

Ensuring Safer Learning Environments in Uganda's Refugee Settlements

Programming effective education initiatives in crisis and conflict environments requires an accurate picture of the risks to student and school personnel safety. These risks often change quickly, given the dynamic nature of crisis and conflict environments. A rapid assessment that focuses on making actionable recommendations can therefore help organizations.

In late 2018, Advocacy for Child Relief Uganda (ACRUG), a local NGO based in Kampala, Uganda, completed a pilot study of primary schools in Uganda's Kiryandongo refugee settlement as part of their Safe Schools Program. The study, undertaken as a partner initiative with ECCN, employed ECCN's Safer Learning Environments (SLE) Assessment Toolkit. This toolkit, which provides the methodology and tools necessary for quantitative or qualitative assessments, helps improve program design and adaptation related to overcoming risks to safe learning. ACRUG used their M&E staff to conduct the assessment and determine the nature and extent of risks related to school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and trauma experienced by boys and girls with and without disabilities.

Uganda as a whole faces a grave refugee crisis. Between December 2016 and May 2017, the country's refugee population nearly doubled, reaching more than 1.38 million, largely owing to the crisis in South Sudan. Between January and February 2018, more than 40,000 refugees entered Uganda from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

ACRUG studied four schools in the settlement, administering quantitative surveys of 335 boy and girl students between the ages of 8–18 and 39 members of the teaching and non-teaching staff. They adapted and contextualized the surveys from those provided in ECCN's SLE Assessment Toolkit, which selects and synthesizes questions from eight different quantitative tools, measuring various risks to safety in learning environments.

This pilot of the SLE Assessment Toolkit provided crucial evidence about the pervasiveness of violence among refugee children, something researchers had suspected but did not grasp the scope of, both in school and on the way to and from school. The findings demonstrated that the problem was even more significant than suspected for both boys and girls. For example, in the last school term, emotional and verbal violence was very high among students (87.6%), followed by corporal punishment (81.1%), and sexual violence victimization (32.5%). Among the students interviewed, 93% reported some form of SRGBV in the last term.

Other findings include:

- Emotional violence, perpetrated mainly by students, was higher among upper primary students (91.3%) than lower primary students (83.1%).
- Boys and girls reported high levels of corporal punishment (82.5% for boys and 79.7% for girls).
- Sexual violence victimization was higher among girls than boys (41.2% for girls and 23.7% for boys). Girls in upper primary reported higher rates of sexual violence victimization (41.8% for upper primary and 18% for lower primary).
- The perpetrators of sexual violence were mainly other students. Most students (68%) did nothing after experiencing sexual violence victimization.
- Trauma has affected 68% of the students, hurting the lives of boys and girls (61.8% of boys and 74.4% of girls) as well as lower and upper primary students (71.3% of lower and 65.1% of upper).
- The prevalence of emotional violence in particular is significantly higher among students with disabilities.

As a result of this study, ACRUG developed a list of recommendations to overcome the risks of SRGBV and trauma in the settlement schools where they work. Their recommendations include:

- create school-based campaigns that emphasize emotional forms of violence and denounce certain behaviors;
- increase awareness among teachers and parents about positive discipline and nonviolent child disciplining approaches;
- make children with disabilities a greater priority in their programming for safer learning environments;
- establish a school-based reporting and response mechanism that builds on existing forums, like school anti-violence clubs, and specialized services, such as professional counsellors or child protection experts. A referral system, with legal, social, and psychological support, will be set up in each school to respond to complaints;
- strengthen the connections between schools, parents, and the community through school management committees and parent-teacher associations.

ACRUG also plans to implement a follow-up study, using the qualitative methodologies and tools provided in the SLE Assessment Toolkit, to add nuance to their quantitative findings and refine their program recommendations.