

ISSUES OF FAMILY UNITY, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Family unity

Up to 100,000 children are separated from their birth families – and the number is increasing (March 2002)

- Approximately 4,650 separated children were registered in 17 provinces during the last six months of 2001

"The number of children who are separated from their families as a result of sudden and disorganised displacement is increasing markedly, most notably in the Provinces of Moxico, Bié, Huambo and Kuanza Sul. Approximately 4,650 separated children were registered in 17 provinces during the last six months of 2001. Partners estimate that more than 100,000 children are currently separated from their birth families throughout the country. The condition of separated children is critical in many areas, including Luena, where orphanages and feeding centres are overwhelmed by steady influxes of newly arrived youth, many of whom are malnourished. Support for family tracing and care for separated children remains inadequate." (UN OCHA 7 March 2002)

Conscription means women often flee their homes with children but no men (November 2001)

- Newly displaced women describe how as soon as government forces recapture a village from UNITA, men of all ages are targets for military recruitment

" 'Once you join the army, that's forever,' Pedro says. 'You die there.'"

Pedro, 26, is one of the many young Angolan men who are worried by a fresh initiative by the Angolan Armed Forces (FAA) to recruit new soldiers.

In the last few weeks, radio announcements have been instructing young men aged between 18 and 20 to report to military bases around the country to register for military service, as is normal at this time of year.

But the FAA also have the legal right to conscript men up to the age of 30 who have not previously served for two years. Many young men fear that even those who have served their time could still be forced to put on uniforms.

The army has recently stepped up its operations in the eastern province of Moxico, saying that the aim is to capture Jonas Savimbi and to destroy the last UNITA forces in a region where the rebels are well established. Young men who hear this worry that it will be a signal for the military to make a particular effort this year - after 26 years of war - to get more of them into the army.

Whether or not this is actually happening remains unclear. The conscription laws in Angola are never applied consistently.

Women arriving in highland cities such as Kuito, after fighting has forced them to flee their villages, have frequently made the journey with children but no men. They tell how as soon as the FAA recapture a village from UNITA, the men are seen as fair game for recruitment, however old they may be. UNITA are

also known to forcibly conscript, and have also seized children for military service." (IRIN 23 November 2001)

Displacement has changed traditional family roles (2001)

- Following displacement, men remain the principal decision-makers, and undertake new income-generating activities
- Women often become the main agents of social and family cohesion, and assume numerous additional responsibilities
- Children are often withdrawn from school to help with domestic and agricultural work

"Communities have proven highly instrumental in reducing vulnerabilities by transforming social roles within the family. Although the role of men is often eclipsed in IDP settings, they remain the principal decision-makers. Men help with land and charcoal preparation and are responsible for constructing community buildings and tending livestock. Men also procure agricultural inputs. In addition, men brew and sell alcohol and where possible, fish and hunt. Following displacement, Angolan women assume additional responsibilities and often become the main agents of social and family cohesion. In most IDP settings, women are responsible for food procurement and preparation, water collection and shelter construction. Women care for the children and elderly and tend sick members of the family. Women help to prepare and maintain the land, collect firewood and also prepare charcoal. Women sell both food and non-food items (NFI) in the market and are responsible for procuring family assets, including clothing and cooking pots. Young girls are often withdrawn from school to assist their mothers and other women in the family and boys are sometimes sent to the fields, particularly during peak periods of planting and harvesting." (UN November 2001)

Displacement can have severe negative impact on individual and communal identity (2001)

- Different age groups and sexes affected differently by displacement
- Difficult memories of flight create problems in adapting to new place of refuge
- IDPs express strong feelings of loss of identity, common kinship values and social function

Excerpt taken from Andrade study conducted in 1996-1997:

"Displacement affected the different age groups and the sexes differently. Some young people were born at the places of refuge (the place or area to which displaced people fled), and some arrived there when very young, so do not remember the things that happened. Older people do remember and their memories are negative: deaths of immediate family members, hunger illness or rape. These recollections create difficulties in adapting to their places of refuge.

Men older than eighteen have quite detailed memories, and can talk about the reasons and conditions for their displacement and the decision to go. Women of this age group have more selective memories, and focus on the problems that their own families experienced. They follow the opinions and decisions of their families and other men in the family, normally the older ones. Old men and women are cautious about stating their opinions, but their memories are strongly marked by feelings of loss: cattle, goods, strength, values, power, dignity, and status. Their age means that they have little hope of reconstructing their lives before they die, and this forms part of their sense of loss.

Displaced people, particularly those older than thirty, are clearly disillusioned by the breakdown of stability which came after the 1992 elections, shattering the peace which had been created by the Bicesse Accord. They display pessimism about the future, and deep distrust. Most of them feel a betrayal of the confidence that they had placed in the institutions and in the peace process. They feel used and kicked around between interests that are not theirs, and which they cannot influence.

[...]

The people who left their places of origin under fire were completely disoriented – they had faced death in the most immediate sense possible. But death also took other forms: abandoning children during the journey, leaving the wounded, untended, unsuccessful births, and death from hunger. These had a large psychological impact, as people had to make absurd choices that left them feeling guilty. A factor that weighed heavily psychologically and caused grief was 'leaving the dead without even burying them'. Older people showed the greatest anguish about this, since they have a particular respect for ancestors and for death rituals. Younger people see this as less important than a birth when on the move (with the subsequent forced abandonment of the baby), or an attack in which many people died, or hunger and exhaustion.

Two kinds of loss were mentioned, and were the source of strong feelings. The first kind is the loss of material items that sustain people (a guarantee of the future) or show wealth (and confirm status). The second kind refers to the loss of places, meaning spaces where people were protected by the family, where there was a solid nucleus of common kinship values and where each person's social function was clearly defined and respected. Even if these values and functions were not always so easy and clear, their loss is keenly felt when they were abandoned unwillingly. This is true whether people moved during fighting or during more stable periods." (Andrade 2000, sect. 4)

For more information on coping strategies of internally displaced persons, see Filomena Andrade study in Communities and Reconstruction in Angola as well as Robson and Roque report on social support in peri-urban environments, both available from the Development Workshop - Angola.