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CHILD-FRIENDLY SPACES PROVIDE CRUCIAL SAFE ZONES FOR REFUGEE KIDS

*Paul Lagasse
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Right now, instead of playing games and going to school with their friends, an estimated 20 million children and adolescents are living in makeshift camps far away from their homes, communities and loved ones. They are refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) forced by war, natural and manmade disasters, persecution and economic collapse to abandon their childhoods. In the past decade alone, an estimated 60 million children have had to live this way.

Many of them have witnessed death and violence and are still traumatized by their experiences. In the camps, they are vulnerable to malnutrition, disease, sexual predation, kidnapping and abandonment. For many of them, the camps will be the only place to call home for years. As a result of what they have seen and experienced, these children have been forced to grow up many years too soon in an environment of fear and mistrust. Global Impact member charities have adopted many innovative efforts to help refugee and IDP children and adolescents to recover their childhoods.

Safe Zones for Children

In the wake of natural disasters such as the Sichuan Province earthquake, Cyclones Sidr and Nargis and the 2004 southeast Asian tsunami or conflicts such as the war in Iraq and ethnic violence in central Africa, member charities have supplemented their emergency aid to refugees and IDPs by constructing or designating buildings, tents and even sometimes simply a tree in a clearing as safe zones for children.

In these places children can:

- Have school lessons under the watchful eye of qualified teachers;
- Play games and sports guided by adult



Photo: The IRC

Girls crocheting and playing games in Darfur. The IRC has set up special child-friendly spaces in camps for



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coaches;

families fleeing the ongoing violence in Darfur.

- Express themselves through art, song, dance and cultural activities;
- Talk through their experiences with trained counselors;
- Receive essential health and nutrition training from health professionals.

In these safe zones, called child-friendly spaces, children and adolescents can make new friends, reestablish lines of trust with grownups and once again find a sense of security and routine in their daily lives—things that will help them grow up to be healthy, self-sustaining adults.

Child-friendly spaces also serve as a locus for other relief activities related to children. Charities use them to help reunite lost children with their families, to provide medical services and to provide nutritious meals.

Making Child-Friendly Spaces Possible

To accomplish all this, member charities try whenever possible to staff child-friendly spaces with people from the local community who are familiar with the customs that apply to children. They work with the local, regional and national governments to secure supplies and equipment and to advocate on behalf of the children. Charities also coordinate with law enforcement officials to improve protection for refugee and IDP children and to pursue and punish the criminals who exploit, harm or even kill them.

When charities are forced to suspend their community development programs due to intensifying conflicts, natural obstacles or government intervention, child-friendly spaces serve as a convenient place to restart or continue programs for children. Because they make use of existing structures, charity staff can set up child-friendly spaces quickly.

Global Impact member charities have built hundreds of child-friendly spaces in camps around the world, but to reach even more of the 20 million children in refugee and IDP camps, they need your support. These young disaster survivors have already experienced enough trauma for a lifetime. Thanks to child-friendly spaces, millions of them now have a much better chance of living the rest of that lifetime as healthy, well-adjusted adults.

Member Charities That Provide Child-Friendly Spaces

Several Global Impact member charities that work with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) provide special services to children, including safe spaces where children can play and learn free from the stresses of their extraordinary circumstances. Here are some of their recent accomplishments.

American Refugee Committee: In addition to providing necessities such as food and water, shelter and medical services to refugees in camps around the world, ARC establishes youth centers and safe places in the camps where children can begin to rebuild their routines around school, activities and games. ARC also provides regular medical care and health education to children and gives children a say in decisions that affect them.

International Rescue Committee: The IRC's Child & Youth Protection and Development Program offers community-based programs for more than 35,000 children and youth in over 20 countries in Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa. Programs include education, counseling, birth registration, family reunification and community reintegration, healthcare and rehabilitation of former child soldiers.


Plan USA: Plan USA works with refugee and displaced children in many countries. For example, Plan provides care and advocacy services for children and adolescents in Colombia, cares for 10,000 children in IDP camps in Kenya and operates child protection networks in IDP camps around the capital of East Timor (Timor-Leste).

Save the Children and United States Fund for UNICEF: In Bangladesh, following Cyclone Sidr in November 2007, Save the Children and UNICEF teamed up to construct nearly 200 child-friendly spaces in cyclone shelters, schools and other structures to serve over 20,000 children whose families were still recovering from the disaster. The child-friendly spaces serve anywhere from 50 to 200 children and are run by trained volunteers. They offer hot

food and potable water as well as a place to play and study. Ultimately, the two organizations will complete 380 such spaces throughout the country.

United States Fund for UNICEF: In addition to its work in Bangladesh mentioned above, UNICEF is also constructing and staffing child-friendly spaces in Myanmar, using tents as temporary schools until the local school buildings can be rebuilt—an estimated 3,000 schools that serve over 50,000 students. UNICEF is also building child-friendly spaces in Iraq for children and women whose homes have been destroyed in the ongoing violence there. These centers offer psychosocial counseling, provide help to reunite families, assist children who have been detained and educate children about the dangers of mines and other explosive devices.

World Vision International: World Vision has set up child-friendly spaces worldwide following natural disasters such as the earthquakes in China and Indonesia and cyclones in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It has also opened such spaces in conflict areas like South Darfur and Lebanon. The centers serve as temporary schools, offer sports and games, provide counseling services, stage cultural activities and serve as medical centers for the displaced children, many of whom have been orphaned as a result of the catastrophes.

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