

FIELD GUIDE FOR THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

in War, Refugee Movements, Famine, and Natural Disasters

In a large-scale emergency, unaccompanied children are the most vulnerable of victims and the group most in need of adequate care and protection. And, because they are children, they are the least well fitted to seek out the care and protection they require.

It is therefore necessary to give them special help. This is both a moral imperative and a principle well established in national and international law. While there may be discussion about who should provide it and what form it should take, the need for that help is beyond dispute.

Every society has some tradition, some arrangement for looking after children who are not under the protection of their parents. However, history has repeatedly confirmed that in emergencies a great many children are left without the assistance and protection they need. Such situations are sometimes even aggravated by attempts made to help. The family, the local community and the State are generally recognized as having primary responsibility in this area. But when they are not in a position to assume this responsibility—or are unwilling to do so—other organizations are called in.

Thus in conflict situations, when large numbers of refugees are on the move or when natural disaster has struck, unaccompanied children may be aided by people from the local community but also by national bodies, international organizations, non-governmental agencies or people who have no particular affiliation. Whether acting professionally or as individuals, all who assume this task face the same questions and decisions as to what services are required and how they can best be provided.

Often help comes by chance and then only belatedly and sometimes, in spite of the best intentions, it falls short of what is needed for the child's development. Worse still, it can happen that the assistance provided does more harm than good. When this is the case, it is rarely deliberate; it is more likely to be due to lack of preparedness or expertise on the part of those trying to help or lack of the information that would enable them to plan and implement a suitable programme.

* *Unaccompanied Children in Emergencies: A Field Guide for their Care and Protection*, International Social Service, Jan Williamson, Geneva, Audrey Moser, London, 1987—*Unaccompanied Children: Care and Protection in Wars, Natural Disasters, and Refugee Movements*, by E. M. Ressler, N. Boothby, D. J. Steinbock, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.

Providing adequate assistance to unaccompanied children in emergency situations is complicated by various factors. The needs of each child vary according to his background, his present circumstances, his age, his expectations and his own individual problems. Even in "normal" times it is not easy to do the right thing. But when the general situation sharply deteriorates, when there is a threat to life itself, when people are displaced, when there is uncertainty and economic hardship and public services break down—to mention but a few examples of disruptive factors—the child's situation becomes much more difficult and solutions are harder to find. In addition to all this, there are differences of culture and tradition which must be taken into account. Thus in many respects the provision of services to unaccompanied children is neither simple nor obvious.

It would be ideal if in every major emergency people from the local community would take care of all unaccompanied children in such a way as to meet each one's personal needs, and to preserve their rights as individuals and above all as children. If those involved require help in doing this, it would be best if they could turn to people with experience and background knowledge in the matter. However, in most such situations at present, those who have to take the decisions and those who have the task of implementing those decisions have no particular experience or expertise in the field of child welfare.

To ease the burden of the individuals and institutions who undertake this vital task, three experts, Everett M. Ressler, Neil Boothby and Daniel J. Steinbock, carried out a remarkable study which, when it was completed in 1985, was welcomed by all the organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, working in this area. It was then suggested that a summary be made of the study for use as a guide by people working in the field.

The Field Guide was published in 1987 and has certainly come up to expectations. The first part deals with the principles on which action to protect unaccompanied children should be based and legal aspects, including means of preventing mass movements of children and of preserving family units.

The second part addresses the practical problems to be faced: how individuals, organizations and governments can prepare emergency measures for children before a disaster occurs; how to prevent families from being separated, how to locate, register and arrange care for unaccompanied children; and what action to take at each stage in the process. The Guide also indicates methods of tracing families and children and gives advice on steps to take for the reunification of families and on long-term placement, including adoption, of children.

The ICRC Central Tracing Agency made a major contribution to this study with its vast experience in registering the victims of armed conflict, tracing missing persons and reuniting separated families. And in recognition of the Guide's importance, ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga has written the Foreword.

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