Developing culturally relevant indicators of reintegration for girls, formerly associated with armed groups, in Sierra Leone using a participative ranking methodology

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This article describes a participative ranking methodology for identifying local understanding of reintegration and adjustment of potential value in programme planning and evaluation. It was applied in the specific context of girls formerly associated with fighting forces in Sierra Leone. Fourteen discussion groups, utilizing spontaneous listing and participative ranking activities, within a focus group framework, were conducted in 10 communities. Discussions served to identify family support, marriage, involvement in communal activities and income generating activities as locally seen as significant indicators of a girl's successful reintegration after the war. This method offers a flexible approach to identifying culturally relevant indictors of reintegration that have the potential for wide use in programme planning and evaluation.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, child soldiers, reintegration, methods, indicators, cross cultural, assessment

Introduction

In recent years, increased attention has been given to girls associated with armed forces – a population long overlooked in complex emergencies (Ager et al., 2006). For many years, the humanitarian community has had little understanding of the experiences of girls and young women conscripted into armed groups, and how well these girls reintegrated back into their communities after their escape or release. Research is now emerging that has the potential to critically inform programming and policy for this population (Veale & Stavrou, 2003; Kostelny, 2004; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Stark, 2006; Annan et al., 2008).

However, there remains a critical challenge in identifying appropriate measures of outcome for girls in such circumstances. How are concepts such as 'reintegration' and 'wellbeing' to be operationalized – made meaningful – in non Western, conflict affected cultures? For example, in Africa, where physical and mental health are often conceived of in relation to one's environment, one's ancestors and one's relationship with others, the consensus is that the use of Western derived tools and checklists to assess post conflict adjustment will often be inappropriate (Honwana, 1997; Summerfield, 1999; Ager, 2008). A focus on Western concepts of trauma may underestimate the importance of culturally constructed meaning and interpretation of war related events in other contexts (Wessells & Monteiro, 2000). Within these contexts, girls are not just passive victims, but active interpreters who

make meaning of their own experiences. Additionally, the impact an event has on a child often depends on how that child understands her experiences, her perceptions of her own motivations, and her conception of self (Wessells & Kostelny, 2008).

By employing Western measures, therefore, one is at risk of giving privilege to external accounts of wellbeing at the expense of local constructions (Ager, 1997). To avoid that risk argues for a perspective that values local understanding of adjustment and culturally grounded, community based interventions (Peddle et al., 1999). Communities *'have their own priorities for improving their lives, and their own ways of identifying impact indicators and measuring change'* (Catley et al., 2008).

In order to build an evidence base in support of these local models, increasingly efforts are being made to develop culturally grounded indicators and measures based on local concepts of wellbeing.

Bolton and Tang (2002), for example, utilised free-listing (an elicitation method used to identify salient aspects of a domain) to learn about locally relevant tasks in Uganda and Rwanda in order to create a valid tool for functional assessment. Community specific function questionnaires were developed from the free-listing exercise and used in community based surveys. Hubbard's *'brief ethnographic interview tool'* offers another alternative to developing locally relevant instruments. This technique involves using a short semi-structured interview, framed around a question, to systematically collect information on a specific topic of interest from a community or population (Hubbard & Miller, 2004)[2].

This paper presents a recent attempt to develop culturally relevant indicators of reintegration and adjustment for girls formerly associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone using a methodology of potential relevance in other settings. A brief background on the conflict in Sierra Leone and the effects it has had on the lives of girls associated with armed groups is first presented. A methodology for constructing locally relevant definitions of successful reintegration and adjustment is then described. Findings using this methodology are briefly outlined.

Background

Today, Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, consistently ranking near, or at, the bottom of UNDP's Human Development Index of 162 countries. More than 82% of the population currently lives below the poverty line. The average life expectancy is 42. The under five child mortality (270 per 1000), and maternal mortality (1800 per 100 000 live births), rates are amongst the highest in the world (UNICEF, 2008a).

Ten years of protracted civil war have significantly contributed to Sierra Leone's current hardship. Throughout the conflict, children, both *'voluntarily'*[3] and forcibly, took part as combatants. More than 10 000 children were separated from their families, including approximately 8000 children who were abducted and conscripted over the years into the various warring factions. Children as young as 12 participated in the conflict (Williamson & Cripe, 2002). Child soldiers constituted approximately one third of the rebel forces that helped to overthrow the elected government. Of these, a large number were girls who were abducted by the fighting forces and used as camp labourers, or for sexual purposes (McKay, 2005).

In the formal demobilization process, girls associated with the fighting forces were largely overlooked and excluded (Williamson, 2006). This pattern of exclusion

can be seen across many settings and conflicts. Girls have been systematically denied services as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes tend to be structured in ways that both formally, and informally, marginalize children, youth and women (Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC), 1998). In Sierra Leone, many girls who had been combatants could not pass the official *'weapons test'* where a child turns in a weapon after demonstrating her knowledge of how to disassemble and reassemble it, in order to enter the DDR process. Only 506, of an estimated 12 000 girl soldiers, participated in the official DDR process[4]. That is an estimated 4% DDR participation rate compared to an estimated 18% for boy soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Typically, these girls witnessed the murder of family members, had their homes burned to the ground, were forcibly separated from their families, and suffered rape and sexual violence at the hands of their captors. Most served as cooks, porters, labourers and bush wives. Some also participated in the fighting where they looted, killed and committed other atrocities (Stark, 2006). As a result, these girls and young women emerged from the war with both physical and emotional wounds, as well as many with small children and babies conceived with their captors. They came from the bush reporting feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and despair (Abdul-Shereef et al., 2006).

Several years on from the conflict what, for these young women, represents *'successful'* reintegration back within their communities? This was the question addressed by the current study, as a precursor to an evaluation of programme interventions that had sought to strengthen girls' adjustment and support such reintegration (Olsen et al., forthcoming).

Methods

From March to April of 2007, Columbia University's Program in Forced Migration and Health partnered with Christian Children's Fund (CCF) to engage in a participatory process with girls formerly associated with armed groups. The aim of this process was to identify key indicators of successful reintegration. The research aim was to provide a context for girls to enable them to share key understandings, regarding the experience of reintegration, and furthermore, rank indicators of successful – and unsuccessful – reintegration, in order of importance. The focus was to identify shared local understanding of what marked successful reintegration and that did not involve an exploration of individual girls' experiences. While care was taken to ensure that interviews did not reopen old wounds, the general expectation and experience was of girls' eagerness to share what had marked their successful re-entrance into community life.

The team employed a Columbia University developed *participative ranking method* (PRM) specifically for this purpose. The method combines key principles of focus group methodology and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) activities to elicit local understandings of successful reintegration[5]. The approach is flexible, can be adapted to local conditions and acknowledges the girls as experts. It allows for the recognition that *'local people are capable of identifying and measuring their own indicators of change'* (Catley, 1999).

The team visited 10 communities in the districts of Koinadugu, Bombali and Port Loko. These sites were deemed the most appropriate for our initial work and the subsequent programme evaluation because they were some of the hardest hit during the war. Additionally, they were the focal areas of

CCF's original programming for girls associated with armed groups.

Sample

The sample comprised 14 focus groups, involving a total sample of 166 girls and young women who had been with an armed group at some point during the conflict[6]. Girls came from a variety of tribes including Fullah, Madinko, and Timene. While specific details on the girls' wartime experiences were not gathered here, past research has documented the variety of wartime roles in which these girls' served; from porters to sex slaves to combatants (Stark, 2006; Abdul-Shereef et al., 2006). A wide range of girls were sought in order to provide sufficient representation of those associated with armed groups, so that shared understandings of reintegration could be elicited. For this reason they were not selected based on specific wartime roles or other socioeconomic or ethnic variables.

Girls were invited to participate from communities where CCF programmes were operating and also from neighbouring communities where girls, formerly associated with armed groups, did not have access to CCF's services. For girls in CCF's operational communities, local community *mobilizers* invited program beneficiaries to participate in the study. These mobilizers lived in the same villages as the girls, and were responsible for helping with the day-to-day support of CCF programmes. The girls, as well as other community members, selected the mobilizers, so that they were both trusted and well regarded. We relied on these mobilizers to extend a verbal invitation to participate in a convenience sample of girls who were programme beneficiaries. For girls in comparison communities, it was necessary for CCF staff to first meet with the relevant chief and explain the purpose of the study. Staff then requested the chief's assistance to gather girls between the ages of 16 and 25 to meet with the research team the following day. Upon arrival, the girls were individually engaged in private conversations to determine whether they fit inclusion criteria (i.e. whether she was ever abducted or conscripted into an armed group during the conflict). Girls were asked about their wartime experience in the context of a wider series of questions. This served the dual purpose of helping to establish rapport with the girls who were eventually selected for the study, while also masking the specific selection criteria in order to avoid potential stigmatization.

Staff selection and training

Two female Sierra Leonean staff members and two female local social work interns were trained in the methodology. The staff had worked in these villages for a number of years and therefore had extensive experience with the population. This proved to be an enormous benefit to the research. First, it allowed the team to enter the communities with the chief's and the larger community's approval. Second, many of the girls who participated in the study already knew and liked the CCF staff. This previously established trust and rapport increased our confidence that the girls were honest and forthcoming in their responses.

Training lasted two days and focused on participatory interview techniques and a structured review of the participative ranking methodology protocol. Training also involved extensive roleplay. Discussions on working with potentially sensitive subject matter and adhering to the '*do no harm*' imperative (Anderson, 1999; UNICEF, 2008b) were emphasized. These discussions allowed both the local and the expatriate staff and researchers to reflect on the short

and long term effects that the work might have on the girls and the larger communities. The team worked together to create strategies to ensure proceedings were grounded in culturally appropriate language and action. When discussing which local language should be used, it was decided that Krio would be most appropriate for the group discussions.

Protocol

Groups ranged from 9 to 16 participants and were held in private areas, away from the main activities of the village. The facilitator began the encounter with a local song or a prayer, in which all of the girls were invited to participate. She would then explain that the aim of the meeting was to understand the experiences of girls who had returned home after the conflict, and how a person would know whether a girl had reintegrated into the community and was *'doing well'*. Facilitators utilized the same language across the different settings when inviting the girls to share their understanding of what it meant for a girl to be well integrated. Probe questions were routinely asked, such as *'what makes people like a girl in this community after she has returned home from being with an armed group?'* and *'how can you tell that a girl is doing well?'* Girls were encouraged to speak freely and it was explained that who said what would not be recorded. It should also be noted that at no time during these meetings did the facilitator probe sensitive issues, such as the girls' sexual histories during the war. The conversation focused on critical events, practices and experiences that have marked the girls' successful reintegration since the end of the war, more than seven years ago.

While the girls were engaged in an active discussion about what it meant to be *'doing well'* and *'well integrated'*, a note-taker recorded the (spontaneously) listed characteristics, qualities and behaviours that were identified by the group. The discussion continued until 10 specific indicators were suggested, or until there were no additional suggestions by girls.

The facilitator then asked the girls to select local objects to represent each of the indicators they had suggested. Over the course of discussions, selected objects included stones, sticks, leaves, a shoe, etc. The facilitator picked up each object in turn and confirmed with the girls which indicator that object represented. The objects were left in a pile on the ground in front of the facilitator.

The facilitator then asked the group to come forward and agree among themselves which indicator was the most significant to a girl's ability to reintegrate. The object representing that indicator was placed at one end of a line drawn in the ground by the facilitator. The group continued ordering the objects, with the most significant indicator at one end of the line, and the least significant indicator at the other. The facilitator asked the group to verbally justify their placements, which frequently led to lively, animated discussions. In this way, the facilitator aided discussion, but did not direct the process. Readjustment of objects by participants was encouraged, until the group reached consensus on the priorities of the indicators. Throughout the process of placement and readjustment, the note-taker recorded key statements used in negotiating the positioning of objects.

As part of the process of piloting this new methodology, the procedure described above was adopted for 11 of the 14 group discussions. On 13 occasions, an analogous process was adopted to elicit indicators of *'poor reintegration.'* Girls were asked how a community would know that a girl was *not*

well integrated after returning from the bush. In nine of these groups, indicators were similarly assigned to objects and ranked in order from most to least significant. In three of the groups, *only* indicators of poor reintegration were elicited, and in four of the groups, *only* indicators of good reintegration were elicited. In the groups where both procedures were adopted, the team alternately began with considering indicators of '*good*' reintegration and indicators of '*poor*' reintegration.

Results

Spontaneously listed indicators

The number of groups in which indicators were spontaneously mentioned are indicated in Tables 1 and 2. It is apparent that for the most part '*poor*' reintegration was seen as the inverse of '*good*' integration.

Girls emphasized the importance of being able to earn money to provide basic necessities for themselves, and their children, as a key indicator of reintegration and wellbeing. When prompted, girls articulated some of the different and preferred forms of income generation. Petty trade, for example, was considered to be more lucrative than collect-

ing and selling firewood. This linkage, between socioeconomic status and wellbeing supports previous findings from other African contexts (Akello et al., 2006), emphasizing once again the multidimensional nature of mental health and adjustment. In the ranking exercise, often there was animated discussion about the importance of this indicator. Girls argued that income generating activities were a means to some of the other named indicators of success, including good health, ability to attend school, ability to eat well and even a good marriage. As a result of these active dialogues, the income generating activity indicator often moved to the front of the line, ahead of the others.

The majority of group discussions also identified marriage as a critical aspect of being accepted in their community. As previous research with this population has documented, '*marriage is the norm for older Sierra Leonean girls, who regard being unmarried as a form of social death*' (Abdul-Shereef et al., 2006). Girls returning from armed groups were considered undesirable partners, and formerly married girls were often rejected by their husbands when they returned home.

Table 1. Frequency of suggested indicators of 'good' reintegration

Indicator	Number of groups where indicator was mentioned
Is engaged in income-generating activity	10
Married/has a good marriage	10
Goes/has gone to school	10
Has children	7
Good health	7
Eats well	6
Emotional and/or financial support from family	5
Is invited to join community events and celebrations	4
Is invited to women's secret society events	4

Community members also feared and rejected the girls, as was reflected in our group discussions. One girl described the way community members regarded young women who had not married with dislike; for *'panting behind other women's husbands'.*

At the same time, a number of groups emphasized that marriage alone was not a sufficient indicator of successful reintegration, and that the marriage needed to be a *'good'* one. A good marriage was described as one in which a husband provided for his wife and children, treated them with kindness and did not engage in domestic abuse. To be married, then, is also to be respected and viewed as a valued member of one's family[7].

Having children was also frequently mentioned as an important social achievement. As one girl commented; *'you cannot be present at a birthing if you haven't birthed yourself'.* However, some groups offered qualifying statements, noting that it was not good to have a child before marriage, and that it was bad to leave school due to pregnancy.

One of the most frequently cited indicators of poor reintegration was exclusion from *bondu,* the women's secret society. This society is responsible for various rites and rituals – from female circumcision to traditional healing practices – and is perceived as a key social support structure for most females living in villages. In many of these villages, girls noted the social importance of being included in activities organized by the society. One girl described rejection from *bondu* in the following way; *'if you have seen blood in the war, they [the bondu society women] are scared to have you in the bush. They think that if you see blood [from a female initiation ceremony], you will go back to your old ways from the war'.*

A related indicator of poor integration back into community life was *'bad behaviour'.* This indicator was described by the girls as; *'acting like you were still in the bush [during the war]'.* Groups listed countless examples of bad behaviour. Examples included: thieving, showing elders disrespect, engaging in prostitution, gossiping, acting idly and refusing to help with farm work or household chores,

Table 2. Frequency of suggested indicators of 'poor' reintegration

Indicator	Number of groups where indicator was mentioned
No income generating activities	10
Unable to get a husband/bad marriage	8
Not invited to women's secret society events	8
Behave badly (*'like they are still in the bush'*)	7
Unable to have children	6
Does not have good clothing	5
Unable to afford good food	5
No parents to care for you	5
Not invited to (or refuse to join) community activities	5
Poor health	5
'Head not steady' (mentally unstable)	5

Table 3. Median rankings of indicators of 'good' reintegration

Indicator	Median ranking
Emotional and/or financial support from family	1
Good health	2
Is invited to join community events and celebrations	3
Is engaged in income generating activity	3
Goes/has gone to school	3.5
Eats well	4
Has children	5
Married/has a good marriage	5
Is invited to women's secret society events	6.5

using '*abusive language*', quarrelling and using drugs[8].

Ranking of indicators
Although '*spontaneous listing*' of ideas provides a useful measure of the saliency of particular indicators, ranking, i.e. the conscious ordering of such issues with respect to their perceived importance, arguably provides a more reliable basis of relative significance. Table 3 lists indicators by the median (average) rank assigned to them in the 11 groups ranking indicators of '*good*' integration. Table 4 lays out indicators by median rank for '*poor*' reintegration.

Of all of the reintegration indicators, having family to care and provide for the returned girls was the single top-ranked indicator. As one girl explained; '*if you don't have parents, you won't feel good. You will receive no encouragement.*' Many girls explained how their reintegration had been aided by family support. One girl explained; '*my parents were here when I returned. They offered their support by collecting firewood and selling it so that they could feed me with the proceeds.*' Another girl shared; '*my parents were here when I first came [back] and they encouraged me to forget about the past.*'

As is clear from these examples, families provided critical emotional and financial support. Girls also spoke of the lack of family support as an impediment to reintegration. One group affirmed; '*if there are no parents there to care for a child, that child will die.*' A girl

Table 4. Median rankings of indicators of 'poor' reintegration

Indicator	Median ranking
No income generating activities	3
Unable to get a husband/bad marriage	3
Behave badly ('*like they are still in the bush*')	3
No parents to care for you	3
Unable to have children	4.5
'*Head not steady*' (mentally unstable)	4.5
Not invited to (or refuse to join) community activities	5.5
Not invited to women's secret society events	6.5

shared her own experience, explaining; '*I never saw my parents again. I had nothing in the home, my child needed medicine and I couldn't afford it.*'

Another highly ranked indicator was whether or not girls were invited to join communal events and celebrations, such as weddings and naming ceremonies. As one girl explained; '*we were excluded from all of the activities in the community – even the farm work. We were not invited to the community meetings to plan the farm work for the season.*' A girl from another group shared; '*we were not invited to join in events in the community. For example, one time there was a witchhunt in our community. They sacrificed animals to help find the witch, but we were not allowed to be a part of this. They said we were stinking.*'

Aside from being excluded from formal group gatherings, girls described countless examples of being ridiculed, called names such as '*rebel*' and being excluded from other girls their age.

Another indicator that was consistently ranked highly was eating well. When probed about what '*eating well*' meant, girls shared a variety of responses. For some girls, eating well meant being able to afford local rice, which is more expensive and was perceived to be better than imported rice. For other girls, eating well meant being able to afford rice at all. Girls spoke of having to supplement their diet, or their babies' diets, with green bananas, palm wine, bush yams and other items that were considered far less desirable and healthy than rice. Some girls spoke about '*eating well*' in terms of the number of meals a day. Generally, this meant the number of times a day that girls had a meal that contained rice. Some girls named specialty items that indicated a person was eating well, including items like beef, fish and the local palm oil.

Finally, girls noted the importance of '*good health*'. Many of the girls mentioned health problems that they had brought back with them from the bush. These included rashes and other skin diseases, sexually transmitted infections and stomach problems. Girls noted that, in addition to their own health problems, the health and wellbeing of their children was of critical concern. The health indicator was often mentioned alongside '*eating well*' and being '*engaged in income generating activities*', both of which were offered as pathways to '*good health*.'

Conclusion

We have outlined a flexible methodology for identifying culturally relevant indictors of reintegration. In the current situation, it served as a basis for eliciting indicators of adjustment and reintegration. This provided rich insight into the factors that were perceived to shape the experiences of girls returning from armed groups in Sierra Leone. These indicators then served as the basis for an evaluation of CCF's programme for girls formerly associated with armed groups and fighting forces. This programme has been widely hailed as an exemplary intervention in post conflict programming for girls formerly associated with armed groups and fighting forces. However, quantitative efforts to measure programme impact have been limited by the absence of a rigorous, yet culturally grounded, approach. The use of the *participative ranking methodology* in Sierra Leone laid the foundation for a rigorous evaluation of programme impact, based on indicators developed though open ended and flexible inquiry.

Because convenience sampling was used to identify participants, it is possible that our results may not reflect views typical of most girls in the area. However, we are

reasonably confident that they do so, given the consistency of rankings across groups. Furthermore, the indicators developed on the basis of this research have been proved in subsequent research (Olsen et al., forthcoming) to be sufficiently sensitive to identify differences between those receiving interventions, and those who had not.

This pilot did not seek out the understanding of other stakeholders, but it would be possible in other trials to do so, and to triangulate the responses. The understanding of the girls may be different, for example, from those adopted by NGOs and other agencies. This difference needs to be addressed when identifying programme goals and strategies.

The use of the participatory method described above resulted in culturally grounded indicators that could then be used to measure girls' reintegration in a valid and reliable manner. The strengths of this method include its potential to access local understanding in a meaningful way, that yields quantitative data signifying programme impact. The use of spontaneous listing and participative ranking exercises within a focus group framework promises utility in circumstances where local constructions and their relative salience need to be accessed. This work is a contribution to developing a range of methods that may be useful for programme evaluation, striking an important balance between systematic evaluation and the richness of qualitative inquiry (Program on Forced Migration & Health (PFMH), 2008).

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[2] For further references and methodologies, see Hart et al. 2006 and UNICEF, 2008b.

[3] While many children are said to join *voluntarily*, it is speculated that these youths have few alternatives to involvement in armed conflict. Many enlist as a means of survival after family, social and economic structures collapse during conflict. Others may join due to poverty and lack of work or educational opportunities. Still others are abducted and forcibly employed as fighters, porters, cooks and sex slaves.

[4] For a broader discussion of the limitations of formal child DDR processes, see Stark, L., Boothby, N., Ager, A. Children and Fighting Forces: Ten Years on From Cape Town. *Disasters: The Journal of Disaster Studies Policy and Management*, (in press) and Akello G, Richters, A. & Reis, R. (2006) Reintegration of former child soldiers in northern Uganda: coming to terms with children's agency and accountability. *Intervention* 4(3):229–243.

[5] For further readings on focus group methodology and participatory rural appraisal, see Morgan, D. (2007) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage and Chambers, R. (1983). *Rural development: Putting the last first*. London: Longman. "*Practical action*," pp. 190-218.

[6] The case definition for a girl who had been with an armed group was in keeping with the Paris Principles (2007), which defines a child associated with armed groups and fighting forces as, "...*any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighter, cooks, porters,*

o a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities."

[7] The complexities around marriage in this setting also has been examined in other articles including Stark, L. (2006) Cleansing the wounds of war: an examination of traditional healing, psychosocial health and reintegration in Sierra Leone. *Intervention*, 4(3) and Abdul-Shereef, C., Jonah, D., Hayes, M., Kostelny, K., & Wessells, M. (2006). *The reintegration of formerly abducted girl mothers in Sierra Leone: Sealing the Past, Facing the Future.* Invited presentation at Meeting the Challenges: Interagency Workshop on Reintegration of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in West and Central Africa conducted in Senegal, February 7 – 10, 2006.

[8] For a more in depth articulation of why girls engaged in such behavior, and how it was contained, readers are directed to Stark, L. (2006) Cleansing the wounds of war: an examination of traditional healing, psychosocial health and reintegration in Sierra Leone. *Intervention*, 4(3).

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