Early Relationships and Marriage in Conflict and Post-conflict Settings:
Vulnerability of Youth in Uganda

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Abstract: *While there is increased attention to child marriage, defined as marriage before 18 years of age, in countries where the practice is especially prevalent, less attention has been directed at understanding the factors affecting relationships, marriage and cohabitation among adolescents affected by conflict and displacement. This article presents factors which contribute to early relationships and informal marriages in conflict and post-conflict settings, based on qualitative research undertaken among two distinct populations in Uganda: internally displaced persons in Mucwini transit camp in northern Uganda and Congolese refugees in the Nakivale refugee settlement in southwestern Uganda. Themes were examined through a social–ecological framework. Findings indicate that fundamental shifts in economies, family relationships, and communication combined with structural changes encountered in settlements resulted in changed relationships and marriage patterns. Participants reported that poverty, splintering of family, and lack of education – which they believed to be exacerbated by conflict in both settings – had profoundly affected the views, perceptions and behaviours of youth around relationships and marriage. We identify interventions applicable to humanitarian settings that would offer refugee and internally displaced adolescents greater and more meaningful opportunities for development.* © 2013 Reproductive Health Matters

Child marriage, defined as marriage before 18 years of age, is associated with a range of poor health and social outcomes for women and girls. These include early sexual debut and early, high risk pregnancy. Women who marry early are more likely to experience pregnancy complications, resulting in maternal death or disability, including obstructed labour and obstetric fistula.[1,2] Young, married girls are likely to have regular, unprotected sexual intercourse, and may face limitations in negotiating condom use with their spouses even when risk of HIV infection is known.[3] They may be at increased risk of domestic violence, due to significant age and/or power differentials within the relationship.[4,5] Additionally, early marriage has been linked as both a cause and effect of school dropout, lower educational attainment, and limited economic activities.[5]

Most countries have national laws designed to ensure that adolescents* do not marry before age 18. Nevertheless, in 2010, roughly 67 million women worldwide were married before this age, and 12% of them were married before age 15.[6] The specific impact of conflict on age at marriage and union formation has received minimal research attention. A recent World Vision report identified early marriage practices as a coping strategy in response to fear following conflict and natural disaster in Bangladesh, Somaliland and Niger.[7] Human Rights Watch has examined how child marriage practices have persisted

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*In this paper, UN definitions of adolescence and youth are applied. Adolescence refers to those who are 10–19 years of age, whereas the term youth encompasses those from 15–24 years of age.

through recent conflict and political turmoil in Yemen.[8] Militia-perpetrated child abductions and *forced marriage* have been discussed in literature from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), among others.[9] Yet, despite internal documents and reports from Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan, which suggest that conflict impacts marriage practices[10–13] and may increase child marriage risks,[12,13] there has been limited research that examines factors which promote and mitigate this practice in conflict and post-conflict settings.

In August 2011, the Women's Refugee Commission undertook research examining traditional marriage customs and perceptions of union formation within the context of conflict and displacement in two settings in Uganda: Mucwini transit camp in the north and Nakivale refugee settlement in the southwest. The main objective was to explore and document the factors that promote and mitigate child marriage during conflict, and generate recommendations to reduce the vulnerabilities of young people to child marriage in such settings. The research team used a social-ecological model as a conceptual framework to guide both research design and analysis of findings. This model, introduced through the fields of psychology and child development, has been applied to a wide range of public health research investigating the ways in which individual behaviours are determined by interacting levels of influence.[14,15] In this research, these include factors at the individual, family, community, and structural levels.

Impact of conflict in Uganda

In January 2012, Uganda was home to more than 139,000 refugees and 29,000 internally displaced persons.[16] Political upheaval has characterised Uganda's socioeconomic development since the 1970s, including major wars from 1978–79, 1981–86 and a 20-year war from 1987–2006 in the north.[17]

The war in northern Uganda resulted in the displacement of 1.7 million Ugandans,[18] mostly from the three Acholi districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader.[19] Roughly 90% of this population were shifted to "protection villages" as a result of government policies in 1996.[19,20] Families were moved from rural farming communities to centralised, internally displaced persons camps – altering traditional farming practices and reducing distance and privacy between households.[19]

Over the more than 20 years of displacement, communities and livelihoods were changed, new trading and commercial junctions developed within the camps, and many children and youth grew up knowing only displacement. The period of civil war was characterised by terror, brutal attacks on local communities, abductions and revenge killings by the Lord's Resistance Army.[21,22] In Mucwini settlement, one of the research sites, the local community suffered a brutal massacre at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army in 2002, in which many community members were forced to witness and participate in the killings of their own children and clan members.[21] The formerly displaced population of the north is young; more than 50% are under the age of 15 years and as many as 25% of children have lost one or both their parents.[18] By the end of 2010, the majority of the displaced had returned to their communities of origin, while another 70,000 re-located to transit camps in the vicinity of their homes and land.[20] At the time of this research, Mucwini was one of the last 13 transit camps.[20] These camps consisted of more than 1,000 people; however, despite their size, they possessed many of the social ailments of larger cities: poor sanitation, crowding and disease.[18]

Uganda is also host to several refugee populations. The southwestern part of the country hosts approximately 101,000 refugees across four refugee settlements.[23] Nakivale refugee settlement, the second research site, is the oldest and largest, currently hosting a diverse refugee population of roughly 57,000.[23] The number of refugees from the DR Congo has increased dramatically, from 6,000 in 2008[24] to more than 30,000 estimated in April 2010, due to recent violence in eastern DR Congo.[25] Although Nakivale settlement is far removed from mainstream society, refugees and Ugandans co-exist, and the settlement is considered more "permanent" than others, routinely morphing to accommodate new populations. Many families are able to obtain a small plot of land for cultivation within this settlement.[24] The diversity of the population, however, has resulted in complex communication issues, including problems in the education system when youth are unable to understand the language of instruction, and problems at home when youth and adults speak different languages.[25] In 2008, children under 18 years of age accounted for roughly 56.5% of the total population in the settlements of Kyaka and Nakivale.[24]

Methodology

In August 2011, the research team conducted focus group discussions and key informant interviews in the two settings. The research was formative and took a phenomenological approach,[14] exploring the lived experiences of early marriage. Focus groups were disaggregated by age and sex based on the assumption that men and women tell different stories, and that peer groups are largely established through age.[26,27] The research team conducted 18 groups, nine in Mucwini among displaced Ugandans and nine in Nakivale among refugees from DR Congo, with a total of 133 participants. Four were conducted with 10–14 year-old in-school youth, three with 10–14 year-old out-of-school youth, four with 15–19 year-old in-school youth, three with 15–24 year-old youth married before 18 years of age, two with parents of youth who married before the age of 18, and two with parents whose children had not married before age 18. Focus group participants were mobilised through community leaders and randomly selected. Focus group discussions explored circumstances, expectations, and goals of and for youth; perceptions related to dating, courtship, and marriage; the impact of conflict and displacement on these practices; and perception of existing and needed services.

The research team also conducted nine key informant interviews in Mucwini and eight in Nakivale with community leaders, Ugandan educational officials, head teachers, health workers, legal officers, religious leaders, NGO staff engaged in youth programming, and UN staff overseeing youth programmes. The key informants were purposively selected to discuss their observations and perceptions relating to marriage norms (including age at first marriage), factors which promote or protect against the practice of child marriage in these sites, and the availability of related programmes.

Interview tools were developed by the Women's Refugee Commission and faculty from Makerere University School of Public Health, and translated into local languages by local research assistants. Each study team comprised three individuals: a researcher representing the Women's Refugee Commission, and one male and one female research assistant from the region where the research was conducted. Focus group discussions were conducted in the local language, and responses were translated into English by research assistants who moderated the discussions. Some local terminologies of significance were kept within transcripts and compiled with field notes.

During the data collection period daily team debriefings were conducted to assess whether saturation had been reached. Additionally, the two data collection teams came together to discuss findings, themes, notable trends, and memorable quotes. Thematic content analysis was employed for this research.[28]

Ethical approval was obtained from Makerere University School of Public Health Higher Degrees Research and Ethics Committee and from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS 2603). The Office of the Prime Minister Directorate of Refugees gave permission for this research in Nakivale refugee settlement.

Findings

In this research, marriage was defined as any union accepted by the community to be "marriage", excluding courtship and dating. Participants distinguished between formalised marriage (which included traditional or religious ceremonies and the exchange of bride price) and informal marriages acknowledged by the community over time. This research did not explicitly explore forced marriage. The increased practice of early relationships among adolescents, combined with the expansion of informal marriages was a theme which was consistent throughout interviews in both settings.

Marriage practices before conflict

Participants stated that formalised marriage was common before conflict. Traditional practices which characterised these formal marriages firmly established the relationship between the families of the bride and groom. In Mucwini, parents and community leaders said that in their youth, marriage negotiations were lengthy. After the boy and girl had expressed a desire to marry, tradition dictated various exchanges of clothing, food, and payments between families as a display of mutual respect. Traditional marriage ceremonies occurred only after both families agreed to the marriage, and bride price solidified the marriage and new relationship between families. The majority of adult participants in Mucwini agreed that marriage before conflict tended to occur when both male and female youth were in their early to mid-20s, following an engagement of up to five years. Family members and village elders were directly involved in negotiating how and

when a marriage would take place, as well as how tensions within a marriage would be resolved.

"After the letter came [from the girl's family], the boy's father would meet with clan members to plan to receive the girl's family. They would brew beer and prepare food. It would be the girl's brothers who would come to the home on the set day and the boy's clan would receive them [to begin marriage negotiations]". (Community leader, Mucwini)

"Before the war, the boy had to talk to the girl, then to his parents [and she had to talk to hers], then parents bless them. The war brought a lot of changes. [Before, the boy] first had to prepare a house and prepare the household." (Adults with children not married before 18 years, Nakivale)

In Nakivale, parents emphasised the importance of preparation within the family, and by the groom for marriage. Bride price and the establishment of a home were fundamental to the practice of marriage. As in Mucwini, they described a long period of courtship and a variety of social customs which surrounded a marriage agreement.

Marriage practices during and after conflict

In both Mucwini and Nakivale, the processes and traditions of marrying changed significantly following conflict, and definitions of marriage were adjusted. Although respondents described formalised, socially sanctioned marriage, inclusive of courtship, family approval, and bride price, it was no longer taken for granted that young people would marry in this way. Indeed, many youth from both settings reported that they had never seen a traditional marriage in which bride price was exchanged. Early relationships and informal marriages had replaced these practices.

"They will start having sex together without the parents' knowledge, which wasn't there before the war. This will lead them into [informal] marriage, even when they are young." (Community leader, Mucwini)

Parents and community leaders in both places said conflict had led to poverty, limited educational opportunities, and weakened family structure, affecting marriage practices.

Although the term "marriage" was used throughout our findings, it was clear that formal, traditional marriage had largely been replaced by sexual partnerships that may lead to informal marriages, often at an early age. Youth, parents, and community leaders reported that young

people now initiated relationships in their early teens, many times leading to cohabitation and early parenting by their middle to late teenage years.

Factors promoting early relationships and marriage
Poverty
The impact of poverty on bride price was one of the most dramatic influences reported to affect marriage practices in these settings, as the conflicts in northern Uganda and eastern DRC negatively altered family and community economies. In many cases, entire clans among the Acholi and Congolese refugees were unable to access land and livestock during displacement, yet marriage had traditionally revolved around access to these resources. In some cases, cash or smaller gifts had taken the place of land and livestock. In others, bride price payment might be postponed until the man's economic circumstances allowed. In many cases, payment of bride price was rare, and socially sanctioned marriages limited. Young people growing up in these settlements did not see formal marriage as a likely possibility.

Participants widely agreed that traditionally bride price bestowed respect, social legitimacy and at times protection upon both families, the groom, and especially the bride. Its absence was reported to increase vulnerabilities faced by young, informally married couples.

"The family of the boy is respected for paying bride price. The conflict changed the reasons for marriage because it made people poor… Young men cannot afford to pay bride price, which is very important in the process of marriage. Marriage no longer has value." (Girls married before age 18, Nakivale)

The inability of parents to provide financially for their children had resulted in new motivating factors for individuals and families to consider earlier relationships. Adults expressed frustration with the trend towards informal relationships among youth at an early age, but many felt disempowered to address these changes since they were unable to meet their children's needs.

"We have no foundation, and that is why our children do not marry. They may get pregnant or impregnate at a very early age and start staying together without the consent of both parents [because we have no wealth]." (Adults with children not married before 18 years, Nakivale)

"I think that if our communities were more [economically] empowered, they would truly

say 'no' to early marriage. The economy is really pushing them to do things they don't want." (NGO staff, Mucwini)

Educators, community leaders, and NGO workers observed that young girls were motivated to take up relationships in order to obtain needed items and eventually to leave the home. Young people agreed that family poverty motivated many youth to enter into a relationship at an early age, sometimes resulting in early and unintended pregnancy. For girls who did become pregnant in an informal relationship, the prospects of formal marriage diminished significantly.

"They get married because they are looking for a way of helping their families, which are poor. [Others] are impregnated by older men [due to sex for money] and they are forced to get married to them because after a girl has produced before getting married, it is hard to get a man for marriage." (Girls married before age 18, Nakivale)

Splintering of families
Conflict has taken a heavy toll on family relationships and communication, including traditional coming-of-age practices. The splintering of family networks due to conflict created changes that diminished cross-generational communication regarding dating and marriage. Many parents felt isolated from their children, and elders were reportedly rarely involved in marriage decisions. Young boys and girls in both settings explained that traditional conversations with elders (Mucwini) and grandparents (Nakivale) had disappeared in the settlements, even if families were still together. Loss and trauma had a major impact, especially in Mucwini, a settlement exposed to ongoing violence. The separation from family and need for emotional connection additionally motivated early relationships.

"In the past, Acholi used to talk with youth in the courtyard in the evening time. This routine has changed. With guns and shots here and there, no one is feeling safe. Parents used to provide instruction and guidance each evening, so that the next day, youth would know how to behave." (Community leader, Mucwini)

"Mucwini was among the hardest hit by violence and many experienced extreme trauma…They turned to alcohol, suicide, and [became] generally absent from the lives of their children." (Local official, Mucwini)

"Now people are marrying because they need [emotional] support due to the consequences of war – because the war had too many parents killed so the boy would prefer to marry so that they can have someone to help or for support." (Males married before 18, Mucwini)

"Others may be sad, or feel they are missing something, especially if their parents have died, and may look for comfort or support from a man." (Local official, Nakivale)

Dropping out of school due to lack of safety and access
Participants at the Nakivale settlement pointed to limitations in access to education and language barriers in school as factors contributing to school drop-out and early, informal marriages. Congolese youth in Nakivale, who typically speak Kiswahili, had difficulty following classes taught by Ugandan teachers in Runyankole. As well, the settlement was geographically spread out and the long distances that many youth would need to travel to get to secondary school also deterred attendance, especially among girls. Parents and youth explained that both boys and girls unable to continue school were motivated to date and marry informally at an earlier age than they would if they had stayed at school.

"Children don't go to school [in the settlement]. They don't have any occupation and because of too much boredom, they are pushed to marry at a very young age." (Adults with children married before 18 years, Nakivale)

In Kitgum district, community leaders and parents reported that for many years, young people were kept home from school due to insecurity. Mucwini itself was unsafe for a long period during the war. Although both boys and girls were affected by security concerns, including abduction, child recruitment, and rape, it was more common for girls to be kept home and do housework than go to school. Educators and community leaders said that young girls were rarely present in school beyond standard six or seven due to lack of security, household responsibilities, early relationships, marriage, and/or childbearing.

Impact of early relationships
Participants in both locations expressed concerns regarding high levels of school drop-out and risks of unemployment and poverty, both leading to

and resulting from early relationships and informal marriages. Additionally, both parents and youth suggested that the absence of bride price and other traditional practices compromised mutual respect within unions, creating two forms of risk. First, unmarried girls in informal relationships may be seen as lacking virtue.

"When a man cannot pay bride price, a girl is called a cheap one, cursed, has bad luck and she is disrespected." (Adults with children not married before 18 years, Nakivale)

Second, the informal nature of some of these unions resulted in the isolation of young couples within their communities. Clan and elder support was likely to be absent since relationships were largely arranged by youth themselves. Participants knew of few available services for young married couples, and couples were described as being unlikely to reach out to connect with support structures.

"These people who are young, they don't really associate with the community. They cannot express themselves about how they are feeling... These young couples stay isolated." (Community leader, Mucwini)

According to participants, the combination of reduced family involvement and the absence of bride price increased the likelihood that informal marriages and relationships would be short-lived. Adolescents and adults in the community said young women who had entered early relationships and separated from their partners were especially vulnerable when they had children.

"For the one living without a husband, they say that there is nothing expected from them because they don't have work, they are not educated, and they don't have husbands. They are taken as good for nothing." (Girls married before 18, Nakivale)

"During their spare time…they look for men who can have sex with them in exchange for money. They don't like doing prostitution, but that's the only occupation which can earn them money." (Girls married before 18, Nakivale)

Discussion

The methodology used in this research does not support the assertion of a causal relationship between conflict and early marriage, nor are results generalisable to all conflict-affected individuals in these populations or in other refugee or displaced populations. Similar data were not collected about non-conflict-affected groups to be able to draw comparisons about early marriage and relationships more broadly in Uganda or the DR Congo. Instead, this research focused on examining factors which may contribute to the practice of early marriage in conflict and post-conflict settings. Additionally, we have presented participants' perceptions of how and if marriage and relationship practices had changed as a result of conflict. Efforts were made to reduce bias in reporting by recruiting local research assistants and ensuring that data were obtained from multiple informants and members of the community.

While the populations included in this research, and type of conflict experienced were different, our key findings show that the phenomena experienced around marriage and relationships were largely similar. Perceptions that definitions of marriage had changed were notable in both settings, as were the links made between camp life and changed relationship and marriage practices among youth. In contrast, outside of conflict-affected populations in Uganda and in the DR Congo, there are still many traditional, formal marriages occurring which include bride price.

This research has identified poverty, school drop-out, and lack of economic and social caretaking as the main factors that have promoted early relationships and informal marriage in both settings studied. High rates of poverty[6,7,12,29,30] and low access to education[6,31–34] are frequently associated with early marriage. Our respondents believed these had worsened in both settings as a result of conflict, potentially exacerbating pre-existing child marriage practices or introducing new practices as a coping strategy to address new risks.

Prior research has suggested that conflict and insecurity may motivate child marriage[35] or help to provide "stability during unstable social periods".[36] This research supports these prior findings, and goes further to identify breakdown in parent and youth communication, following conflict, as impacting relationship practices. Additionally, loss and trauma were discussed by participants within this research as factors motivating youth to form early unions. In this research, the desire to find comfort in others following multiple losses, fragmentation of families and community during displacement, and the exposure

to violence during conflict, were associated with youths' motivation to find a partner at an early age. Although many youth, especially girls, realised that being in a relationship did not always result in the protection and support that they hoped for, many continued to seek out relationships.

In normal times, the exchange of bride price may promote early marriage practices, as an economic survival strategy for a girl's parents.[32,35] During conflict, however, the difficulties young men and their families faced in securing sufficient bride price played a different, but equally significant, role. In South Sudan, the inability of young men to access wealth for bride price as a result of conflict has removed many from formal courtship traditions, leaving young girls to marry older, more financially established men.[11,37] In this research, many young married and unmarried girls felt that the absence of bride price was problematic inasmuch as they lost some degree of protection and social status. UNICEF has similarly noted that informal marriages may deny basic protections.[29] The lack of bride price may not specifically be connected to earlier age at marriage following conflict, but it is very likely to increase the vulnerabilities of girls.

Effective interventions to reduce these risks are critical in humanitarian settings. A 2013 World Vision publication reports that Uganda is 16th among the 25 countries with the highest rates of early marriage – 46% of girls are married before age 18 and 12% before age 15. The DR Congo is 24th on the list, with 39% married before age 18 and 8% before age 15.[7] If the trend is for this to become even more common in conflict and post-conflict areas, as perceived by our respondents, then the risks are high indeed.

Recommendations

Humanitarian programmes should empower parents and young people in settlements to access viable livelihoods, increase safe access to secondary education for both boys and girls, involve community members in protection strategies, seek to reduce isolation of young people in relationships and especially those with young children, and build resilience among youth to overcome physical, mental, and emotional strains during and after emergencies. At the time of the research, youth programming in both settings in Uganda, was either thinly stretched, sporadic, or discontinued. An education programme targeting young

mothers was in the early stages of implementation in areas around Mucwini, and may show promise for reaching this vulnerable group. More programmes must ensure the integration of married adolescents within health, education, and livelihoods projects. Additionally:

- Cross-sectoral strategies to mitigate early marriage and relationships among youth need to be mainstreamed within the humanitarian response, and the impact of interventions on social outcomes, including early dating and marriage among adolescents, monitored.
- National and local governments must be supported in sensitising communities to policies which are established to reduce risks of child marriage. National policies prohibiting child marriage are important in this effort, and humanitarian actors should support these activities.
- Strategies to reduce early marriage, including early formal and informal union, should be piloted in humanitarian settings. Promising programmes to this end have emerged in non-conflict settings and include efforts to build life skills and promote school enrolment through cash transfers.[38]
- Services should be available in humanitarian settings for married and cohabiting adolescents, including those with children, across health, education, livelihoods and protection, which treat them as a vulnerable population. By overlooking this group, the humanitarian community exacerbates negative outcomes and risks for this population.

The insights offered through our research at Mucwini and Nakivale settlements in Uganda highlight the ways in which humanitarian contexts offer a distinct opportunity to understand how society changes with regard to informal unions and marriage practices during and following displacement and conflict, and to examine ways to reduce risks experienced by a highly vulnerable population.

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Résumé

Si le mariage d'enfants, défini comme le mariage avant l'âge de 18 ans, bénéficie d'une attention accrue dans les pays où la pratique est particulièrement fréquente, on s'est moins attaché à comprendre les facteurs influençant les relations amoureuses, le mariage et la cohabitation entre adolescents touchés par le conflit et le déplacement. Cet article présente les facteurs qui contribuent à des relations précoces et des mariages informels dans les contextes de conflit et post-conflit, sur la base d'une recherche qualitative entreprise parmi deux populations distinctes en Ouganda : des déplacés internes dans le camp de transit de Mucwini en Ouganda septentrional et des réfugiés congolais dans le camp de réfugiés de Nakivale, dans le sud-ouest de l'Ouganda. Les thèmes ont été examinés au moyen d'un cadre socio-écologique. Les conclusions indiquent que des réorientations fondamentales dans les économies, les relations familiales et les communications, jointes à des changements structurels rencontrés dans les environnements, ont abouti à des modifications des relations amoureuses et des modes de mariage. Les participants ont indiqué que la pauvreté, l'éclatement de la famille et le manque d'instruction – des facteurs qui avaient été à leur avis exacerbés par le conflit dans les deux environnements – avaient profondément influencé les idées, les perceptions et les comportements des jeunes autour des relations amoureuses et du mariage. Nous identifions les interventions applicables aux contextes humanitaires qui pourraient offrir aux adolescents réfugiés et déplacés internes des possibilités accrues et plus constructives de développement.

Resumen

Pese a la creciente atención al matrimonio infantil, definido como matrimonio antes de los 18 años de edad, en países donde la práctica está muy extendida, se ha prestado menos atención a entender los factores que afectan las relaciones, el matrimonio y la cohabitación entre adolescentes afectados por conflicto y desplazamiento. En este artículo se exponen los factores que contribuyen a relaciones tempranas y matrimonios informales en ámbitos de conflicto y postconflicto, a raíz de investigaciones cualitativas realizadas en dos poblaciones diferentes: personas desplazadas internamente en el campamento temporal de Mucwini, en Uganda septentrional y refugiados congoleses en el asentamiento de refugiados de Nakivale, en Uganda meridional-occidental. Se examinaron las temáticas mediante un marco socioecológico. Los hallazgos indican que los cambios fundamentales en economías, relaciones familiares y comunicación, combinados con cambios estructurales encontrados en los asentamientos, produjeron cambios en las relaciones y en los patrones matrimoniales. Los participantes relataron que la pobreza, división de la familia y falta de educación –que creen eran exacerbadas por conflicto en ambos ámbitos– habían afectado profundamente los puntos de vista, percepciones y comportamientos de la juventud en torno a las relaciones y el matrimonio. Identificamos las intervenciones aplicables a ámbitos humanitarios que ofrecerían a refugiados y adolescentes desplazados internamente mayores y más significativas oportunidades de desarrollo.