Nele Bostoen and Eleonora Mansi: Their story

Kampala, Uganda: ‘Unite for children’ is what UNICEF stands for and what drives UN Volunteers to support UNICEF’s work.

As UN Volunteers with the Child Protection team of UNICEF’s Country Office in Uganda, we focus on violence against children and justice for children. However, we are not strictly confined to our respective areas. This gives us the chance to learn about and contribute to other UNICEF programmes. One of the contributions that we are very proud of is our assistance to the simulation of a newly-developed mobile phone application to register and trace unaccompanied children in humanitarian action; also known as Rapid FTR.

Rapid FTR has been developed by volunteer university students from six different countries, in collaboration with UNICEF Uganda. The technology is specifically designed to streamline and speed up family tracing and reunification efforts, both in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and during recovery. The tool is very user-friendly. By inputting a photo, location and other essential details into a mobile phone, a profile can be created within minutes. From this very moment, everybody who has the RapidFTR tool can access this information and
easily trace these children separated from their families without losing time.

Before the tool could be used on a large scale, UNICEF Uganda organized a simulation at the Railway Children Primary School in Nsambya in the suburb of Kampala. Thirty children had been prepared by a UNICEF Child Protection Officer to make up a story and act as unaccompanied children. We have to say, they were very convincing in their roles! Some of the children even dressed up as parents, grandparents, etc.

One of the girls told me her own story of how she had to leave her seven-month-old baby with her grandmother in the village, while she came to Kampala to earn a living. By the time she went back to the village to see her child, she found out that her grandmother had died and that her baby was gone missing.

Sometimes, it was hard to realize that we were doing a simulation. The stories seemed so real. Later on, we realized that this was not only our impression. The headmaster informed us that the stories the children were telling were actually situations that they might have come across in their real lives.

On one hand, we were happy to have successfully tested the RapidFTR tool because through it, thousands of children can now find their way back to their families, but on the other hand we left behind this school with hundreds of children and their day-to-day struggles.

Such confrontations with the hard realities children face can make us feel sad, but it also makes us even more motivated and committed to unite our efforts for the children of Uganda! And that’s what we are here for!

By Nele Bostoen and Eleonora Mansi, UN Volunteers with the Child Protection team of UNICEF Uganda