



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

ASSISTING ANGOLAN CHILDREN IMPACTED BY WAR: BLENDING WESTERN AND TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO HEALING

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After over twenty years of bitter conflict, the worst fighting of which occurred during 1992–93, Angola achieved a fragile cease-fire and entered a period of post-conflict reconstruction. The obstacles to peace in Angola are formidable and include the devastation of infrastructure, high levels of poverty, shortages of clean water, an economic crisis, rising crime rates, the ongoing suffering and problems associated with over 10 million land mines, and the continued fear and isolation across the lines of UNITA- and government-controlled areas.

A key part of the effort toward peaceful reconstruction is meeting the psychosocial needs of children. Violence runs in a self-perpetuating cycle that will continue unless steps are taken to interrupt it. In Angola, this problem is particularly acute since over half the population is under fifteen years of age, and younger generations have never known anything but war. Many youths bear the psychological scars of violence in the form of trauma and reactions associated with the multiple, ongoing stresses of poverty, displacement, loss, and separation from family. Although invisible, these psychological wounds create suffering and damage that endure long after the physical wounds have healed. They also impair learning and thwart healthy development, making it difficult to move ahead with education or economic development projects. In Angola, many youths have been forced or drawn into lives as soldiers, and despite the cease-fire, many operate

with groups of uncontrolled bandits who use violence to obtain what they want. This participation in armed conflict has normalized violence for many youth, corroded humane values, and planted the seeds for civic distress and violence in the future.

The Mobile War Trauma Team

In addressing problems such as these, there is a tendency both in the U. N. system and the NGO community to overuse Western concepts such as "trauma" and "post-traumatic stress disorder." Whereas entire populations have sometimes been described as "traumatized," there is in fact considerable resilience, even under conditions of war. It is no more appropriate to assume that all youth are dysfunctional than it is to stigmatize and reduce entire groups as "traumatized" or as a "lost generation."

There are also significant problems associated with the use of concepts that have proven to be quite useful and appropriate in contexts such as the U. S. It is highly questionable whether concepts such as "trauma" can be *taken off the shelf* and applied directly in the African context. In Angola, people do encounter specific stressful events, but it is misleading to think of trauma associated with particular events. The main psychological problems stem from the multiplicity of ongoing stresses—the poverty, uprooting, community destruction, lack of food and water, etc.—and from the loss of hope associated with them. In addition, spirituality permeates life and colors the interpretation of events, making it difficult to talk of violence-associated trauma in the U. S. and the Angolan contexts as if they were the same species.

For example, the shooting of one's mother would surely induce severe psychological stress in either Angola or the U. S. But in the Angolan context, just as significant as loss is the issue of burial ritual and spiritual harmony. If one's mother was killed and one had been forced to flee, great psychological stress may stem from the inability to perform the appropriate burial ritual, without which the mother's spirit is believed to linger and to cause problems both for the individual and the community. In this situation, it would be misleading to think of loss in the Western framework and to conceptualize stress in terms that do not place spirituality in a central position. Further, it would be very limiting to try to address the stress without using culturally appropriate methods such as traditional healing rituals that restore spiritual harmony. Regardless of Western attitudes about the validity of local spiritual beliefs, these beliefs have a powerful influence on emotional and social wellbeing in Angola and other Bantu areas of Africa.

Keeping these points in mind, Christian Children's Fund (CCF), with financial assistance from the Swedish International Development Agency and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, initiated the Mobile War Trauma Team (MWTT) for healing the psychological wounds of war in young people in the capitol city of Luanda, to which many Angolans had fled during the war.

■ PROCESS AND GOALS

From its inception, the project encouraged a culturally sensitive, collaborative process that honored local communities, worked in partnership with the government and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and avoided paternalism and the treatment of Angolans as passive recipients. The heart of the project was its all-Angolan core team, headed by Dr. Carlinda Monteiro, who had formerly held a government position. The team consisted of five professionals who understood the needs of children, knew Angolan culture from the inside, and had connections with government agencies and diverse communities within Angola. The team members were receptive to Western approaches to healing, which emphasize the importance of expressing emotions and reintegrating experiences in a secure environment. In fact, the team had been trained by both Dr. Monteiro and by Nancy Dubrow, a U. S.-based consultant. But the team was keenly aware of the cultural limitations of Western concepts and methods and had a keen interest both in adapting Western methods to the Angolan context and in using indigenous methods wherever appropriate. Since these indigenous methods had been passed on orally among Bantu peoples, the team had few written documents to learn from and had to rely instead on its willingness to learn from local people.

As part of an initial needs assessment, Dr. Monteiro conducted a survey of 200 children in Luanda who were either unaccompanied or living in so-called orphanages. Not intended as a representative sample but as a picture of the worst-case conditions, the results indicated the heavy toll of the war on children, of whom 94% had been directly exposed to military attacks, 33% had suffered injuries from shelling or shooting, 65% said they had escaped death, and 27% had lost their parents. Interviews revealed that many of these youth experienced psychological difficulties such as nightmares and sleep disturbances, bed-wetting, social withdrawal and isolation, concentration problems, aggressive behavior, and hopelessness.

The primary goal of the MWTT was to train adults who work with children in settings such as children's institutions, street centers for unaccompanied children, and camps for displaced persons. The trainings were designed to help adults to recognize the signs of trauma, to be aware of the needs of children affected by war, and to develop and implement activities that heal the psychological wounds of war and promote healthy development. The project aimed to build upon the importance of adults in the psychosocial development of children and to put adults, who themselves bore the scars of war, in a better position to help war-affected children. It embodied the holistic view that physical health and psychosocial wellbeing are richly interconnected. On this view, psychosocial work with children in exceptionally difficult circumstances cannot be an afterthought but should be integrated into all aspects of relief and development work, even in the crisis stage. Consistent with this philosophy, the MWTT collaborated extensively with diverse relief agencies to facilitate the delivery of food, water, and other materials to meet basic survival needs.

■ TRAINING SEMINARS

Trainings were conducted in two-week seminars that were highly participatory and respectful of local knowledge and practices. Typically, there were approximately 25 participants, who had been selected in consultation with local communities, government agencies, and groups involved locally in social service work. The participants worked in partnership with two trainers from the core team, who posed questions such as "What do children need for healthy development?" and "How are children affected by the war?" Using a method of dialogue and participation, the seminars explored children's psychosocial needs and development, the impacts of war on children, views of death and healing, and methods of assisting children impacted by war.

This dialogue brought forward traditional ideas about impacts of war and about healing, and it revealed important understandings and practices that exceed the scope of Western psychology. As mentioned earlier, some participants reported that their most stressful experience of the war was their inability to fulfill their spiritual commitment to the ancestors by, for example, performing the appropriate burial rituals for loved ones who had been killed. They stated that in this situation, effective treatment entailed the performance of the culturally appropriate rituals by a traditional healer. Similarly, some participants said that young people who had participated in killing during the war harbored evil spirits which had to be purged before the children could be reintegrated back into the community. This dialogue created two-way learning in which the trainers learned in partnership with the "trainees," and it avoided privileging the Western approaches that dominate the discipline of psychology. In this manner, the seminars encouraged the blending of Western and traditional approaches, combining the best ideas of two worlds and enabling the use of culturally appropriate methods.

The content of the seminars evolved over time, as the trainers realized that more weight needed to be attached to violence prevention and the avoidance of future trauma. For this reason, the seminars came to include subjects such as nonviolent conflict resolution in the family and beyond. Over a one-year period beginning in Fall, 1994, 574 adults took part in the MWTT training seminars. Following the seminar, the trainers made follow-up visits to the trainees at the sites where they worked with children. These follow-up visits were useful in providing support, advising on the handling of particularly difficult problems, and identifying ways of improving the seminars.

■ EFFECTS OF THE TRAINING

Post-training evaluations indicated that the trainings had been highly successful. In a study of a random sample of the participants conducted six months following completion of the seminar, nearly all the participants said that the seminars had helped them recognize the effects of war in children's behavior and emotional lives. In addition, 96% reported that they had better relationships with war-affected children as a result of the seminar, and 91% said they were able to improve the behavior of war-affected children.

Many participants commented that they had gained new ability to interpret child behaviors such as aggressive responses that might appear to reflect poor discipline but that in fact may stem from exposure to violence. Participants stated that they had increased appreciation of the importance of children expressing their feelings about their war experiences, and they had acquired tools for encouraging emotional expression via methods such as drawing, song, dance, and story-telling. This approach complemented and provided additional psychological impetus to the deeply rooted practice in Angolan communities of expressing emotions through song and dance.

The participants reported that in their daily work they were able to encourage a mixture of Western methods of healing with indigenous methods (used by local traditional healers) that emphasize rituals and spiritual practice. Most important, children in the settings where the trainers worked showed decreased sleeping problems and isolation behavior, reductions of aggression and stress reactions, fewer concentration problems and psychosomatic illnesses, improved relations with other children and with adults, and a more positive orientation toward the future.

The project also had positive effects on communities such as camps for displaced people. On an evaluation visit by Dr. Edward Green and the author, the leaders of one camp reported that as a result of the MWTT training seminar, the adults had become more aware that when children spend large amounts of time alone this may not reflect a desire for solitude so much as psychological difficulties such as flashbacks, anxiety, or depression. Accordingly, they had begun to arrange structured educational activities for children and were more attentive to the needs of each individual. Through this activity, they had become more hopeful and active in general. This suggests that in war-torn areas where communities have been uprooted and burdened by despair and inactivity, it is possible to enable communities to become more active and to mobilize themselves around the task of meeting the needs of children, who represent the future. This mobilization and positive future orientation provide the foundation for future steps in sustainable development.

The MWTT project had also sought to raise consciousness about the needs of children and to advocate for social policies that best met those needs. At the start of the project, the government had placed too many children in orphanages and devoted too little effort to documentation, tracing, and reunification. Although the MWTT worked in homes for unaccompanied children, it challenged the legitimacy of orphanages and called for increased efforts to unite children with their families. But changing social policy requires much more time and the availability of evaluation data that document effective interventions for assisting children. Accordingly, the project was extended into a subsequent phase that included an extensive process of evaluation.

Assisting Children in the Provinces

As important as the work in Luanda was, the CCF team recognized that the greater challenge in building peace in Angola is to assist rural communities and to work across the lines of the conflict in ways that promote cooperation and nonviolence. With assistance of major funding from USAID for a three-year project that began in Fall, 1995 (called the Province-Based War Trauma

Training Project), CCF expanded the work piloted by the MWTT to include seven provinces: Benguela, Bie, Huambo, Malange, Uige, Huila and Moxico. In Huila and Moxico, CCF collaborates with UNICEF-Angola, which has made its offices available to province-based training teams. These seven provinces were heavily affected by the war, and they contain the major part of the Angolan population.

■ TRAINING THE TRAINERS

This project entails the training of trainers in each of the seven provinces, thereby building local capacity to prepare adults to work more effectively with children. For each province, the national CCF team selected three trainers according to criteria such as teaching and leadership ability, flexibility, community support, and commitment to meeting the psycho-social needs of children. The national team then brought together the entire group of 21 province-based trainers for a three-week training seminar, the process and content of which were similar to the seminars that had been conducted by the MWTT, except that the third week was devoted to issues of administration, financial management, and evaluation. Each team then returned to its respective province and conducted training seminars like those of the MWTT for adults who work with children impacted by war. As of May 31, 1996, 256 adults had participated in the province-based training seminars. Ultimately, the goal is to train 4,000 adults who work with an estimated 320,000 children.

To focus project resources effectively, work in each province has begun with a situation analysis that provides a comprehensive picture of children's circumstances, the impact of the war, and the conditions regarding health, education, population, and agriculture. Decisions about where to conduct training seminars are guided by data indicating the areas that have the greatest need and that have been impacted most strongly by the war. In addition, a relatively high degree of attention will be concentrated on the 10% of the children in these areas who are deemed neediest by means of an assessment by their care providers or teachers. As in the MWTT, the children will be assisted by a mixture of Western methods and indigenous healing rituals. To support adults in working with children, the province-based trainers will make periodic follow-up visits to field sites. In this system, the province-based trainers will continue to assist the adults who had participated in the training seminars, just as the national team will continue to assist the province-based trainers.

■ COMMUNITY REBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION

As the project has evolved, it has become increasingly community-centered and holistic in its approach. Beyond the need to address children's war experiences, the national team realized the importance of developing positive skills of communication and nonviolent conflict resolution within the family, and these elements have been incorporated into the training seminars. In rural communities that had been disrupted or badly damaged by the war, it was important to rebuild a positive physical environment and to encourage in children a sense of hope and a healthy appreciation of growth and the future. Accordingly, the project is encouraging child-focused community projects such as planting gardens and trees, establishing centers for play and sporting activities, and organizing theater and choral groups. In all of these activities, the national and

province-based trainers work closely with traditional leaders, church leaders, and local government, and they foster cooperation with other NGOs that are working to meet basic needs.

The project is also addressing the wider needs for peace and reconciliation by focusing on the needs of children. To raise consciousness about the damaging effects of war and the needs of children, the team is fostering the creation of public radio broadcasts on the impact of war on children. To help break down the barriers of isolation and fear that continue to divide government-controlled and UNITA-controlled areas, the team is encouraging radio broadcasts in which children on both sides talk of their war experiences without partisanship or blaming. In addition to educating the public about children's war experiences and needs, these broadcasts are intended to humanize the other side, to build a sense of common ground, and to encourage cooperation across the lines of conflict in meeting children's needs. This approach makes use of the well-established principle in social psychology that hostile, destructive conflict can be reduced by having conflicting groups cooperate in the achievement of a shared goal that lies squarely within the interests of each group. Of course, reconciliation will not be possible unless the estimated thousands of former child combatants are demobilized and reintegrated back into local communities. Toward this end, the national team is organizing activities that prepare former child combatants to re-enter communities and parallel activities, including traditional cleansing rituals, that prepare local communities to receive the children.

Because the project is in its initial phase, it would be premature to judge its effectiveness. Already the project has developed an extensive system for evaluation that incorporates the ideas of the national team. The evaluation system includes the training of local people to be careful observers of children's conditions and activities, ethnographic documentation of methods of traditional healing, direct observations of child behavior, and the measurement of the project interventions against a temporally relevant baseline condition in which no intervention occurred. This system is intended not as a research project but as a means of documenting project effectiveness in hopes of developing a positive model that can be applied in other parts of Africa. Careful evaluation is also intended to provide data that can be used to advocate for social policies that improve the children's wellbeing.

Ultimately, the creation of a positive future for Angola's children requires the coordination of policy changes with changes at the community level and the modification of minds and hearts toward nonviolence. In this sense, the work of CCF in Angola is part of the systemic process of building peace.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999.