



LETTING IN THE SUN... Child Friendly Spaces in Kashmir

'Excerpts of the report'



اور میں اپنے آپنی ماپوں کی تالیف
پہن اپنے پیڑھی لہوں اور میرے ماپوں
بیت سے حالات سے غزری ہے اگر
میرے باپھی بھاری ۴۶ منوی
لو تو میں اچا لائی گا

میرا اپنی زندگی میں بہت سے حالات
ہوئے ہیں مگر اب میں جیب میں جو بھی لکھی اس وقت
جہاں ایسا لکھا ہے وہاں (school) میں شامل ہوں



Photo: Aamir Wani



LETTING IN THE SUN...

Child Friendly Spaces in Kashmir



Documentation of a pilot intervention for children affected by conflict. A collaboration between Action Aid, Chotay Taray Foundation, KFORD, and UNICEF in the districts of Srinagar and Budgam.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016 in Kashmir a prolonged period of violent protests and curfew ensued after the killing of Burhan Wani. Schools, colleges, shops, businesses remained closed, mobile and internet services were turned off for prolonged durations. Young people suffered a great deal during this period. They experienced trauma brought on by exposure to violence around them, and suffered personal losses. Homebound in a stressful environment, they had no avenue for expression.

UNICEF responded by bringing its network of partners together to develop and implement pilot Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), in 10 communities each, in Srinagar and Budgam, reaching out to children in the age group of 6-14 years. CFS centers provide a safe space, routine, recreation, emotional support, coping skills, life skills, peace activities, case work, referral services, counselling, and a space for children to express themselves and move towards healing.

The initiation and roll out of CFS, took place under very challenging circumstances in a situation of limited mobility with limited resources—time, people, material and finances. UNICEF, the collaborating civil society organizations Action Aid, Chotay Taray Foundation, and KFORD, along with the youth who formed the CFS teams, the children, and the community came together to achieve something significant. In a tense and dangerous situation when most often, children's voices are stifled and their needs neglected, CFS created a space, which welcomed, accepted, and listened to children. Every child had the opportunity to share feelings, emotions, thoughts about how life was impacted.

In a short duration, the team and the children together, moved from a situation of complete despair to the beginning of change. Children reported being relieved

of stress and tension, they looked forward to coming to CFS every day; CFS facilitators reported that children got over their resistance and began to meaningfully engage in structured activity at the center; parents reported that children were calmer, better behaved and sleep patterns had improved. A need was expressed for more structured therapeutic activities to be incorporated into the work at CFS. All stakeholders involved unanimously requested for the work to continue to ensure long lasting impact on the young people. Discussions to scale up CFS to more districts in Kashmir are underway.

CFS are community based response mechanisms in situations of disaster or conflict, which function for a limited duration. As communities being to regain their balance and normalcy, CFS phase out. The conflict in Kashmir is quite unique and it continues, thereby making a case for further work. Young people in Kashmir are deeply impacted and are in need of an integrated and long-term approach of care, protection, prevention and healing. In this scenario, there is need for comprehensive and collective thought towards deepening engagement directly with young people.

The preparation of this report was preceded by an in-depth consultative process with UNICEF and its partners in Kashmir. The report analyses children's experience of conflict in Kashmir, and establishes the context in which work directly with children takes place. It examines the concept of CFS, and outlines CFS activities which formed part of the program, as well as touches upon those that must be taken up for implementation as the engagement with children deepens in the future. It analyses the initial impact of CFS, reflects upon challenges, learnings and make programmatic recommendations. Finally, the report flags pertinent questions for taking work with children affected by conflict forward in Kashmir.



Photo: Aamir Wani

CHILDREN AND THE CONFLICT IN KASHMIR

Young people in Kashmir carry a fair share of the load of troubles brought by the conflict in the region. Through the voices of children, their parents, community members and the CFS team, this chapter of the report examines and reflects on how children are affected. It establishes the context in which work directly with children through the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) takes place in Kashmir.

No reference point to imagine peace

“From as far back as I can remember, the first thing I see outside my house is a soldier with a gun, pointing outwards. I am 26. This is what I have grown up with. This is normal. I am affected. Every person is.” -A CFS facilitator

The conflict in Kashmir reaches neighborhoods, and door-steps of people’s homes. For the present generation of parents and children, a troubled environment is normal. With unrest spanning over three decades, many people now are left with no reference point for imagining peace.

Conflict-socialization of children

We like going to the main road for stone pelting. There are more personnel there. We have a lot of fun – A 12-year-old

We had taken children out for outdoor games on a Sunday. When we asked them to divide themselves into two teams, the first question they asked was, if we were going to play stone pelting game. – A CFS facilitator

Young children at the CFS centers, barely in their adolescence, displayed a lot of aggression, in their routine transactions. Play would get rough, petty arguments or conversations could turn violent over very

inconsequential differences. Many children shared that they routinely participated in stone pelting and have also suffered injuries in the process. Reports of violence also state that there have been many incidents where children and youth have fallen victim to ‘stray bullets/pellets’ as passers-by or as they rush to encounter sites in an attempt to shield militants.

Preoccupation with conflict has now become part of socialization of children and young people. This is evident in the games they chose to play, the songs they sing and in the selection of toys. For example, enacting a gun fight between militants and security personnel is a common game played out among young children.

Children speak a language of conflict. “The ease with which you hear young children use words associated with conflict in their routine conversations is jolting. It goes against the grain of what should constitute childhood”, an observation made by the Leher team. A conflict glossary becomes a part of children’s everyday parlance from an early age. Pelting, shelling, gun, tank, media-leak, *rakshak*, martyr, *azadi (freedom)*, shut-down, *hartal*, curfew are words that feature in their conversations. “Toddlers pick up *azadi (freedom)* slogans. Children pick up from the scenes that unfold around them”, shared a CFS Facilitator.

The preoccupation with violence among children was also reflected in how they engaged in the activities at the CFS. The sharing sessions during circle-time, and self-expression through art was heavily populated with stories of conflict and violence, of lost childhood and a bleak future. During circle time, (an activity that encourages free constructive sharing in the group), children asked for time to be allocated to discuss issues related to conflict.

Daily struggles of every-day living

“These hands of mine... we pick up the injured, bury the dead, organize marriages, and celebrate birth. Life, death, joy and sorrow go together. Life is very hard here in Kashmir. Trouble can break at any-time.” –A school teacher who also ran a curfew school.

“While we were in a workshop with the CFS team, a 15-year-old was killed in cross-fire in another district. In seconds, the room became tense with fear, anxiety and sadness. There were phone calls from worried families, checking in on each other. For the next 24 hours, no one knew how the situation would pan out.” –An observation made by the Leher team.

While certain incidents of violence make headlines and receive mass attention, the burden and struggles of life for ordinary people are not spoken about adequately. The CFS team discussed that conducting normal transactions of day to day living becomes very hard. Trouble can break at any time. Community members shared that during the curfew, patients were unable to reach hospitals even in emergencies, examinations were cancelled, shops were shut so groceries could not be purchased, people missed job interviews, night raids were carried out in some communities, in the middle of the night the whole community was pushed out of their homes.

Constant state of fear and foreboding

I have only known conflict all my life– killings, gun fights, protests, state imposed restrictions, humiliation, curfew, and hartal. A life of uncertainty and disruptions. As a parent, what breaks my heart the most is that it is not any different for my children. I hope and pray that life is better for them as they grow up. A parent at a CFS center.

The nature of conflict in Kashmir is such that the exposure to armed violence takes place in spurts. However, the imposition of certain special laws places restrictions on common people and gives exceptional powers to

the security forces. Unpredictable periods of curfew or hartal (strike), switching off telecommunication, creates a constant state of fear and fear and foreboding. Parents fear their adolescent children will join militant groups, protestors, or be caught in cross-fire. Children and their families experience repression, loss of security, income, access to services, disrupted routines and schooling, displacement, physical injury and psychological trauma among other things. The current generation of young parents, having grown up in the shadow of conflict themselves, lament that the situation remains unchanged over the years. Conversations with parents at CFS were underlined by a sense of resignation. And yet, the same time, parents yearn for better times for their children.

Disruption of routine-nothing to look forward to

The only glimpse we got of the outside world was through the window. We used to pray for the curfew/shutdown to end so that we could step out of the house again and see the outside world again. –A girl at a CFS.

The months of curfew and shutdown were very hard. We had nothing to do at home. Whenever internet and phone connection was restored intermittently, we distracted ourselves on social media. –A child at a CFS.

Children said that one of the hardest parts of living in a situation is the looming uncertainty, which results in frequent curfews and shutdowns, lasting from a few days to months on end at times, throwing everyday routine out of order. Speaking about the recent period of prolonged curfew, children mentioned their lives had been reduced to a meaningless unremarkable ritual. They felt no motivation to wake up in the morning as there was nothing to look forward to during the day. In the absence of school and outdoor play, children were drawn towards television and video games on laptop and mobile phones. The only time they were allowed to go out was to the *Darzgah*.

Some children said that boys were allowed step out for brief periods when there was relaxation in curfew and to the local masjid to pray. Girls were mostly house-bound, saddled with household chores and nothing else to do. In some communities, boys would participate daily in stone pelting.

Children also recounted their memories of witnessing violence during the recent period of turmoil. All children were relieved with the resumption of routine life. While boys expressed excitement about outdoor play, girls were happy that they could visit their friends and relatives. Children stated that they were delighted to go back to school after a gap of 8 months and were looking forward to the new academic year.

Young people feel unengaged, unheard and unaccepted

“Put on your recorder and leak my message to the media in Delhi! Tell that famous journalist to come here sit in my community and ask his questions.” A 14-year-old

Are we animals? Why are Kashmiris being hit with pellet guns? Is anybody listening to us?—A child at a CFS.

Life in Kashmir is hell. No one cares -A child in a CFS.

Children feel anger at the loss of life, injury they witness, and with the constant disruptions in their lives. They strongly feel that their views are not considered. Many young people see themselves in the midst of a struggle for freedom. In the absence of any avenue for positive dialogue, young people especially, feel unheard and inconsequential. It paves way for anger, resentment, confused thought processes, and general helplessness. These emotions perhaps, feed the justification and acceptance of the use of violence to make a statement or achieve a goal. Some children idolize the armed separatist leaders. There is a critical need for alternatives for

constructive positive conversations and peaceful coping strategies for young people.

Parents too explained that in these times, they find themselves at a loss. They find it hard to explain the circumstances to children. They find it very difficult to keep their children occupied.

Of late, youth in colleges and schools have been coming together to protest. There is an opinion that these groups are coming together organically, outside of any influence of separatist groups. If so, this is departure from usual practice, where calendar dates for protests are tightly held by separatist leaders. These young persons also need to be brought into the sphere of influence, for peaceful and constructive discussion.

Children choose to participate in violence

The desire to protect children is instinctive. The role of family, community and State is to nurture and protect children. However, in situations of conflict almost everything children experience is antithetical to protection. Children are not equipped physically or emotionally to deal with loss of life, property, injury, exposure to weapons, violence and its imagery, disruption of routine, feelings of loss of control and loss of security. In situations of armed conflict as also seen in Kashmir, young people are find themselves in situations where they make choices no child should have to make –joining and participating in armed conflict, and acts of violence.

Mental health and behavioral issues

There were raids on some nights and we could not sleep thinking about it for days. -A child at a CFS.

There was a girl in my CFS who used to constantly chew on the hems of her sweater cuffs. -A CFS facilitator.

A girl in my center used so much force while drawing that the chart paper would tear. -A CFS facilitator.

Research studies in conflict affected areas have highlighted the effect of conflict on the mental health of people. Here too, children have experienced and witnessed many things in episodes of violence. Children from among those attending the CFS centers reported having scars from being grazed by pellets, knowing children/youth who were injured by pellets, seen their parents being chased by security forces, lost someone they know in the recent violence, had brothers who were detained by the police. These experiences though sometimes brushed aside in conversation as 'collateral damage', are real, traumatic, and have long lasting impact on children which stay with them through their life-times.

Childhood and adolescence are critical stages of development. Traumatic experiences in these phases of life have long-lasting impressions, which are carried into adulthood and persist lifelong. It is a well known fact that psychological distress manifests itself in different forms – physically (headache, stomach pain) and behaviorally (withdrawal, aggression towards people or project). The CFS facilitators observed a lot of aggression among children. It included the tendency to break into physical fights, bullying among children, physically aggressive behavior during play (pushing, shoving, hitting, knocking down etc.), attention seeking, low self-esteem, anxiety, low attention span, and refusal to take part in activities. These are behavioral issues commonly found among children who witness prolonged conflict and violence.

With a smile on her face, a 12-year-old girl narrated her experience, "One day when we were in the Darzghah, a tear gas shell landed just outside the steps of the Darzghah. A 10-year-old boy who was passing by picked it up in his hands and that's when it blew off. Severely injured and bleeding, he was rushed to the hospital. Immediately afterwards, there were clashes between the security forces and youth outside the Darzghah. The Maulvi Shahab asked us to go home, but as we stepped out and saw chaos in the street, we rushed back inside. The Maulvi Shahab calmed us down and dropped us back home after some time." The desire to share experiences of violence with a seemingly unaffected demeanor, is a common symptom of trauma found in children who experience prolonged episodes of violence.

Loss of layers of security and protection

The exposure to violence and conflict in Kashmir steals childhood from children. It hampers children's overall development, be it physical or psychological or social. Children have lost the feeling of security even while being at home and in their families and communities. Loss of security leads to loss of trust. This has a significant negative impact on children who are dependent on adults in their environment (family, community, government) to fulfill many of their needs. Families get de-stabilized with injury to parents, older siblings, detention or death, or disappearance of family members. Loss of livelihood caused by prolonged curfew causes break-downs in families. With every episode of violence, it is not just academic education which suffers. When schools get attacked as they do in Kashmir, children are stripped off a very important layer of safety, nurturance and security. Schools are unable to be the safe-haven for healthy interactions, critical to the formation and development

of mentally, physically and emotionally healthy children. Children face severe restrictions to their mobility in their communities. During curfew, they are rarely allowed to play outdoors, as parents are constantly worried about safety. The protection needs of children are enormous and require urgent attention and intervention.

Compounding of vulnerabilities in backward communities in times of prolonged conflict

“Nothing reaches our village. Only one girl in our village has studied till class 10. The one bus that would stop at long walking distance away from our village stopped during the curfew.” –A community member in a remote hilly community.

“There is a lot of stress due to loss of work. Market demand for our Sozni (embroidery) work fell. Those of us dependent on daily wage could not reach out work places in Srinagar” –Community members.

In a few poor communities, we identified cases of malnourished children, and children with health issues and learned from their families that they did not have they had no money for nutritious food. A child who suffered from seizures could not be taken to hospital because of restricted mobility. –ACFS facilitator.

In Kashmir, it was observed that non-conflict related vulnerabilities, issues or problems related to children, their families and communities, get compounded when there are prolonged periods of violence. Restrictions on mobility and the complete stand still of life also affects communities where they may not be high incidence of violence. Poor and backward communities have developed visible signs of stress which can be seen in an adverse impact on health, education, livelihood. Chronic health conditions remain unattended to, malnourishment increases, children become vulnerable to child labour, quality of much needed education suffers. Girls, who are

under normal circumstances have to do a lot of household work find that when they are away from schools the burden on them to serve their families increases. There is no data of reports on increase in domestic violence and child abuse in times of curfew, however, these should be studied.

Detention of Children

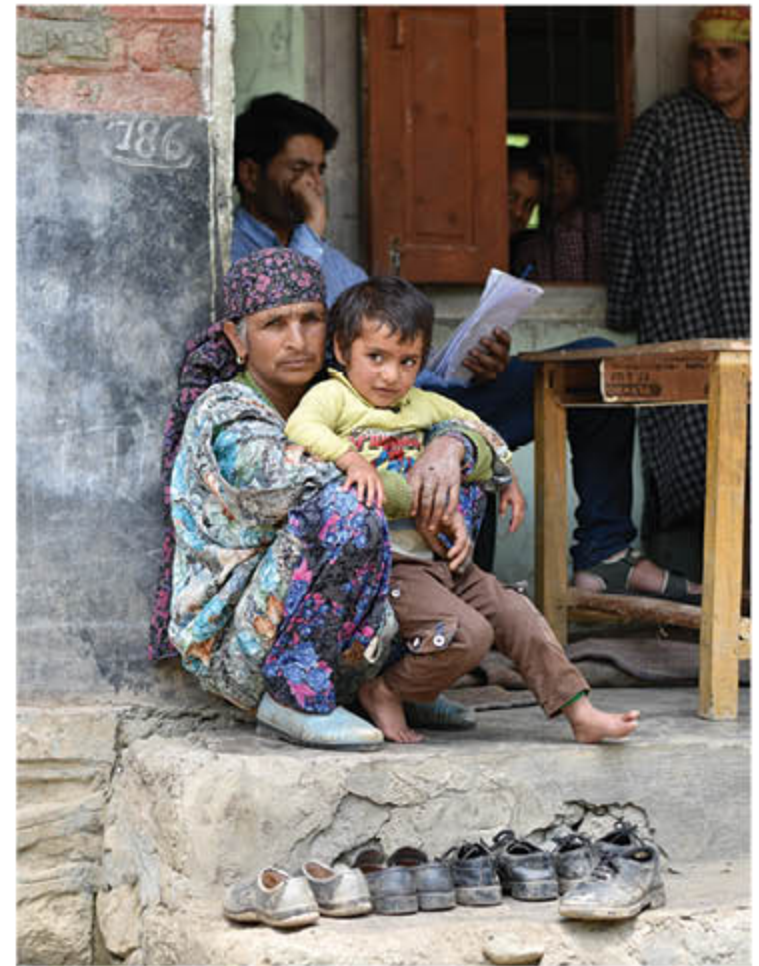
A child at my CFS was detained by security forces for close to 10-15 days. The parents paid money to ensure the release of the child. Even to this day, he gets recurrent nightmares of his time in detention. –A CFS facilitator.

The 2016 turmoil also brought to attention that children were detained under the J&K Public Safety Act, 1978. This is a grey area which requires urgent attention. Children are detained because of their association or proximity with conflict related activities. Detention of children puts their safety, and well-being at risk. It fuels anger and frustration among children which remains unaddressed and grows with time. A recent judgment by the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir, in connection with the detention of a 16-year-old boy under J&K PSA, states that children shall not be booked under PSA. The judgment further reiterates that the provisions of Jammu and Kashmir Juvenile Justice Act 2013 (J&K JJA) should be followed strictly while apprehending children for an offence, which makes detaining children in jail and police station illegal. The implementation of the J&K JJA, act so far has been a challenge for child protection workers in the state. Recognizing that children who have been detained would need rehabilitative and preventive interventions, of which there is a dearth in Kashmir, there is an urgent need for interventions in this field.

“Normally when there is firing exchanged between the forces and armed separatists, people tend to run away. In the protests that followed the killing of Wani, it was the

opposite. Every young person from the village would come out to protect the armed separatists.”—An observation by a Kashmiri writer. The killing of Wani affected young people very deeply. They saw themselves in him. There were some peculiar characteristics to these clashes which impacted young people: the use of pellet guns to counter stone pelting protestors, which may not have killed but gravely injured them, the killing and injury of many young people in cross-fire, snapping of internet connectivity on which young people hugely rely, and more than 6 months of curfew. The violence eventually stopped. However, the backdrop of non-dialogue, and non-resolution of political issues, remains a constant, severely impacting young people. It is in this complex situation, that CFS, a child rights based intervention for children, stepped in as a pilot initiative in 20 communities to reach out to young people.

As the government of Jammu and Kashmir moves forward with setting up the child protection system in the state under the Jammu & Kashmir Juvenile Justice (care and protection of children) Act, 2013 through the implementation of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), and other measures, the learning from this pilot CFS intervention can inform and provide valuable insights for both government and civil society for further interventions with children and young people in Kashmir.



Way on a Boy who lives in Kashmir

PELLET VICTIMS



to find out the
reasons for
this



ARE WE ANIMALS?
YOU ARE KILLING US FROM PELLETS.



→ PRESS

ONE SOLUTION
ONE TRACK

to come
how
them
i am
either
die

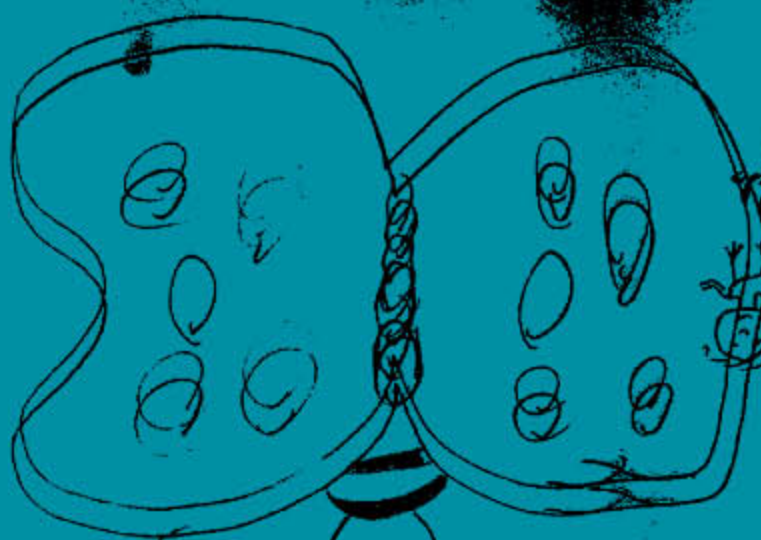
GO INDIA

Made BY ARDEN MOEE



Photo: Aamir Wani

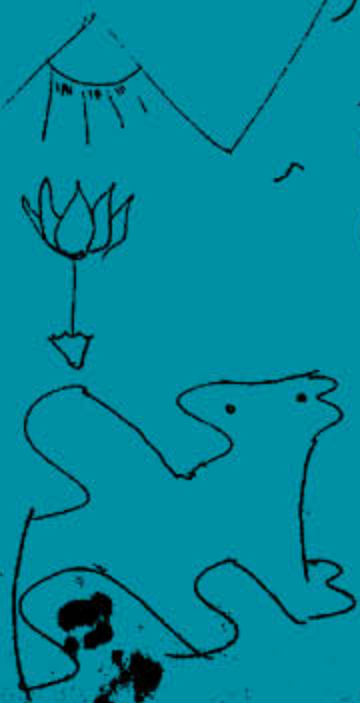
Turned down Hill down street



moving towards CTS



Flying High in the sky



Box
Rug rug