



Listen

Hear our voices

Investing in conflict-affected children in the DRC

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Children affected by war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are tired. They are tired of violence and hunger, tired of fear and uncertainty. They are tired of not having their experiences or views heard on issues affecting them. Rarely are they asked how conflict affects them and what would make their lives better. They want to use their voices but are excluded in local and global debates on the crisis and the future of the DRC.



All photos by Wezzie Banda/World Vision

Introduction

The crisis in the DRC is first and foremost a child protection crisis, one of the worst in the world.

Children make up more than 60 per cent of the 13.1 million people expected to need humanitarian assistance and protection in the DRC this year: 7.9 million girls and boys under the age of 18 are in dire need of support to survive and to thrive¹, and two million children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition.²

Humanitarian emergencies can have catastrophic effects on children, exacerbating existing forms of violence and making children more vulnerable to all forms of violence and exploitation, including being recruited into armed forces or groups, being sexually abused and being trafficked.³ In the DRC in 2017, at least 3,270 grave violations against children were documented. While the actual number is likely much higher, this figure already represents a 245 per cent increase in just two years.⁴

The long-term impact of children being exposed to violence for so long is difficult to overstate. It can have far-reaching effects on children's social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual well-being and development⁵. It interferes with their ability to learn and to lead healthy lives into adulthood.⁶

1 OCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan 2017-2019 for the Democratic Republic of Congo, updated for 2018, December 2017, p6.

2 *ibid.*

3 Child Protection Working Group, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, p. 13.

4 OCHA, p 9. *Some children's names have been changed to protect their identity

5 World Vision Child Protection Systems in Fragile States, Policy Report 2013.

6 World Vision, *No One to Turn To: Life for children in eastern DRC*, Policy Report, January 2014.

Children facing violence and hunger

When speaking to communities, children and youth are consistently identified as the most vulnerable – as the primary victims of violence and as victims of pendular displacement⁷. The challenges that children are grappling with include sexual abuse; recruitment into militias; and the extreme distress of losing family members, seeing their homes and schools destroyed and

witnessing other things no child should see. Children themselves report high levels of psychological distress⁸. They have fled their homes, with little to eat but leaves and wild fruit for weeks or even months, only to continue to struggle for food where they are living. They are trying to rebuild their lives and find a future. But they cannot do it alone.

“We heard sounds of guns and we started running. The sounds of guns came close. My father and mother were shot. That’s the last time I saw them.”

Musimbwa*, 12, Kasai



Forced to participate in the fighting

In the Kasai Region of DRC, the majority of militia members are under 18 (more than half of these under 15).⁹ Ngala*, a 10-year-old boy in Kasai tells his story.

“I was playing with friends when soldiers came and our father was killed.” Fearing for their lives, Ngala, his mother, brother and a sister, fled his grandparents, some 50km away. But he was not safe there.

“Friends asked me to go with them to Tshota (‘place of sacrifice’). They told me that I was going to get some

powers to protect myself and my family, but they had planned it to initiate me into the militia.

“I stayed in the bush and I was given a machete to use as a weapon. A lot of bad things were happening. One day, a friend died after being shot by a bullet. I was very scared and I decided to escape.”

Now, Ngala is one of more than 7,000 children participating in the six Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) World Vision has set up in partnership with Cooperative Reveil de Kananga and communities in the Kasais. He says that participating in the CFS has helped him to get rid of bad memories about war.

7 World Vision, Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response for the Kasai Provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo, July 2017.

8 World Vision, Real Time Evaluation, Kasai Emergency Response, March 2018.

9 UNICEF, *The Future of Kasai: Children at Threat*, December 2017.

The voices of children

Despite the challenges they face, children in the DRC hope for something better – and courageously pursue a better future. They still talk with hope and express dreams of a better life. Listening and acting, we must do all we can to show them they are not wrong.

They are asking leaders to provide solutions to the problems that affect their day to day lives and threaten their future.

The true causes of instability cannot be addressed without understanding how the most marginalised and vulnerable children are affected. Those with power must consult and listen to those most affected by war.

Their voices must inspire us to overcome existing challenges in responding to the crises in the DRC – and to find a way to provide the support they need and deserve.

“A lot of girls stopped going to school because of poverty. More girls stopped going to school because of war. A lot of men marry young girls for because they are poor. Myself, I have been proposed to by men. But I always say no. I am still young. I am still thinking of going back to school.”

Patuakamuena, 12, Kasai



Bring lasting peace and affordable food

Pauline, 15, who grew up in Dibaya territory in Kasai Centrale, shares her story and views on the future.

“I was sleeping when the battle started in March. We heard the armed men going into the houses and killing people. My brother and I ran. When we arrived

at our grandmother’s house, months had passed. She told us that our Papa, Maman, and our brothers and sisters had all been killed.

“I knew some girls who joined the militia. They were my age, or even younger than me. They went off to battle to kill people and drink their blood. All with the goal of having lower prices for food, and school supplies, and getting good healthcare.

“Now we have peace because the armed groups met and agreed to stop. But in order to keep the peace, no one can go to war again.

“I’ve seen people register to vote for the elections. They said that even children should register, but when I tried to go my Grandmother said that they would chase me from the registration centre. If I was old enough I would vote when we have the elections. I want whoever wins to make food more affordable, so that orphans like us can live well and eat.”





Build new schools so that children can continue with education

Ndibu is a 13-year-old boy living in Kasai whose father was killed during the war. More than 400 schools have been attacked in the Kasai Region, with at least 260 destroyed. Ndibu wants safe schools in his community.

"I, my mother and my young brother fled from our village after the militia arrived. The militia were burning houses, taking property and forcing young children to join them.

"We ran to the bush to hide. There was no food. We were eating leaves and wild fruits. We reached the village of my grandparents and I now live with them. The school I go to is not good. Some of the classes were damaged during the war. Whenever it rains, the roof of the school leaks and our classes stop. When grow up, I would like to be an English teacher. Not many people in my area speak English. People speak French and Chiluba.

"I hear that the school in the village I used to live was destroyed. I hear also that some of my friends were killed. My mother says we cannot go back to the village. Sometimes bad memories about war come to my mind. I am afraid the war might come back again.

"The leaders should think about ways of bringing peace in this country. They should build new schools so that children can continue with education."



I want to see my village having clean water

Water, sanitation and hygiene problems are rising in the Kasai region. Walking long distances to water sources; lack of access to potable water and illnesses caused by poor sanitation are some of the compounding challenges that children, families and communities are facing in this conflict-affected area.

Ngalula, a 12-year-old girl from Kasai, asks leaders to bring solution to water problems in her area.

"My parents and my siblings fled from the war to Angola. I was not with them and now stay with my aunt. I am hoping to see my parent and siblings again.

Every day, I help my aunt fetch drinking water from the stream. I have to walk a long distance to get to the stream. It is dangerous to go to the stream alone. I fear being bitten by snakes. I fear being raped. I always go to the stream with friends.

"People wash their clothes and dishes at the stream. It is dirty, and it makes me sick, but we don't have other places to get water in my village.

"I want to see my village have clean water. Water sources should be near to my home, not far away."

How World Vision is helping

World Vision has been delivering relief, rehabilitation and development programmes to conflict, disaster-affected and poverty-stricken people in the DRC since 1984. Currently, World Vision operates in 14 out of 26 provinces, with programming in protection, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, food aid, food security, peacebuilding and emergency relief reaching almost 2.5 million people a year. World Vision is World Food Programme's (WFP) biggest partner in the country, distributing food to nearly one million people.

Working with WFP, World Vision has reached nearly 360,000 food insecure people in Kasai Central, North Kivu,

South Kivu and Tanganyika since 2017. World Vision has also reached more than 100,000 children through a school feeding programme in the Kivus and a cash transfer project has reached more than 24,000 displaced people in Tanganyika.

In the realm of child protection and education, World Vision, together with communities, has set up 11 Child Friendly Spaces in the affected areas to provide care and protection for children. Children play different games and those who for a variety of reasons are not attending school are given the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. The project which includes back-to-school

distributions of bags and supplies, planning education interventions, and psycho-social support, aims to reach more than 55,000 children affected by conflict.

World Vision identifies children and youth as critical stakeholders for peace in the DRC. Through Empowering Children as Peacebuilders (ECaP) methodology, World Vision is building the capacity of children to enable them to impact their own families, communities and governing authorities in a way that enhances tolerance, develops mutual respect, and contributes toward a more peaceful and just community.



Feeling safe at Child Friendly Spaces

Kanyeba, 10, regularly attends one of the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) that community members, with support from World Vision, have set up in Kasai. She explains the benefits of CFS and shares her future dreams.

"I started attending this place (Child Friendly Space) in December last year. My mother escorts me every morning. She then goes back home or goes to the farm. I don't feel safe at home when my parents are away. I am always afraid. I fear that the war will come again. I feel safer here. The "teacher" [CFS attendant] stays with us.

"Some children [referring to child soldiers] were doing bad things during the war. I was scared when I heard about them. But my teacher says we should love them. My teacher says that we must love one another.

"I would like to become a tailor when I grow up. I would like to make a lot of money to give to my parents.

"I am asking the leaders to help bring peace to my community. Those who are involved in fighting must stop. War is not good."



Creating the change children want to see

It will take all of us to protect children in the DRC from the effects of armed conflict. Therefore, World Vision urges the international community and donor governments to support the participation of children and youth in creating the future of the DRC

The knowledge, problem solving ability and commitment of children and young people to building a better future should not be underestimated.

They have not started the crises, and yet they are disproportionately affected. Allowing them space to use their voices – in the global dialogues, in programming, and in peacebuilding – will lead to a stronger, more stable DRC. Investing in local-level peacebuilding and social cohesion led by children and youth can foster peaceful solution and stability across the country and empower the next generation.

“Most children in this area are suffering from malnutrition. They are suffering from lack of means to go to school. We really need to advocate for children and for the population of this country.”

World Vision Southern Africa
Senior Director of Operations,
Jean Claude Mukadi



World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign *It takes a world to end violence against children* is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.

