success. The following paragraph elaborates on the definition of “childhood” and its implications within the framework of CAAFAG’s programming.

3.1.1 Childhood(s) and transition into adulthood

The literature that draws attention to the relevance of the contexts where programs are implemented also highlights that the understanding of the concept of “child” differs from one context to the other and often does not fully align with the logics of international organizations. Several authors have argued that the discourse on “childhood” which guides the international human rights framework mainly reflects Western principles and suggest considering it a historical construct rather than a universal concept. This is not a new debate and child protection experts who constantly engage with issues such as child marriage, juvenile justice, and child labor, *inter alia*, are familiar with the “tension” between locally consolidated practices and ideas about “who is a child” vis-à-vis the international children’s rights framework.

Accordingly, also the concept of CAAFAG, constructed in the humanitarian discourse, may be disregarding the complex local understandings and experiences of military recruitment, including those of the communities, the families, the caregivers, and the children participating in DDR programs (Haer, 2017; Lee, 2009). The literature offers plenty of examples of children involved in fighting or supporting armed forces and armed groups by various means in different historical periods and geographical locations. The documents reviewed as part of this project are no exceptions and show that the engagement of under-18-year-olds with armed forces and armed groups is not necessarily seen as an outrage by the local population.⁸

For example, in the context of the Philippines, the identities of the children associated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are very much rooted in Islamic beliefs and interlinked with the political cause of the Bangsamoro. Children and adolescents younger than 18 years old were considered well-fit for associating themselves with the rebel group (UNICEF, 2017). Similar considerations have been made for the adolescents who fought with the Taliban armed forces in various historical periods in Afghanistan (Zyck, 2011) or who contribute to the armed forces of the Kurdistan Republic of Iraq (KRI). Interviewees from Daesh-controlled areas report that children who wish to enlist are inspected for signs of puberty, and “*if they have armpit hair and are able to carry a weapon, they are considered old enough to fight*” (Revkin, 2018).⁹

⁸ The SPARC project’s [research findings in CAR](#) highlight that “among those who joined armed groups, NONE mentioned that anyone in the community discouraged them from joining”.

⁹ “This logic also seems to apply to the designation of enemy combatants. When IS attacked Yazidi villages on Iraq’s Sinjar Mountain in August 2014, men were immediately separated from women and children to be executed *en masse*. Boys were asked to raise their arms; those with hair were considered adults and executed accordingly” (Revkin, 2018).

This is due to the fact that many CAAFAG, or children in general, are regarded as “young adults” or “adults” rather than “children”, in their socio-cultural context (Bleck et al., 2018; Haer, 2017). In some communities, today’s protracted conflicts generate a shared need for mutual protection and an expectation towards all of its members (male, female, younger, and older) to actively play a role in the conflict (World Vision, 2019). Children, adolescents, and young people have to contribute to the protection of the family and the community during conflict, as much as they have to provide livelihood for themselves and their families in periods of peace. Additionally, in several contexts, participation in armed conflict is seen as much as mean of subsistence as it is the engagement in a type of labor (Podder, 2011b).

Evidence also shows that several former CAAFAG feel the need to support their families and hence would prefer access to interventions aimed at adults, such as cash assistance and microcredit-schemes, rather than responses aimed for children which tend to exclude financial support. Sometimes this may lead to frustration, as CAAFAG do not fully understand a division between adults and children (and which is probably in contrast with their military experience), and subsequently to re-recruitment (Hear, 2017). In line with these considerations, Lee (2009) suggests going away with the definition of CAAFAG as anyone under the age of 18 who is associated with armed forces and prefers the terminology “young combatants”.¹⁰ However, this term could exclude many CAAFAG who are not directly involved in hostilities but are engaged in support roles and experience similar impacts on their psychosocial wellbeing and barriers to reintegration.

Recognizing the phenomenon of “child soldiering” and the concept of “childhood” embedded in humanitarian programs as historical constructs and questioning age as the main disaggregating element for program’s targets might help enlarging knowledge on CAAFAG and building more effective and successful interventions. It would perhaps help to look outside the box to find out that the factors influencing the recruitment of children may be no different from those impacting the recruitment of adults (Haer, 2019) and that some interventions traditionally conceived for adults (i.e., cash transfers) might be very important for adolescents’ reintegration and prevention, as well.

Additionally, different ideas on “who a child is” imply that what is expected from a caregiver or a community member in a specific context might not be corresponding to international standards of children’s rights (and caregivers’ duties). These are powerful considerations when envisioning the approach of a parenting curriculum because they draw attention on the possibility that one of the main objectives of the intervention (prevent children from joining) might not be fully *owned* by participants. Some parents might see military

¹⁰ The parenting intervention to be developed by the present consultancy responds to this specific concern having been envisaged for caregivers of young people up to 20 years old.

recruitment as a livelihood strategy that adolescents and young people adopt to contribute to family life, or consider it as an experience, a “rite of passage” into adulthood, and an accepted contribution to community life.

Implications for IRC parenting intervention

In light of all the above-considerations and according to several scholars, programs are successful when context related. They should be tailored to the experiences and needs of their participants, and this in turn would avoid clashing with local values and facilitate accountability. Flexibility should be a key component of international interventions on CAAFAG for them to be effective (O’Neil & Van Broeckhoven, 2018; Haer, 2017). A good example in this regard might be *Sugira Muryanggo*, a strengths-based home-visiting intervention developed for Rwanda. To ensure its relevance for the context, government stakeholders (the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion and the National Commission for Children) and local community leaders, as well as local experts, were invited to input in the curriculum which includes a series of Rwandan proverbs and songs. Furthermore, the curriculum has the possibility to customize the number of sessions required to complete the modules on the basis of each family’s needs (Barnhart et al., 2020).

Another relevant example is War Child Holland’s Caregiver Support Intervention (CSI), developed to help Syrian caregivers of displaced families living in Lebanon cope with stress. CSI adopted a “*culturally integrative approach*”. Idioms in local language which reflected phenomena common to various cultures were identified and included in the curriculum. The intervention is hence culturally sensitive but still has the potential to be adapted to other contexts (Miller et al., 2020b).¹¹ To overcome this type of challenge, UNICEF for example developed the manual “Children in Islam” together with Al-Azhar University (2017) and key messages from the manual were included in several tools and activities of the CAAFAG’s reintegration plan implemented in the Philippines (UNICEF, 2017) in order to resonate with local understanding of “childhood”.

Considering the importance of tailoring the intervention to the local context, a parenting curriculum could be consequently adapted to regional contexts, as done by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) which tailored the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) to the Latin American region, creating the curriculum “Familias Fuertes” (Orpinas et al., 2014).

The experience of the “Parents Make the Difference” IRC program already highlighted that the use of formative research is key to inform a successful cultural adaptation of a parenting intervention (Sim et al.,

¹¹ “For example, we have a session on disengaging from “thinking too much” (*Am b'aker ksteer*)—a culturally salient phenomenon that both reflects and contributes to stress, roughly akin to rumination and conceptually similar to the Buddhist concept of overthinking as a source of suffering. We also focus on managing anger and frustration, using the locally salient idiom of *Asabi* which refers to becoming irritable or angry in response to life stress.” (Miller et al., 2020b).

2014). The adaptation of the curriculum could be based on qualitative research with community key informants and with a rigorous piloting and testing at local level.

Ensuring strong knowledge and connection with the context is paramount not only to design the intervention but also to develop the tools to be used to implement it. In their research highlighting the effectiveness of art workshops to discuss sensitive subjects with CAAFAG, Green and Denov (2019) provide an example on the “*vital importance of community consultation, trust, and relationship building*” and suggest that holding consultations with local community members before any intervention minimizes the risks of being rejected and/or criticized by the community itself.

The logistic of the training sessions should be also organized keeping in mind the local context. For example, some caregivers may prefer attending separate sessions for women and men, for some (especially women) the proximity of the training centers and the provision of childcare might be a fundamental pre-condition to attend (Miller et al., 2020a). Incentives for or provision of transportation might have to be considered in some contexts (Orpinas et al., 2014) as well as harvesting periods, community events, and job commitments (Stark et al., 2018).

Additionally, being aware of the context’s socio-political and power dynamics is paramount to ensure the right selection of participants for the training. For example, international programs often rely on community leaders for the selection of the beneficiaries of reintegration interventions. However, evidence shows that there have been cases where the sons of the imam, the village chiefs and the former commander of the militias were included in DDR programs even if they had never been associated with armed forces, at the expenses of “real” CAAFAG (Shepler in Haer, 2017). Considering the logics of programs promoted by international organizations might not be fully shared by local communities and in light of building an intervention aimed at both reintegration of CAAFAG and prevention of recruitment, it could be advisable to make the parenting curriculum available to the largest number of caregivers possible, in order to avoid transforming the program in a potential source of conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ❖ Have participants reflect on what children and adolescents’ roles in their society are and highlight those points in common with the international framework;
- ❖ Consider diverse caregivers’ experiences, needs and capacities and find a way to make the intervention flexible and adaptable;

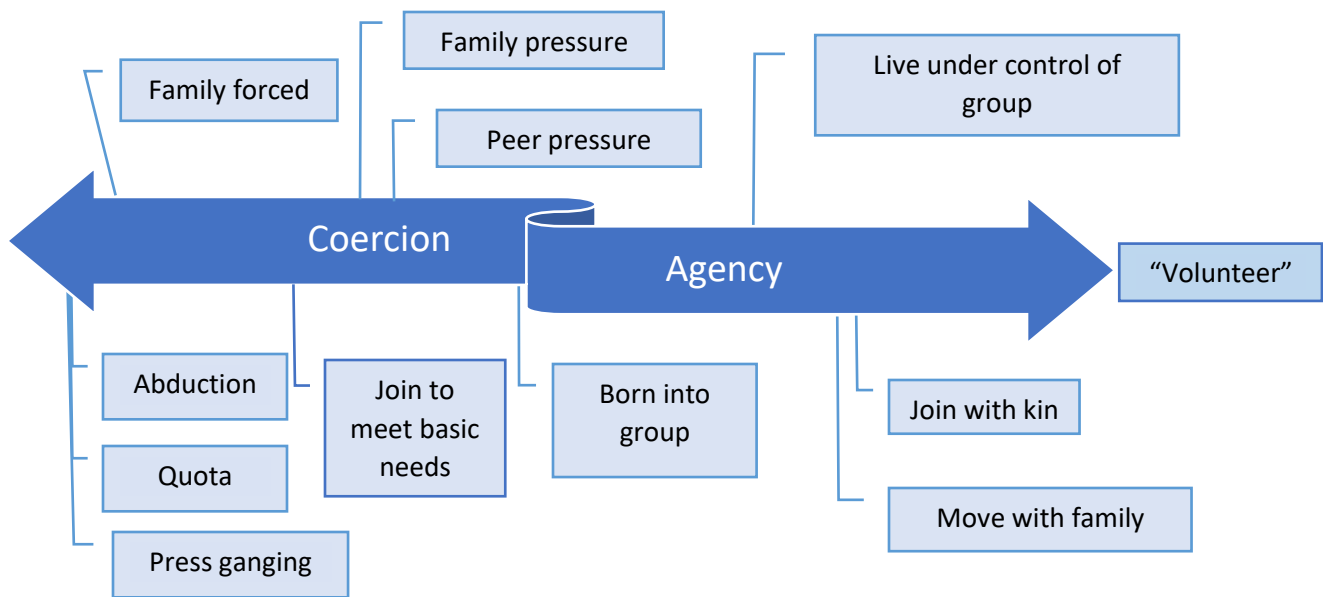
- ❖ Ensure that a reflection about the local context is carried out by the program’s manager and the facilitator(s) before the implementation of the intervention;
- ❖ Avoid the use of the terminology “terrorism” and “radicalization” when possible and do not engage in ideological debates;
- ❖ Consider developing regional versions of the intervention;
- ❖ Consider involving local experts from governments, international and national organizations, and the community in inputting and in reviewing the intervention before its implementation;
- ❖ Consider conducting formative research and pilot testing in every location before the implementation of the intervention;
- ❖ If needed, consider organizing transportation for participants and/or providing incentives for transportation;
- ❖ Try to open the intervention to the largest number of caregivers possible.

3.2 Children as agents during recruitment and reintegration processes

The previous paragraphs highlight the importance of building programs that respond to the local socio-economic and cultural context(s) and to the variety of participants’ needs. However, the challenge of creating a curriculum that will be relevant for parents of all former CAAFAG and all children and adolescents at risk of recruitment remains. The literature reviewed reflects on a large number of children’s and young people’s experiences during conflict, recruitment, and reintegration, looking at different circumstances and reasons for joining armed forces as well as factors favoring CAAFAG’s well-being. The present desk review does not aim to describe them in detail but rather to identify some common denominators which could be used as lenses to understand children’s realities and in turn suggest an effective approach for a parenting intervention aiming at both prevention and reintegration. Following several scholars’ suggestions (Haer, 2017; Lee, 2009; McLure & Denov, 2006;), the main key concept identified is child’s agency.

The literature highlights various reasons why children join armed forces and armed groups. The following graphic¹² summarizes them and shows that a dichotomous understanding between voluntary and forced recruitment does not respond to the realities of children’s lives. CAAFAG move rather in a “continuum of coercion”, as probably all people in conflict context(s) do, and deal with circumstances to the best of their knowledge and possibilities:

¹² The graphic has been re-adapted from “Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict”, ed. O’Neil, Siobhan, and van Broeckhoven, Kato. New York: United Nations University, 2018, pp. 32.



As the graphic above highlights, a variety of coercive factors can influence child association with armed forces and armed groups. For example, the RUF and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) were mainly assembled by abduction (Annan et al., 2011; McLure & Denov, 2006), and Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have largely engaged in forced recruitment (O’Neil, 2018). There are children and families who lived under the control of an armed group such as the MILF in the Philippines (UNICEF, 2017). The right end of the coercive spectrum includes children who join groups “voluntarily” such as those within the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) (Madeiros et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2008), Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia (O’Neil & van Broeckhoven, 2019), several armed groups in Liberia (Podder, 2011a) and the guerrilla movement in Guatemala (Hauge, 2011).

The literature explains that children and young people react to and act within this wide range of factors trying to guarantee for themselves security and safety and better economic and social conditions, and to fulfill their aspirations, even in the most restraining circumstances. A reading of CAAFAG’s experiences through the lenses of “*tactical agency*” (Haer, 2017) does not mean to minimize their need for protection and care, but it rather aims to underline the complexity of conflict’s realities, the power of children’s resilience and their role as actors in their own lives and in society, to various extents and within various types of constraints. It means getting away from an “*all-are-victim discourse*” (ibid.) that does not reflect the reality of CAAFAG.

Conceiving children as “active” rather than “passive” subjects during both the recruitment and the reintegration processes means believing that successful reintegration and finding valid alternatives to recruitment depend on children themselves as much as on external coercive factors. Subsequently, it makes it logical to envisage the role of caregivers as *facilitators* and *mediators*. It implies asking two main questions: (i) are there factors influencing children’s recruitment directly depending on caregivers or that the latter can substantially act upon? (ii) how can caregivers have a positive impact on the actions and reactions of their children to external circumstances?

From the literature review, the following points emerge providing elements, elicited from children’s voices and experiences, useful to respond to the afore mentioned questions:

- ✓ A harmonic and loving family environment is a deterrent for recruitment as for several other “risk-behaviors” (Orpinas et al., 2014). Violence within the family is one of the factors pushing children to enroll. There is evidence of former CAAFAG lamenting their post-war situation characterized by punishment and abuse at home and regretting their lives at camps. At the same time, “*emotional proximity*”, meaning the feeling of closeness to a loving family environment, is one of the main factors influencing successful reintegration and undermining retention within the armed group (Medeiros et al., 2020). Several children and adolescents leave the armed group because they caregivers “*call them back*” (Revkin, 2018).¹³
- ✓ The acquisition of economic independence and a recognized social role are important motives for children joining armed forces and strong retention incentives (Gates, 2011). Former CAAFAG might miss their life with the group because at home they do not feel the same sense of power and authority and they do not feel considered as grown-ups, since they are often not able to provide for themselves (and their loved ones).
- ✓ Stigma from community members and peers is one of the main reasons why children would rather go back to the armed group or suffer during their reintegration process; instead, the process of “*re-socialization*” within the armed group which CAAFAG go through after recruitment is a strong element for retention (Özerdem & Podder, 2011a). The bonds among children and adolescents belonging to the same armed group are very strong (Gates, 2011) and there are instances where fellow ex-comrades might also prove a useful network for reintegration (Carayannis and Pangburn, 2020).
- ✓ Indoctrination is a powerful recruitment and retention technique for military groups. They respond to children’s and adolescents’ needs to actively contribute to the betterment of society and the amelioration

¹³ This is also confirmed by SPARC research in CAR.

of their own conditions (Gates, 2011). Armed groups depict themselves as fighting for justice and positive change in society and communities. CAAFAG's adherence to the ideology of the group favors recruitment but especially retention. Additionally, some scholars highlight that DDR interventions might "*offset a process of remarginalization for marginalized youth who participated in conflict to change monopolistic, corrupt and gerontocratic structures*" (Utas, 2005b in Özerdem & Podder, 2011a, p. 8) ultimately leaving former CAAFAG with a sense of injustice. Furthermore, there are instances where family's closeness to the group's ideology can be an important factor favoring reintegration (Medeiros et al., 2020).

The above-mentioned points make considerations on the fact that children's experiences within the armed group are not an exclusive mix of trauma and violence, but they might also have some "positive outcomes", especially from the children's point of view. Similarly, children may have built their identity around the armed group, particularly in those groups with a strong ideology, and may need support to shift their identity from member of armed forces to civilian. These social outcomes might be a starting point to plan prevention and understand challenges in reintegration.

Implications for the IRC parenting intervention

A focus on the child's agency implies building a parenting curriculum where children and their experiences are at the center of the intervention. At the end of the training parents should value the importance of knowing and respecting their children with all their aspirations, opinions, and struggles, and should embody this new understanding in their communication, interaction, and relation with their children. This need has been expressed by parents interviewed within the framework of SPARC research in CAR, but it has also been expressed by children themselves in other contexts. For example, a Child Soldiers International (2017) research in DRC found out that, among the adolescent girls interviewed, majority longed to have someone to talk to about their past and present experiences. They felt that their suffering had not been sufficiently acknowledged, or in some cases, was not even fully known to their families.

In a sort of *circular learning*, caregivers should get to know their children and learn how to respect their individuality; they should then embed this learning in their family life and in the relations, they have with their children, first of all thanks to positive communication. The acquisition of good communication skills, largely based on the disposition to listen to and to empathize with the child and to provide the child with undivided attention, will in turn support the parents' understanding of their children as individuals with agency and vulnerabilities. For these reasons, improving parents' communication skills should be a critical component of the parenting intervention. Evidence shows that group sessions involving opportunities to practice communication skills, joint parent-and-adolescent sessions that enable understanding of one

another's perspective and focus on improving family dynamics together, exercises caregivers can practice at home with their children, and video or audio material that models sensitive and effective communication, are all very effective methods to promote positive parenting of adolescents (Marcus et al., 2019; Sim et al., 2014).

The parenting curriculum should facilitate exchange of opinions between children and parents and within the family in general, promoting a household environment where participation is a key element in decision-making processes. The feeling of "*having nothing to do*" has been expressed by the adolescent participants of the SPARC research in CAR as one of the main reasons for joining; participation in family life would give them a sense they are contributing to the wellbeing of their loved ones.

A participative family environment should also favor discussions and interactions about themes not strictly related to familiar issues, but rather related to the community or also to the larger conflict situation. Evidence shows that African adults who joined violent extremist groups share no experience of civic engagement from when they were adolescents or young boys; furthermore, there is often a difference between their perceptions about religion and its significance as a reason for joining violent extremist groups, and actual religious literacy (UNODC, 2018). For these reasons, ideology, religion, politics, and beliefs should not be taboos in conversations among family members since engagement with these themes and confrontation of ideas in a safe environment is of vital importance for adolescents and young adults.

The improvement of caregivers' communication skills should not exclusively aim at ameliorating their interaction with their children, but also with other family members and with members of the community. The literature tells us that when former CAAFAG face difficulties at home, it is always one specific family member they are not able to relate to and they have constant discussions and arguments with (Annan et al., 2011). At the same time, stigma from neighbors and peers might be a source of suffering for children, while the lack of approval of their network of friends by family members might become a reason for misunderstandings and conflict. Caregivers could aim at using their communication skills to better interact with their children's social entourage, other members of the community, and their own family members, becoming facilitators for their kids' relations.

Additionally, several qualitative and quantitative studies identify improved communication as the most important factor influencing other adolescent well-being outcomes, such as improved mental health indicators and reduced experience of violence (Marcus et al., 2019). The latter is a key objective in particular because violence and abuse within the household setting is a structural push factor into the armed group. These two objectives are linked to each other since the improvement in caregiver-child interactions results

in decreasing of harsh parenting behaviors, which in turn result in children being less fearful or more comfortable with talking and spending time with their caregivers (Sim et al., 2014). Evidence from the IRC's "Parents make the Difference curriculum" shows that even short interventions are successful in changing discipline practices, but they have to equip caregivers with concrete techniques that they can use, rather than be based on sensitization activities (ibid.).

In light of the evidence above, a parenting curriculum could aim at two connected learning objectives: 1) Problem-solving and 2) Positive communication. On the one hand, problem solving techniques will aim at avoiding and softening arguments within the family and providing caregivers with techniques to deal (and support their children to deal) with problems and trying to solve them together. In contexts where children and parents face stigma by the community, problem-solving techniques might be a way to manage them, as well. On the other hand, in the framework of positive parenting techniques, teaching caregivers strategies for positive communication would be preparatory to the teaching of positive discipline methods aimed at eliminating harsh punishment, and in turn reduce violence within the family environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Find a way to include children's views, experiences, and perspectives (maybe including qualitative research with children before implementation in each country, or a preliminary Focus Group Discussion with the children of the parents involved in the intervention before starting it, or including caregiver-child joint sessions in the curriculum, etc.);
- ❖ Highlight the role of caregivers as mentors and mediators between the child's agency and structural confinements and reflect with them on the things they can do to support their children's needs connected to the drivers of recruitment and the difficulties of reintegration;
- ❖ Include communication, positive discipline, and problem-solving skills in the curriculum objectives, providing caregivers with concrete techniques they can try at home;
- ❖ Discuss with caregivers both difficulties in communicating with their children and with other people (family and community members, children's friends, etc.) and reflect with caregivers on communication difficulties their children might have;
- ❖ Underline the importance of a participative family environment and provide tips to create it (e.g., a Family Action Plan at the end of the intervention);
- ❖ Facilitate a reflection on the negative consequences of association with armed conflict which relates to the parents' experiences and find alternatives relevant to the context;

- ❖ A referral mechanism could be included in the training package to ensure situations of serious children's rights violations (or GBV and IPV) are immediately identified and acted upon and to “redirect” issues which require the intervention of mental health workers.

3.3 The experiences of girls in armed forces and armed groups and the impact of gender dynamics

Research on recruitment and reintegration of CAAFAG from a gender perspective is quite underdeveloped (Haer, 2019; Haer, 2017), even if studies suggest that up to 40% of some non-State armed groups active in recent African conflicts were girls, making girl soldiering a notable phenomenon (Haer & Boelhmelt, 2018). Nonetheless, girls' experiences in terms of drivers of recruitment, life with the armed groups, and reintegration in the family and community differ consistently from those of boys (World Vision, 2019).

For example, while they are part of armed forces or groups, girls frequently take care of different tasks than boys, and experience inequality, such as receiving less food or poorer health care in comparison to boys (Haer & Boelhmelt, 2018). This is often a similar treatment to the one they receive at home where, due to the scarcity of resources, especially in extended families, they have access to less food than their brothers or male cousins (Annan et al., 2011).

Additionally, patterns of girl soldier recruitment differ from those of boy recruitment (Haer & Boelhmelt, 2018) and evidence shows that they might experience different forms of discrimination while in the group. These might vary consistently where females join voluntarily for nationalist or other motives, or where they have more opportunity for equality within groups (United Nations & World Bank, 2018), such as in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (Alison, 2003) or the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Nepal (Annan et al. 2011).

Even after conflicts terminate, girls remain peculiarly susceptible to discrimination, stigma, violence, and related mental health challenges. Evidence shows numerous accounts of girls who are survivors of sexual violence and abuse perpetrated while living with armed forces and armed groups (Haer & Boelhmelt, 2018), including forced marriage. These traumatic experiences haunt many girls, together with the anxiety created by the secrets they harbored relating to acts of violence which they were forced to commit or experienced themselves (Child Soldiers International, 2017).

Numerous girls and women return home with children born out of sexual violence and with compromised sexual and reproductive health (SRH). In some cases, their children constitute a shaming “evidence” for their

sexual conduct, resulting in high rates of rejection and stigmatization by their families and communities (Haer, 2017). However, there are also accounts from specific contexts where support from families is the norm, and where distress and problems of acceptance are marginalized phenomena, often limited to a few family and community relationships (Child Soldiers International, 2017; Annan et al., 2011). Overall, in those contexts in which positive parenting approaches are present, a parenting intervention could praise and support these behaviors to underline their importance for the wellbeing of children and adolescents and for their successful reintegration (an example is the “positive deviance approach” as described in Save the Children Sweden (2016)).

Furthermore, girls in armed conflict are often perceived as “*abductees*” or “*passive objects*” unable to act or speak for themselves, even if many identify themselves as volunteers (Hear & Boelhmelt, 2018). There is little recognition both in international programs and at local levels of the new powers, skills, and agency girls might have acquired during the time spent in armed forces and armed groups (UNICEF, 2017). These factors, not always appreciated in families and communities, could be brought to the attention of caregivers during parenting interventions to better understand the lives of their daughters. Examples of relevant interventions with a focus on gender that have shown positive results include “Girl Shine” (IRC, 2015), “the Creating Opportunities through Mentorship, Parental Involvement, and Safe Spaces (COMPASS) programme” (IRC, 2017) and the “Practical guide to foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed groups in DR Congo” (Child Soldiers International, 2017).

Discrimination upon their return results in girls facing difficulties to marry and/or making a livelihood (Child Soldiers International, 2017). In some contexts, this makes them more at risk of early marriage, both to avoid any stigma associated with their time spent with the armed group and as means of social control over those girls who may have come back with different ideas about their own lives (UNICEF, 2017). In some contexts, girls are also particularly likely to experience attempts at re-recruitment, as commanders often want to retain the girls’ added value as wives or servants (Haer, 2017).

Gender dynamics do not exclusively impact the experiences of girls affiliated with armed groups but can also be detrimental for boys, as well. The lack of extensive research on CAAFAG through gender lenses makes it difficult to understand how the identities “male” and “soldier” play in their interaction.¹⁴

¹⁴ A gender approach was not the focus of the present desk review. However, it would be interesting to look at the literature to find out answers to several questions, *inter alia*: Are there instances of boys/men coming back home with their children born within the armed group? What is the extend of sexual violence and abuse on male CAAFAG and how does it impact their reintegration? How are local practices detrimental for boys seen by armed groups (i.e., *bacha bazi* among Taliban in Afghanistan)?

Developing a parenting intervention with a gender lens, it is important to avoid falling into the trap of considering that what is needed by caregivers of male CAAFAG to guide a “universalist” curriculum, presuming that all children share essentially the same (male) characteristics and experiences, and consequently should receive the same kind of assistance (Child Soldiers International, 2017). For example, any intervention that aims at successfully reintegrate girls should not necessarily focus on a “*return to normality*” or “*to the way it was before the war*”. This focus can be harmful for girls, since it is this “normality” which hinders their reintegration. Especially girls who ultimately came out of the armed group more empowered may be pushed to resume conventional, socially ascribed roles undermining their potential for development in the post-conflict world and leading to frustration and even re-recruitment (Medeiros et al., 2020; Haer, 2017).

Last but not the least, evidence shows that lack of attention to gender dynamics might have a direct impact not only on the relevance of the parenting intervention but also on its effectiveness. For example, the randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the COMPASS caregiver curriculum¹⁵ shows that even if the program was open also to male caregivers, majority of the participants identified females as a “safe caregiver” to be invited to the training. However, in a society characterized by gender discrimination, women might have less possibilities of structurally changing norms within the household in comparison to men, including those related to GBV and discrimination. Therefore, a program addressing solely, or mostly female caregivers might ultimately be less effective in changing gender dynamics (Stark et al., 2018).

Implications for the IRC parenting interventions

Looking at CAAFAG and at children at risk of recruitment through a gender lens has two main implications for the approach to be taken by a parenting intervention. First of all, it means including the recognition and the elimination of detrimental gender stereotypes within the family setting among the learning objectives of a curriculum. In this way, an intervention could diminish the underlying causes that might push girls (but also boys) towards recruitment and facilitate their reintegration. Majority of positive parenting interventions for caregivers of young people in this review do not have a strong focus on gender equality; however, according to the literature, this is a missed opportunity to challenge embedded discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes that affect adolescents (Marcus et al., 2019).

Secondly, a parenting curriculum should take into consideration gender dynamics which exist at the local level and that might hinder its effectiveness; for example, paying attention when selecting the participants of the training. A common refrain in research on parenting interventions, particularly in low- and middle-

¹⁵ COMPASS is an adolescent girl’s life skills programme developed by IRC and implemented in three different contexts. In DRC, incremental effectiveness of the COMPASS caregiver curriculum was compared with receiving only the girls’ curriculum in the Sudan/Ethiopia border and in Pakistan.

income countries, is the importance of including fathers (Marcus et al., 2019). Parenting programs typically include a disproportionate number of mothers relative to fathers, reflecting the general difficulty of engaging male caregivers in parent-focused interventions as well as biases at the policy and programmatic levels that prioritize women as the primary caregivers of children (Miller et al., 2020a). However, given the powerful influence of male caregivers on children’s psychosocial development and in reducing domestic violence (Betancourt et al., 2020), efforts to include men in interventions should be made.

Moreover, gender dynamics might influence the way participants perceive certain topics or activities. For instance, evidence shows that some interventions addressing caregivers’ stress-management through the teaching of some breath exercises were not well-received by fathers in Pakistan, while appreciated by male caregivers in other contexts. This is also true for the sessions on puberty and early and forced marriage. Mothers in Pakistan did not want to discuss these subjects during the joint session with their daughters or they stated these traditional practices were not harmful (Tanner & O’Connor, 2017). Also, it is necessary to plan the timing of sessions to allow caregivers to join without interrupting their regular economic activities or work.

Furthermore, there might be cases of community members and local staff sharing gender stereotypes and discriminatory assumptions embedded in the local context (Child Soldiers International, 2017). This has to be considered when selecting and training the appropriate facilitators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Include understanding of gender discrimination as a learning objective of the curriculum;
- ❖ Make sure facilitators share the understanding of gender discrimination at the core of the intervention;
- ❖ Make greater efforts to engage fathers by minimizing the potential barriers for their participation (conflict with working hours, asking only one caregiver per family to join, facilitating a fathers-only training);
- ❖ Ensure the curriculum is based on examples where CAAFAG are not only depicted as boys.

3.4 The importance of caregivers’ wellbeing: managing stress

As mentioned in the introduction, during the past years, there has been a growing interest by international humanitarian organizations to work with caregivers of children and adolescents living in conflict and at risk of recruitment by armed groups, since there is ample evidence that parents’ behavior affects their children’s wellbeing in ways that might influence enrolment and reintegration. Drawing on evidence-based parenting interventions developed primarily in high income countries, various parent-training programs that share an emphasis on strengthening positive parent-child interactions, decreasing harsh discipline, and increasing the

use of non-violent behavior management strategies have been developed and implemented in conflict and post-conflict zones, including among refugees and displaced communities.

Central to the above-mentioned interventions is a focus on teaching positive parenting skills. The assumption behind this emphasis is that sub-optimal parenting is mainly a lack of relevant knowledge and skills. This deficit can be hence remedied through targeted interventions (Miller et al., 2020a). However, a growing amount of literature currently recognizes *“the powerful impact of chronic adversity on parental wellbeing, and in turn on parenting behaviour”* (ibid.).

For caregivers, living in a conflict zone means dealing with a series of stress factors, *inter alia*: security issues, violence, separation from social support networks and from children themselves (when they join armed groups), the inability to plan their future, preoccupations about the family economic situation, unsafe or overcrowded housing, feeling guilty not to be able to properly provide for their children, humiliating treatment by local authorities, etc. These factors have a negative impact on caregivers’ wellbeing and behaviors and in turn on their children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing. For these reasons, when envisaging parenting interventions, there is a growing tendency in improving not only caregivers’ skills and knowledge, but also in supporting their positive mental health.

In particular, Miller et al. (2020b) suggest a caregiver curriculum model that recognizes influence of two key sets of variables: *“(1) elevated parental distress stemming from war-related violence and loss, coupled with persistently high stress stemming from chronic adversity, and (2) parents’ knowledge, attitudes, and competencies related to parenting”* (p. 3). As emphasized in the previous paragraphs, the latter should also consider the combination of socioeconomic resources, cultural norms, and personal beliefs regarding parenting and child development related to the specific context.

Evidence from high- and middle- income countries suggest that including financial management and saving among the learning objectives of the curriculum might actually lead to greater knowledge, and to greater communication around financial matters between parents and adolescents (Marcus et al., 2019). Some parenting programmers’ participants appreciated joint sessions with their children on this subject since it empowered them to manage their daily lives better and avoid situations of risk (Stuer, 2019).

Following this evidence, including the improvement of financial management skills among the learning objectives of a parenting curriculum, and potentially linking it to social protection interventions such as cash transfers, might prove effective. Poverty and preoccupation to make ends meet are among the most

important stress factors for parents and they consider them being the most important driver for recruitment.¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Include the management of stress factors among the main learning objectives of the curriculum;
- ❖ Include financial management of the household among the learning objectives of the curriculum.

3.5 Additional considerations

3.5.1 The role of facilitators

Evidence underlines the importance of supporting facilitators with a manual to support their work¹⁷ and suggests pairing up facilitators. A review of adolescents' caregiver programs in low- and middle- income countries highlights that facilitators should be provided with continuous face-to-face support to ensure they cover all content, including themes they may find challenging, and maintain participatory learning environments (Marcus et al., 2019). Additionally, on-going-support and the pairing of facilitators might help them deal with situations where caregivers share difficult personal experiences which are challenging to manage (Stuer, 2019).

Regarding facilitators' skills, the evaluation of IRC's COMPASS curriculum suggests that the more educated and better trained the facilitators are, the most successful an intervention will be (Stark et al., 2018). However, this is a challenging point since in low-resource (post-)conflict settings, capacity and access are likely to be limited and the feasibility of community workers or paraprofessional staff delivering the intervention becomes particularly relevant to enable successful implementation at scale (Sim et al., 2014). Additionally, recruitment of parenting facilitators who live in the same villages as participants is key to sustained behavior change but does not ensure a large range of child protection professionals for the selection. In these circumstances, effective training of facilitators and supportive supervision become even more important for quality assurance purposes and a way to provide ongoing support and strengthening to these frontline workers; therefore, they must be considered a core cost in program budgets (Stuer, 2019).

3.5.2 The value of integrated interventions and follow-up

The evidence suggests matching parenting programs with other anti-poverty, social protection, and health and nutrition programs to help reduce parental stress and violence and give parents more time and energy to

¹⁶ During the [research conducted in CAR](#), caregivers emphasized that economic conditions and children having no school or occupation are, according to them, the primary drivers of recruitment.

¹⁷ The IRC parenting intervention has already envisaged a manual for the facilitators.

communicate with adolescents (Betancourt et al., 2020). Positive parenting skills education would be more effective if integrated within the context of skills training, job matching services, cash transfers, or entrepreneurship support initiatives (Marcus et al., 2019). Additionally, economic interventions in particular have a direct impact on parents' and children's wellbeing since they alleviate some of the financial burden families face in conflict settings, protecting them from having to engage in risky behaviors to ensure survival (Stark et al., 2018) and limiting the recurrence of conflict (Özerdem & Podder, 2011a).¹⁸

Furthermore, integrating parenting interventions with other child protection initiatives might lead to better outcomes. Children, parents, as well as teachers are often satisfied when social workers support them during reintegration processes since they help caregivers and children communicate with each other and avoiding conflict (UNICEF, 2017). Social workers who carry out case management programs might be an important resource for follow-up on a parenting intervention. They should be made aware of its curriculum and they could be involved during the training sessions as support for the facilitator(s); this would help introduce them to the caregivers as professional figures whom they could rely upon even after the training is over.

3.5.3 Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)

Evidence demonstrates the value of evaluation of parenting interventions not only through caregivers' self-reported outcomes but also using children's reports on changes in their parents' behavior and attitudes towards them (Marcus et al., 2019). This option might be considered when developing the M&E for a parenting intervention.

Marcus et al. (2019) also suggest enhancing evaluation and reporting to provide greater insights into the effectiveness of particular program components or approaches – for example, by testing the impact of separate parent and adolescent groups compared with combined groups – and the impact of integrating parenting programs with other services, compared to a stand-alone initiative. The quality and fidelity of implementation (how closely facilitators stick to program curricula and activities) and how this affects outcomes should be also evaluated.

In terms of long-term impacts, it would be worthwhile undertaking further follow-up to identify the changes that have persisted and the factors that have led to lasting impacts. The indirect impacts of programs should be also considered, such as whether there are actually any traceable impacts on adolescents' reintegration and risk-behaviors (Orpinas et al., 2014). Sim et al. (2014) suggest a follow-up of at least 12 months post

¹⁸ Also, SPARC [research in CAR](#) underlines that lack of livelihoods constitutes a constant challenge for caregivers and a continued risk for adolescents.

intervention to assess longer-term outcomes, that could be combined with a baseline data collection before the intervention starts.

3.5.4 Risks related to the Covid-19 pandemic

At this point, it is difficult to envisage the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in a different range of geographical territories. For instance, it is important to consider the risks of implementing a parenting intervention without jeopardizing families' and staff's health, in consistence with the *do not harm* principle. Mitigation measures can be put in place first of all to address risks of staff contracting the disease and further exposing caregivers and their children. In cases of face-to-face training, the Alliance for Child protection in Humanitarian Action (2020) suggests the following:

- ✓ Reduce the number of participants in each session;
- ✓ Provide adequate hygiene products (soap, water, cleaning materials, etc.) to both facilitator(s) and participants;
- ✓ Health screen (i.e., measure temperature) of all participants and facilitators before each session.

It is paramount that decisions to provide material assistance (hygiene kits or educational materials) should only be delivered in a way that does not stigmatize or inappropriately privilege CAAFAG as compared to other children (the Alliance for Child protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Consider engaging two facilitator(s) per training;
- ❖ Find ways to provide on-going face-to-face support to facilitators;
- ❖ Provide facilitators with a referral pathway they have to follow if caregivers share particularly challenging experiences;
- ❖ Recruit competent and experienced facilitators to the best extent possible;
- ❖ Recruit facilitators coming from the same community of the caregivers;
- ❖ Develop a comprehensive training for facilitators;
- ❖ Consider integrating the parenting intervention with other anti-poverty, social protection, and health and nutrition programs, especially cash-transfer, entrepreneurship support initiatives, or job matching services;
- ❖ Consider integrating the parenting intervention with a social protection intervention, especially case management (social workers engagement in case management activities could be engaged in the caregivers' training as well, as support for the facilitator);

- ❖ Use both parents' and children's reports to evaluate the intervention;
- ❖ Evaluate the effectiveness of single components, i.e., caregiver-child joint sessions, and the impact of integrating the intervention with other services, i.e., cash transfers;
- ❖ Evaluate the quality and fidelity of implementation;
- ❖ Carry out an ex-post evaluation one year after the end of the conclusion of the intervention;
- ❖ If possible, develop an impact assessment, especially measuring the impact of the intervention on children's wellbeing;
- ❖ Mitigate the risks connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, considering reducing the number of participants per session, providing adequate hygiene products, and health screening the participants before each session.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND IDEAS

This paragraph concludes the desk review by summarizing a few key recommendations and ideas to respond to the needs and challenges highlighted by this analysis in order to define the approach, content, design and structure, and implementation of a parenting intervention.

APPROACH	CONTENT	DESIGN AND STRUCTURE	IMPLEMENTATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Place participants at the center of the intervention: take into account their needs, perspectives, knowledge, and ideas. ➤ Consider involving local experts from governments, international and national organizations, and the community in reviewing the intervention before its implementation. ➤ Try to open the intervention to the largest number of caregivers possible. ➤ Place children at the center of the intervention: find a way to include children's needs, experiences, opinions, and perspectives. ➤ Consider integrating the parenting intervention with child protection interventions, for example case management (social workers engagement in case management activities could be engaged in the caregivers' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Support participants' reflection on children's and adolescents' roles in family, community and society and highlight common points with the international child rights framework. ➤ Avoid the use of the terminology "terrorism" and "radicalization" when possible and do not engage in ideological debates. ➤ Highlight the role of parents as mentors and mediators between the child's agency and structural circumstances; ➤ Reflect with caregivers on things they can do to support their children's needs connected to the drivers of recruitment and the difficulties of reintegration identified. ➤ Include communication, problem-solving and positive discipline skills in the curriculum objectives. ➤ Discuss with caregivers about difficulties they may 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Include caregiver-child joint sessions where safe and appropriate. ➤ Provide caregivers with concrete techniques and exercises they can try at home. ➤ Conclude the intervention with the elaboration of a joint caregiver-child Family Action Plan. ➤ Ensure the curriculum is based on examples where CAAFAG are not only depicted as boys. ➤ Include in the curriculum "stop signs" where the facilitator needs to reflect on local adaptation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ensure a reflection on the local context is carried out by the program's team and the facilitator(s) before implementation (develop checklists and/or a manual for the program's team). ➤ Consider developing regional versions of the intervention. ➤ Consider organizing transportation for participants and/or providing incentives for transportation. ➤ Include qualitative research and pilot testing with children and adolescents and caregivers before implementation in each country. ➤ Make sure facilitators share the understanding of gender discrimination at the core of the intervention. ➤ Engage fathers by minimizing the potential barriers for their participation (conflict with working hours, asking only

<p>training as well, as support for the facilitator).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consider integrating the parenting intervention with anti-poverty, social protection, and health and nutrition programs, especially cash-transfer, entrepreneurship support initiatives or job matching services. ➤ Develop a training for facilitators. 	<p>have communicating with their children and other people (family and community members, children’s friends, etc.) and reflect with them on communication difficulties their children might have.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Underline the importance of a participative family environment and provide tips to create it. ➤ Include a referral mechanism to ensure situations of serious children’s rights violations (or GBV and IPV) are immediately identified and acted upon and to “redirect” issues which require the intervention of mental health workers. ➤ Include understanding of gender discrimination, management of stress-factors and financial management of the household as learning objectives of the curriculum. 		<p>one caregiver per family to join, considering fathers-only training).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consider engaging two facilitator(s) per training, a man, and a woman for mixed groups; ➤ Find ways to provide on-going face-to-face support to facilitators; ➤ Provide facilitators with a referral pathway to follow if caregivers share particularly challenging experiences; ➤ Recruit competent and experienced facilitators; ➤ Recruit facilitators coming from the same community of caregivers; ➤ Ensure that the location of the workshop is accessible to people with disabilities; ➤ Mitigate the risks connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, by reducing the number of participants per session, providing adequate hygiene products, and health screening the participants before each session.
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ANNEX 1: Additional resources mapped and reviewed

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ANNEX 2: Parenting interventions mapped and reviewed

Title of the Program	Document / Tool Name	Year	Author/Organization	Countries of Implementation	Context
Better Parenting Plus (community discussion guide)	n/a	2014	USAID; Catholic Relief Services; TPO Uganda	Uganda (adapted for this context)	general
Better Parenting	Better Parenting - facilitator manual	2018	4children Nigeria; USAID; IntraHealth; Maestral; Pact; Plan International; Westat	Nigeria (adapted for this context)	general
	Better Parenting curriculum Nigeria - community discussion guide	2018	4children Nigeria; USAID; IntraHealth; Maestral; Pact; Plan International; Westat	Nigeria (adapted for this context)	general
Helping children cope with the stresses of war	n/a	1993; 2001	Mona Macksoud / UNICEF	not specified	children affected by war
Intervention de compétences parentales	n/a	2016; adapted for DRC context in 2018	USAID; International Rescue Committee	DRC	general / children recruited in armed forces
Practical guide to foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed groups in DR Congo	n/a	2017	Child Soldiers International	DRC	girls recruited in armed forces
Action for the rights of children (ARC)	ARC Resource Pack: Critical issue module 7 Children associated with armed forces or armed groups	2009	ARC (Save the Children Alliance; UNICEF; UNHCR)	not specified	CAFAAG
	ARC resource pack Facilitator's toolkit	2009	ARC	not specified	general
Parenting for lifelong health for young children	Parent handbook	2020	UNICEF, WHO, the Universities of Bangor, Cape Town, and Oxford, and Clowns Without Borders South Africa.	Thailand (adaptation, originally developed for the South African context)	parenting programmes for vulnerable households in LMIC
	Facilitator manual	2020			
	Parent handbook	2018		Initially tested in South Africa, adapted in the DRC, Kenya, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, the Philippines, Romania, South Africa, South Sudan, Thailand, and Uganda	parenting programmes for vulnerable households in LMIC
	Facilitator manual	2018			
PARENTING FOR LIFELONG HEALTH FOR TEENS - Sinovuyo Caring Families	Family Guidebook	2016	UNICEF, WHO, the Universities of Bangor, Cape Town, and Oxford, and	Eastern Cape, South Africa	parenting programmes for vulnerable households in LMIC
	Facilitator manual	2016			

Programme for Parents and Teens			Clowns Without Borders South Africa.		
Strengthening Families Program (Familias Fuertes)	n/a	From 2007	Iowa State University	Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador	parenting programme for at risk adolescents
Sugira Muryango	n/a	2016-2020	Boston College School of Social Work and FXB Rwanda	Rwanda	ECD programme
The Journey of Life	Community Implementation Guide	From 2007, last edition in 2017	REPSSI Initiative (Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	Multiple	community
	Facilitator Training Guide				
	Action workshop 4 social connectedness - community implementation guide	2016	REPSSI Initiative (Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative)	South Africa	community
	Action workshop 4 social connectedness - facilitator training guide				
	ACTION WORKSHOP 8: ENDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING - community implementation guide	2017	REPSSI Initiative (Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	South Africa	community
	ACTION WORKSHOP 9: PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM ABUSE - community implementation guide				
The Positive Discipline in Everyday Parenting (PDEP) programme	n/a	2007; 2011; 2013	Positive Discipline in Everyday Life (PDEL), Save the Children Sweden	30 countries	primarily High income countries
Creating Opportunities through Mentoring, Parental Involvement and Safe Spaces (COMPASS) programme	n/a	2015-2017	International Rescue Committee	DRC, refugee camps on the Sudan/Ethiopia border, and north-west Pakistan	humanitarian settings
I DEAL manuals for children	n/a	2015	War Child Holland	Central Africa Republic, Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan	conflict / post conflict settings
Families make the difference	n/a		International Rescue Committee	Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Liberia, Pakistan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda	Conflict Post conflict Protracted crisis Rural, urban, camps.

Girl Shine	n/a	2017	International Rescue Committee	Liberia, Ethiopia, DRC, Pakistan, and Lebanon	Initial pilots have been implemented in fragile settings due to conflict, including refugee camps.
Supporting Adolescents and their Families in Emergencies (SAFE)	n/a	2017-2019	International Rescue Committee	Nigeria and Central African Republic	emergencies
Reach Up and Learn	n/a				
Singing to the Lions - A guide to overcoming fear and violence in our lives	Facilitator guide		Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Say and Play Therapy Center	Zimbabwe	Protracted crisis
The Youth Resilience programme	The Theory and Programmatic Guide	2015	Save the Children	Denmark, Egypt, Greece, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, South Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, Yemen	All contexts in low-, middle- and high-income countries, as part of a variety of humanitarian responses, as well as in protracted crises. The critical requirement is that there is a level of stability so that the young people and parents have the necessary emotional stability to work on these issues.
	Facilitator's handbook : Life Skills Workshops for Youth				
	Facilitator's handbook : Parents and Caregivers Meetings				
Structured and sustained better parenting sessions (Amani Interagency Campaign)	Interagency child protection and GBV campaign		UNICEF and other organizations	Jordan	Protracted crisis (Syria crisis)
Enhancing community psychosocial wellbeing for vulnerable girls and women	n/a		CARE International, Uganda	Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda	Conflict Post conflict Protracted crisis in refugee camps.
Family oriented screening and assessment processes	n/a		Center for Victims of Torture	Jordan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda; Capacity building programmes with local partners in a number of other countries, including Iraq	Conflict affected refugees in camps and urban contexts

Education sessions for parents in IDP camps on positive parenting	n/a		Plan International, Myanmar	Kachin State, Myanmar	Protracted conflict
Celebrating Families Tool	n/a	From 2011	World Vision	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Tanzania, and other contexts	
Youth Readiness Intervention (YRI)	n/a		Child Soldiers International	Sierra Leone (tested for validity and reliability in 14 countries)	resource-poor post-conflict contexts youth 15-24
The Rethabile "Happy Together" positive parenting program	n/a	From 2014	Catholic Relief Services CRS; 4Children	Lesotho	
Parents make the difference	n/a	From 2012	International Rescue Committee and Duke University	Liberia	rural areas
War Child Holland's Caregiver Support Intervention (CSI)	n/a	From 2017	War Child Holland	Lebanon (with Syrian refugees), Palestine	for caregivers in war / displaced by war
UNICEF Programme for the reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups in Nepal	n/a	2009	Unicef and child protection partners	Nepal	CAFAAG And specifically: Children currently in the cantonment sites; · Children who have 'self-released' including those who have escaped from the CPNM at any time; · Children who may have been asked to leave the cantonment sites on an informal basis; · Vulnerable children.
UN-MILF Action Plan	n/a	From 2009-2017	UNICEF, governmental partners and other UN	Philippines	children recruited in armed forces
Positive Deviance Approach	n/a		Terre des Hommes Lausanne	Burkina Faso	development context
Positive parenting skills training	n/a		Terre des Hommes	Haiti, Greece, South Sudan	Natural disaster, Protracted crisis
Positive Parenting Package	n/a		Unicef / Save the Children	Myanmar	Natural disaster Protracted crisis

