

**Enhancing Personal Agency and Community
Resilience among War-Affected Young Mothers
and their Children in Northern Uganda,
Liberia and Sierra Leone**

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Aims of this presentation

Through exploration of a participatory action research project that aimed to support young mothers' formerly associated with armed forces/groups and other war-affected young mothers in their social reintegration, to ask:

Can individual resilience be developmentally induced through the mobilisation of material & social resources close to an individual?

Can resilient systems be mobilised around individuals so that resilience is emergent in both *the individual* and *the community*?

The Context



What is 'Resilience'?

- Individual resilience refers to the processes of or capacity for positive adaptation during or following exposure to adverse experiences that have the potential to destroy the successful functioning or development of the person
 - (Masten & Obradovic, 2008, p 2).
- Community resilience is a process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of adaptation in adversity-affected communities
 - (Norris et al. 2013)
- In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, to experience well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in a culturally meaningful way
 - (Ungar, 2008, p225)



Resilient Systems

Exercise of Individual Agency through Collective Efficacy

Bandura self-efficacy theory

Expanded to include

- *Proxy agency* occurs where people:
 - “do not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their lives.....they seek their well-being and security through the exercise of proxy agency. In this socially mediated mode of agency, people try to get other people who have expertise or wield influence and power to act on their behalf to get the outcomes they desire” (p 75).

The Challenge(s)

- War –affected young mothers, in particular those returning from armed groups and their children have been discriminated against/marginalized/were invisible within DDR processes & their rights disregarded.
- No one knew what ‘effective social reintegration’ meant for returning young mothers; agencies found that what they were doing with respect to young mothers and their children was not working.
- *Project objective: To engage formerly-abducted and other war-affected young mothers in a process of reflecting on their situation, in order for them to develop solutions to the problems they face so they may be effective agents in their and their children’s social reintegration*

Introducing the PAR



“Participatory Action Research ..aims at promoting change; ... and in which members of the group being studied participate as partners in all phases of the research, including design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination.”

(American Journal of Public Health, 2008)

Our mantra: “If the girls are not doing it, it is not PAR”

Who are the PAR members?

Liberia:

- Save the Children, UK in Liberia
- THINK

Sierra Leone:

- Christian Brothers
- Christian Children's Fund
- Council of Churches in Sierra Leone
- National Network for Psychosocial Care

Northern Uganda:

- Caritas, Gulu Archdiocese
- Concerned Parents Association
- Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO)
- World Vision

Plus academic partners in each country.

Funding

- The Rockefeller Foundation (NYC/ Italy), Oak Foundation and Pro Victimis Foundation (Geneva), UNICEF West Africa, & Compton Foundation (CA/USA),
- Irish Aid.



Demographics of Participants

How many participants?

- Liberia = 111, average age 20
- Sierra Leone = 266, average age 22
- Uganda = 281, average age 18

How many participants formerly associated?

- 33% vulnerable community girls
- 67% formerly associated

Demographics of Participants

Who do the participants live with?

- 273 (41%) live with boyfriends or husbands
- 234 (36%) live with parents or guardians
- 36 (5%) live alone

How many children did they have at the start?

- 93 had only 1 child
- 191 had 2 children
- 107 had 3 children
- 38 had 4 children or more

The PAR Process

Community Outreach

- Identify communities with strong need.
- Meet with community leaders to solicit interest.
- Hold community meetings to describe project.
- Work with advisers and leaders to identify girls

Outreach to Young Mothers

- Follow up initial recommendations with home visits.
- Hold group meetings to describe project.
- Ask young mothers to invite others for inclusion in the project.

- **Step 1:** Young mothers gather information about their situation and needs. Methods include weekly meetings, drama, family discussions, community consultation.
- **Step 2:** In their groups, young mothers identify, prioritise and implement social action plans with community support.



- **Step 3:** Girls learn to analyse their information and share it with community through discussions and community dramas to inform others about their lives, educate other girls, and build positive community relations.
- **Step 4:** Girls document and learn from their activities



How the project facilitated development in adaptive systems

- Working in and through their groups initially mobilised
 - Group-institutional-community systems
 - Health & stress systems
 - Self-regulation, arousal modulation, self-direction, response inhibition systems
 - Problem-solving & executive function systems



Implementing Social Actions

- Community dramas
- Petty trading (charcoal, vending, etc)
- Hair braiding
- Cultural dances for parties/events
- Group gardening
- Goat rearing/Piggery
- Nursery school
- Agriculture
- Community cleaning
- Help at funerals
- Home visits to peers facing difficulty



How the project facilitated development in adaptive systems

- Mastery and reward systems
 - Participation, decision-making, ownership
 - Robustness-the ability to withstand stress
 - Diversity of activities
 - Safe to fail
 - New learning & innovation
 - Interdependence

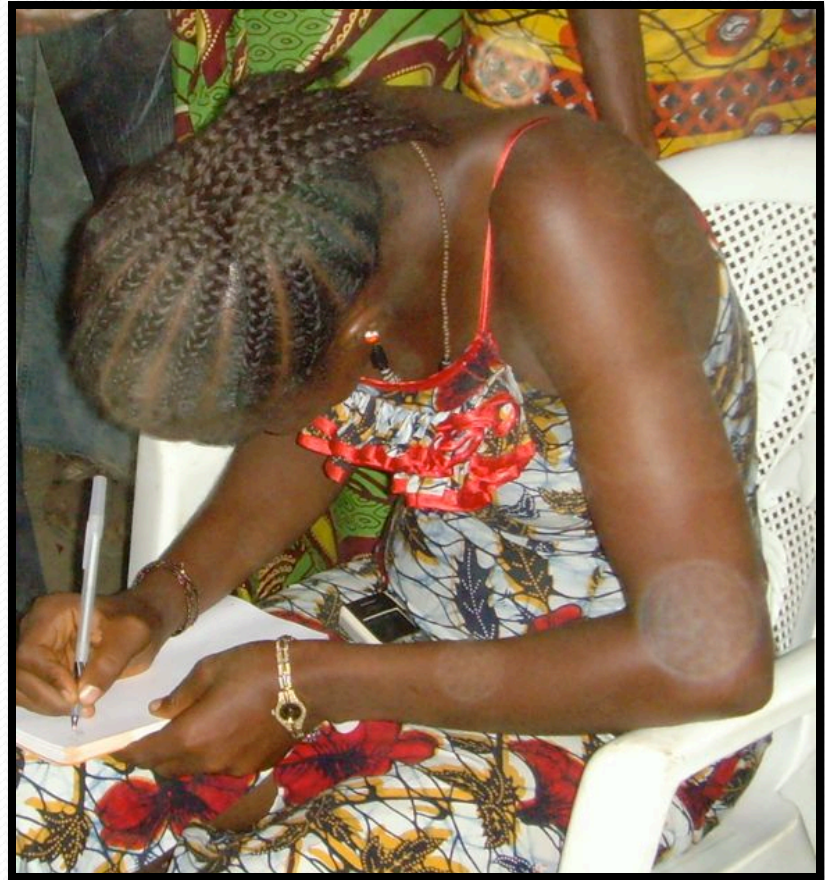


From individual agency to community resilience



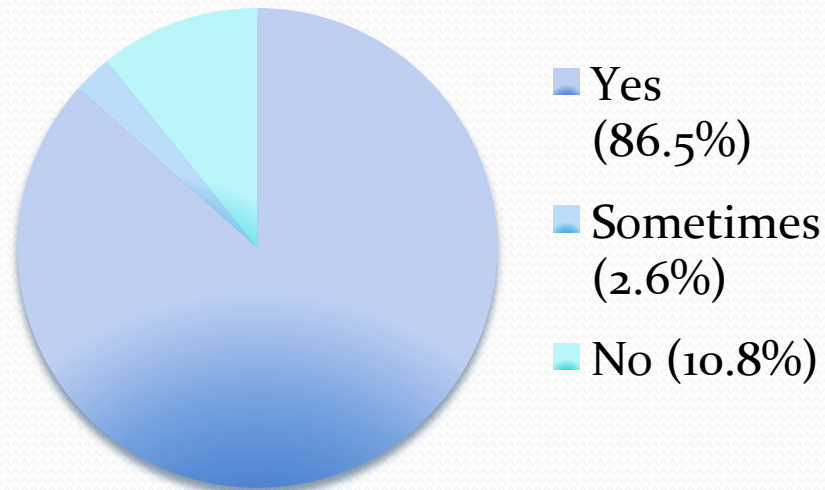
Other important systems

- The reflective system
 - (minds to minds)
 - A core 'system' was the project structure and reflective capacities this generated
 - Organisers, team members, agencies, community advisers, community leaders and informal supports, national academics, visits to each other's sites, international team meetings, note keeping and reports
 - Up, down and across information flows



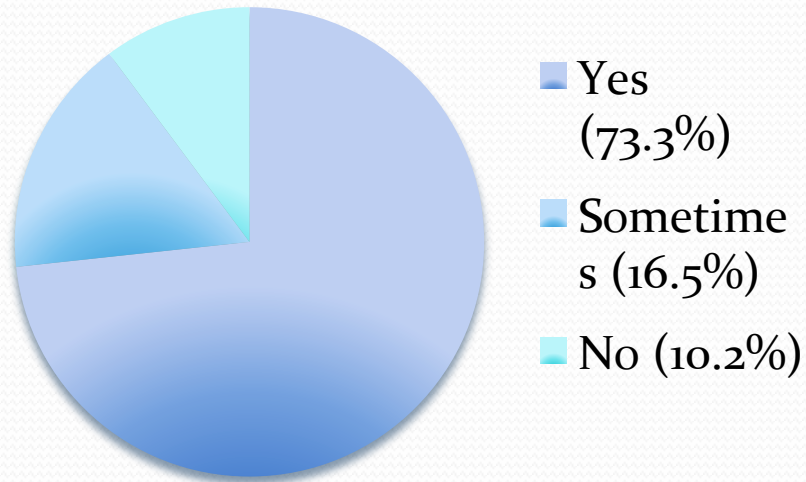
Survey results: Impact on children

Involvement in the project has made me and my children more liked or loved by my family.

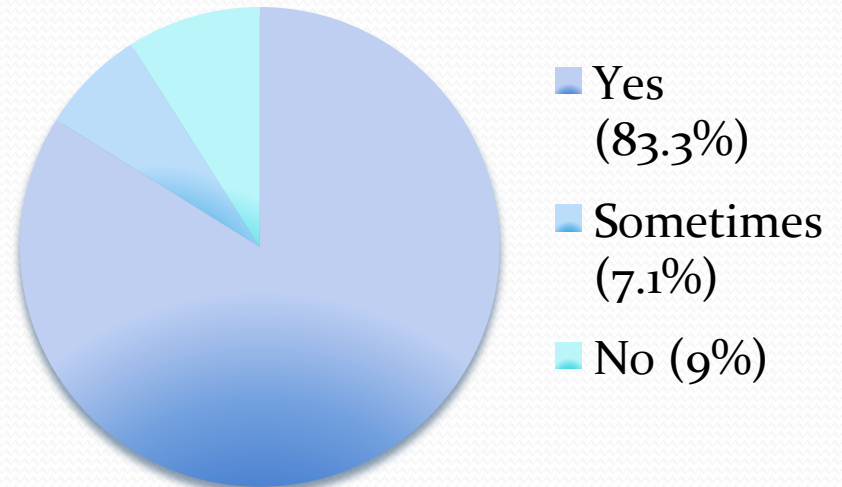


Survey Results: Impact on children

I feel I am able to be supportive to my family by buying basic necessities.

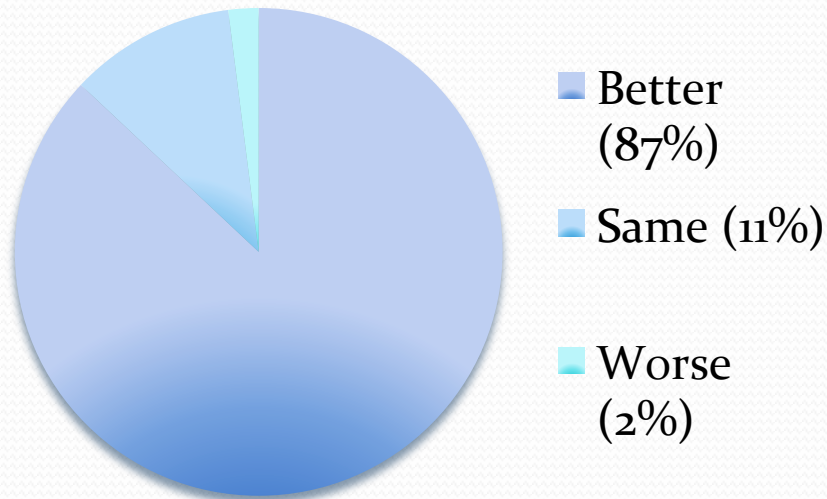


I can take better care of my child than I could before I joined the group.

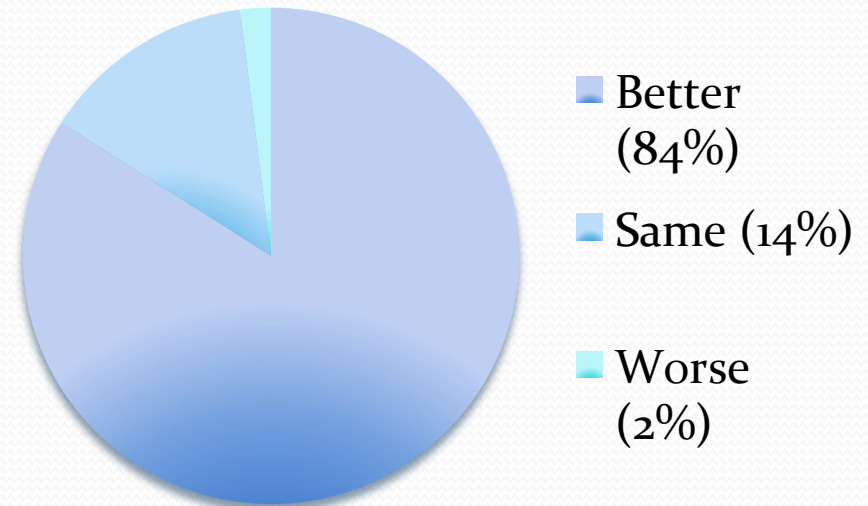


Survey Results: Impact on children

Has your health changed since you joined the project?

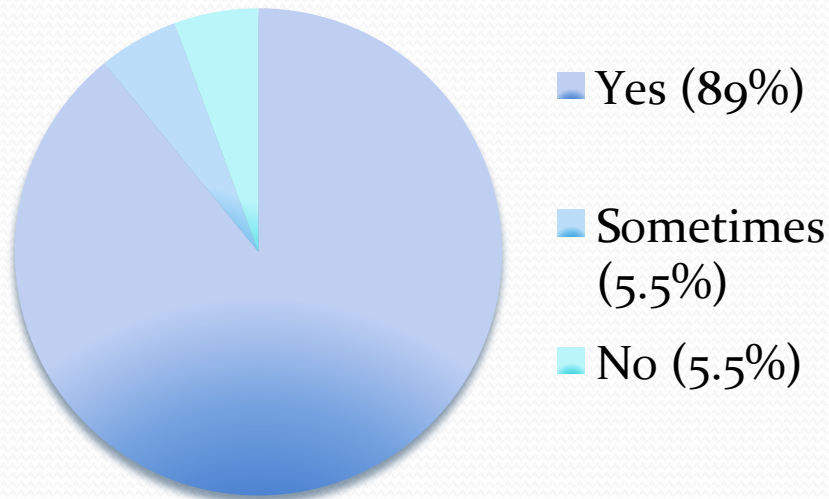


How has the health of your child or children changed since you joined the project?

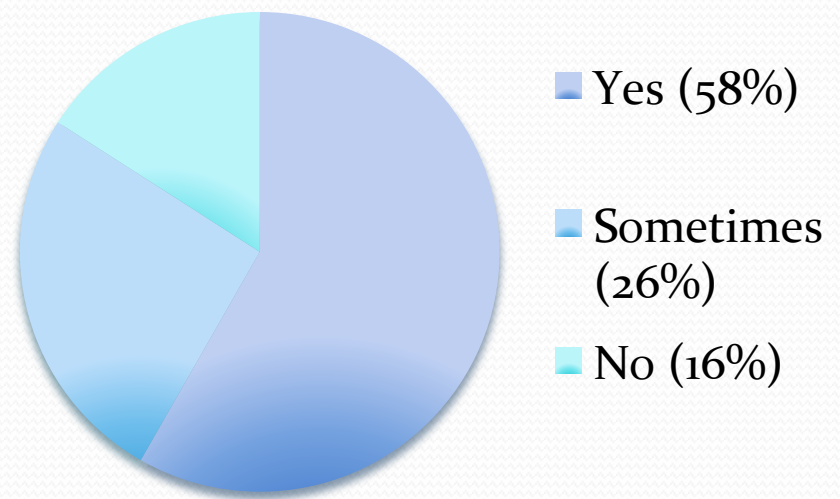


Survey Results: Stigma, discrimination, rejection

I feel more respected and supported by my community.



Through the group, I help other people in the community.



Conclusion



Thank you!

We thank all the participants in this project.

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