

ORGANIZATION: SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

PROJECT TITLE: CONGO, VOICES OF CHILDREN, CHILD JOURNALISTS

A. BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has had a devastating effect on the state of the country's children and led to a child protection crisis. In the East of the country, in particular, young people are largely without opportunities for livelihood or education and are still at risk of recruitment into armed groups. The role of children in their communities is increasingly marginalized as institutions designed to support them break down and family structures disintegrate. Thousands of children during the war were involved with fighting forces as combatants, cooks, porters, and sex slaves. It is essential, therefore, to engage young people in seeking solutions to the violence that affects them and their communities. Strengthening the role youth play in the redevelopment of their communities and country is a key component of protecting children and promoting peace in Congo. Giving youth an alternative way of contributing to their surroundings is also vital to promoting long-term stability.



As part of Search for Common Ground (SFCG)-DRC's overall conflict resolution program, this project addresses the effect of war on children in a radio-based project designed to empower young people to disseminate information about the issue and children's rights more widely. Commonly known under the Kiswahili name of *Sisi Watoto*, the project produces radio programs by children for children. The project trains a group of youth producers and reporters to produce radio programs that address issues concerned with the effect of war on children. The Voices of Children project broadcasts dialogue,

magazines, and news reports throughout eastern DRC. The radio shows serves to open up space for children to be part of their country's peace process and redevelopment.

B. GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The overall goal of the Voice of Children Media Project is to *open space for dialogue in communities among young people and adults about the impact of armed conflict on children*. In order to achieve the goal, SFCG-DRC pursues the following objectives:

- Sensitize youth and young adults on the effects of armed conflicts on children.
- Support the reintegration of youth in their communities.
- Support the participation of youth in rebuilding their communities (including enhancing community social harmony).

C. SPECIFIC ACTIONS/ACTIVITIES DURING THE PROJECT TO ACHIEVE STATED OBJECTIVES

- Training for young journalists.
- Purchase of radio program production equipment.
- Production and distribution of radio programs to radio stations for airing.

To achieve the stated objectives, SFCG encourages a shift in thinking for children and youth, from being vulnerable and using weapons as their means of survival to making a positive contribution to the development of their communities. The shift in thinking makes it possible for them to develop sustainable life skills and gain respect. The young journalists SFCG has already trained are able to demonstrate this to the public through their professionalism and the important issues they cover in their programs.

The radio program produced by the young journalists, called *Sisi Watoto*, began airing weekly in October 2003. *Sisi Watoto* is presented in a magazine format, which allows for a variety of styles to be included in each episode. The journalists report on news surrounding the conflict and its effects on children. They also interview experts, government officials, civil society representatives, and young people about the demobilization and reintegration processes.

The program covers a broad range of topics, from providing information about services available to ex-combatants to personal accounts of demobilization success, from the examination of girls' roles as child soldiers and whether or not they were being properly demobilized to discussions with sensitive political implications about promoting demobilization during crisis. A few examples of previous individual program topics follow in the text box below.

Successful Demobilization and Reintegration: In one program a child soldier-turned-musician shared his story of demobilization and then reintegration into his family. Through music, this child found a new purpose in life and a way to forget about his time in the armed forces. In another episode, a young woman told the *Sisi Watoto* journalists how she was demobilized and reintegrated with her family, then finally accepted by her fiancé. She is now happily married and the mother of a young child.

Difficulties Post-Demobilization: The *Sisi Watoto* journalists highlighted that demobilized children should not have disproportionate expectations. Numerous children joined the armed forces due to poverty and a lack of any other option. After demobilization, children are confronted with the same precarious economic conditions. In the episode, children and parents spoke about life after demobilization and the ways they have tried to overcome economic difficulties. In addition, other programs highlighted that children themselves have the main responsibility in successfully demobilizing.

Discussion of the DDR Process: Demobilized child soldiers described their experiences during the disarmament and demobilization processes and their life in the transit centre in Kindu. Also, the term DDR is widely used in the Congolese media, but what is the Congolese population's understanding of it? To respond to this question, a team of young *Sisi Watoto* reporters interviewed adults and children in the streets of Bukavu and in demobilization centers. They organized a round table on the subject with local stakeholders in the DDR process to bring other community voices into the discussion.

D. PAST RESULTS ACHIEVED BY THIS PROJECT

- The activities of this project have been able to open a space in eastern Congo for discussion about conflict issues affecting children in the society.
- They have also furthered the ability for young people to speak out about their situations.
- The journalists spread important information about demobilization opportunities and success stories to thousands of people normally without access to such information.
- As a result of the radio programming there will be an increased awareness among Congolese people in the east of the country about the effects of war on children, the rights of children, and the capacity of young people to contribute positively to their society.

- Change in attitude on the dangers of child soldiering and the roles of youth in society. *Sisi Watoto* received over 500 letters from Bukavu and its surrounding communities. These letters contained children and youth's opinions, hopes for the peace process, suggestions for issues to be covered, and requests to join the team of young journalists.
- Child leaders: Formation of a group of young leaders who give voice to children and contribute to the dialogue on peace in their country.
- Active and concrete involvement of young people in the physical redevelopment of their communities and country.

In addition to the results obtained in the community and with the youth, Sisi Watoto was recognized internationally for its work in the following ways:

- A team of journalists from the Swiss national francophone radio, *Radio Suisse Romande*, visited *Sisi Watoto's* young journalist team. These journalists produced a radio program that included references of the *Sisi Watoto* project.
- *Sisi Watoto* was mentioned in a radio program on Voice of America.
- *Sisi Watoto* won the prestigious One World/UNICEF prize called *Children's Lives*. The program was in competition with entries from children's radio programs produced by and for children all over the world.



Young SFCG-DRC reporters receive the 2004 from OneWorld Radio/UNICEF international competition for the best radio program produced by and for children