**Summary Report**

**Asset Exercise: Learning and Recommendations from use in Humanitarian Contexts**

**Executive Summary**

*Background:* Since 2012, the Population Council (the Council) and the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) have engaged in a thought partnership. The aim: to develop field tools that practitioners can apply to ensure programs are responsive to adolescent girls’ needs, risks and capacities in humanitarian settings.[[1]](#footnote-1), [[2]](#footnote-2) The Building Assets Toolkit (Asset Exercise) is one such tool. This report summarizes learning from the use of the Asset exercise in humanitarian settings, where it has been used in trainings for staff, along with program design and assessments. As one tool in WRC’s *I’m Here* Approach, practitioners have facilitated the participatory exercise with their peers, adolescent girls, girls’ mentors, and caregivers.   
  
*Method:* The Council and WRC conducted in-depth interviews with 12 practitioners who have used the Asset Exercise in more than ten countries; and drew on direct observations and activity reports from field implementations. The aim of this review was to document how, and with whom, the exercise is currently being used, and based on these findings, to propose recommendations for refining the Asset Exercise. Even though the findings are drawn from learning in humanitarian contexts, the proposed recommendations may be relevant to girl-focused programming in any setting.   
  
*Findings:* All participants affirmed that the Asset Exercise was a valuable participatory activity, with potential to strengthen programmers’ understanding of key concepts in adolescent development, health, and well-being that could translate into improved program design. Respondents reported that they had primarily used the Asset Exercise with other practitioners, often during capacity-strengthening workshops. Some practitioners had facilitated the exercise with girls, mentors, or caregivers, and found that its use yielded important program-relevant insights. Nearly all participants who described using the exercise with these different participant groups noted that its implementation required a high level of expertise and preparation. The sheer number of listed assets (100) was daunting, and the complexity of concepts and wording presented challenges for translation across social contexts. Participants also expressed an interest in guidance on how to prioritize assets and on how to translate the activity into concrete “next steps,” appropriate to the program. Additionally, practitioners noted its limitations for use in high-mobility contexts, which are common in humanitarian settings.  
  
*Recommendations:* All practitioners called for simplifying the exercise and streamlining the guidance. Respondents emphasized a need for: (a) clear guidance identifying a set of basic assets relevant to all contexts; (b) parameters for how to include an appropriate range of domains and topics when identifying cards; (c) simplifying the phrasing of individual cards, and (d) concrete guidance for how practitioners should move from the asset exercise to next steps appropriate to its use in either introducing or promoting reflections on the purpose, aims, and core concepts in programming with and for girls; or to inform decisions about a specific program’s goals, content, and indicators of progress,

**Background**Since 2012, the Population Council (the Council) and Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) partnership has centered on developing field tools that can make humanitarian responses more responsive to adolescent girls’ needs, risks, and capacities. This collaboration has fostered the development and field-testing of tools that help practitioners gather actionable information, while proactively engaging adolescent girls, boys, their caretakers and important adults in their lives.

Together, the Council and WRC co-developed and adapted the Girl RosterTM, a programming tool that enables practitioners to identify and engage adolescent girls.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Girl Roster™ entails administering a brief survey of every household in a set geographic area to create a basic profile, or “snapshot” grouping all the girls and young women in that area by key socio-demographic characteristics.

**Asset-building** is an approach rooted in an understanding that girls’ chances of making a safe and healthy transition to adulthood improve when they have the support they need to build knowledge, skills, and relationships, and have or can access critical resources to make and act on healthy choices as they get older. Asset-building reflects an inherently multi-sectoral approach to girls’ health and well-being. While stand-alone programs may not build *all* assets, specific assets can be operationalized into distinct positive, developmentally and socially appropriate age-bound benchmarks for measuring program success.

***The Asset Exercise:***The activity centers on assigning 100 asset cards to age cards (2-year intervals for ages 6-20). Participants work as a group to determine *which* assets are important, and to identify the *latest* age a girl *should* acquire each one in order to have it *before* she needs to use it. The current version of the Asset Exercise includes: the background, or “origin story” for each card; a list of resources on key learning from girl-onlyprogramming; and a worksheet that guides practitioners from the identification of key assets to their use in program design or evaluation. Assets can serve as either topics to include in content for tailored, community-based girl programming or indicators of program quality or

**The Asset Exercise is intended to:**

* **Provoke critical thinking** among practitioners about program goals, content, and potential links with services or programming across sectors.
* **Operationalize** the idea that girls’ abilities to make and act on healthy choices rests in part on what assets, or “stores of value” they control – and can mobilize when needed.
* **Engage girls, practitioners and community stakeholders** in the same process; and
* **Inform decision-making** about concrete program components, such as priority age “segments” for programming, age-appropriate content, and potential indicators of programs’ success.

The Girl RosterTM is an essential component in WRC’s *I’m Here* Approach. Designed for use in humanitarian contexts, the *I’m Here* Approach consists of five steps and complementary tools that enable practitioners to identify and engage isolated, harder-to-reach and overlooked groups of adolescent girls and boys; and to link them to services and targeted programs that address their needs, risks, and capacities. Building from the co-development and refinement of the Girl RosterTM, the Council and WRC identified an opportunity to tailor the Asset Exercise[[4]](#footnote-4)—an existing Council resource—for use in humanitarian settings.

For this project, the Council and WRC drew on in-depth interviews with humanitarians who have implemented the exercise; observations from direct experience in facilitating the Asset Exercise with humanitarian practitioners; and program and training activity reports. The aim of this project was to gather an initial understanding of the contexts, populations, and programs where humanitarian practitioners have used the Asset Exercise; to identify emerging lessons and insights from these experiences; and to tailor guidance specific to humanitarian settings.

We sought to gather insights in two areas:

1. **How and with whom has the Asset Exercise been used in humanitarian contexts?** By learning about how practitioners have used the Asset Exercise, we sought to identify: first, with what audiences, and at what stages in program design and humanitarian response it has been used; and, second, what potential it may have as a tool for strengthening programming in the future.
2. **What adaptations to the Asset Exercise could help support humanitarian practitioners and the adolescent girls their programs reach?**Drawing on insights and recommendations from participants, we present a (draft) set of adapted asset cards.The guidance addresses key decisions that program staff make in: (a) deciding when, and with whom to use the Asset Exercise – and what to do with the results; and (b) how facilitators should prepare for implementing the exercise with different groups, such as practitioners, adolescent girls, and community stakeholders.

**Methods**:

To answer these questions, we drew on:

* Semi-structured key-informant interviews with 12 practitioners. Respondents were purposively selected. These practitioners had (a) been involved in Council and/or WRC-led workshops or trainings that involved the Asset Exercise; and (b) represented a range of technical backgrounds.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Activity reports and colleagues’ feedback about the Asset Exercise, including notes on direct observations from facilitation experiences in facilitating the Asset Exercise with humanitarian practitioners in the Middle East, East Africa, West Africa, and Latin America/Caribbean.

***Ethical Review & Informed Consent:*** Prior to conducting interviews, we obtained ethical approval from the Population Council Institutional Review Board. Each interview participant provided verbal informed consent before agreeing to take part in an interview. We did not collect participants’ names on any study notes or other materials and took steps to ensure that any information that might make them identifiable, such as locations or agency names where they had worked would not be included in any documentation of the project. We compiled notes from interviews and our observations, developed informal written memos and discussed insights from each interview to identify key emerging themes, and identify priority areas for the guidance and revised assets.

Findings

***How and with whom has the Asset Exercise been used in humanitarian contexts?***

This section highlights with whom and in which settings practitioners have the Asset Exercise. The section also describes how the Asset Exercise is used with specific stakeholders

Respondents reported using the exercise with program staff, mentors, adolescent girls, and caregivers and other important adults. The purpose of the exercise varies with each of these groups. For example, when participants are practitioners, the primary function of the exercise may be in promoting critical thinking and competence around why a program should focus on adolescent girls, or to provoke discussion of whether specific assets will indeed be developed with existing program content. When used with adolescent girls, the Asset Exercise may help to practitioners identify concrete program priorities, such as selecting or developing program content and developing indicators. With adults, the Asset Exercise can be entry-point for community engagement in support of girls’ health, development and agency.

Feedback from respondents suggests that the diversity of uses creates a need for planning around how and why to use the exercise, and what to do next. The “next steps” guidance appears geared toward situations where the purpose of the exercise is to guide selection of M&E indicators or critical reviews of program content. This, they suggested, is not aligned with its most common use: to encourage critical thinking among staff members about how program content can best support girls in a positive and healthy transition to adulthood—absent a specific program.

**With practitioners – during capacity strengthening trainings and workshops:** The Asset Exercise has typically been used in the context of staff trainings and capacity strengthening activities—the activity operationalizes the idea of *“thinking from the perspective of a girl.”* As one respondent said, the Asset Exercise *“debunks the popular notion that safe spaces are solely a physical place where girls can play.”*

Respondents highlighted three important themes in using the Asset Exercise with practitioners: (a) fosters collective reflection and enables participants to question assumptions about the function of girl-specific programming; and (b) presents a lens through which practitioners can assess whether existing content/curricula for girls’ programming is age-appropriate and incorporates relevant content and learning strategies that will support girls to build assets across domains. Particularly when the practitioners involved have diverse specialties, it may also (c) promote thinking and discussion about the multiple domains of “asset-building” and the importance of coordinating across sectors to promote girls’ health and well-being.

Shifts in thinking about what makes a “safe space” for girls, or what programs can achieve are typically a core learning outcome of using the Asset Exercise in the context of program design or capacity strengthening workshops. One practitioner reflected on the importance of the tool for orienting staff members’ thinking:

“*It can be used to remind people who call themselves experts but don’t have a lot of contact with girls day to day, it can be really grounding (I include myself in this). And, in design workshops with field staff – you often say that everyone is an expert, but that’s not the reality – an education expert, for example, who is good at that, but not used to thinking about different girls & different situations; it can also be really useful for staff in that sort of situation.”*

When used this way, the exercise surfaced assumptions that practitioners may have about what makes girls vulnerable, what constitutes “protection,” and how these compare with what targeted humanitarian programs were planning or prepared to offer.

Because practitioners have used the exercise mostly during regional or country-level workshops for staff from multiple programs or sectors, the current guidance—which includes a very detailed chart for selecting and refining indicators—may be misaligned with its primary use (to date). However, respondents also suggested that guidance on how to synthesize insights or key lessons from using the exercise would enhance its value and strengthen participants’ sense of its relevance, regardless of the context where they encountered it.

**“Sensitive” Topics and Program Implementation:** The Asset Exercise challenges participants to think about when girls need to be prepared with information, skills, or resources *before* they might need them. This dialogue is critical because elevated risks are often directly associated with “sensitive topics” such as sexual and reproductive health or girls’ rights and agency in relation to marriage, education and employment. Where one group is adamant that programs should withhold information about HIV prevention or contraception until age 18 or 20, it is likely that this will present a challenge for efforts to ensure that this essential content is included and/or delivered as intended or at the time in girls’ lives when the information is most needed.

**Strategies for managing discussion of sensitive topics** include encouraging participants who have a grasp of the relevant evidence to relay the evidence to others. For example, facilitators may encourage those who are aware of the value of comprehensive sexuality education for delaying sexual debut, toto challenge those who claim that information about contraception or HIV is dangerous - rather than posing this kind of challenge directly. Similarly, during a debrief, rather than simply reciting evidence, facilitators may also challenge these claims and the assumptions behind them with examples of how girls *can use* information to protect themselves or advise peers. *In exercises with girls or adult community members, however, these tactics are less useful: facilitators may encourage debate, and then simply observe where participants decide to place cards, will be more instructive than seeking to change attitudes or build knowledge on the spot.*

Additionally, discussions about select assets should also entail conversation about the roles that authority figures—teachers, NGO staff, or health care providers—play in girls’ lives. Regardless of participants’ profiles, facilitators should be prepared to discuss the potential for abuse of authority – and the mechanisms that are available to report abuses or neglect by such duty-bearers – even if participants do not suggest them.

***When during humanitarian operations have practitioners used the Asset Exercise?***

Practitioners have most often used the Asset Exercise in protracted emergencies or complex emergency contexts. In such settings, practitioners pointed out that the Asset Exercise, on its own, or as part of the *I’m Here* Approach, draws attention to the importance of accounting for adolescent girls’ perspectives and the diversity of their needs, risks, and capacities. The activity helps call attention to whole-of-response accountability to adolescent girls, and the importance of breaking through siloed program and service-delivery structures. Multiple sectors are responsible for the delivery of key knowledge, skills and resources that girls need and rightly deserve: as part of a participatory dialogue involving adolescent-specific practitioners and/or those working across sectors, respondents agreed that the Asset Exercise can help to concretize this shared responsibility.

Several practitioners suggested that the Asset Exercise is best suited for use in settings where agencies anticipate having a relatively long-term, consistent program engagement with adolescent girls. Several respondents pointed out that as currently structured, the exercise is best suited to settings where long-term engagement with girls is feasible, since this enables staff to think about sequencing activities to build assets that will reinforce each other. Several respondents also noted that high staff turnover and dwindling resources for girls’ programming created an ongoing need for programs to reorient staff or set new priorities in girls’ programming. In these cases, it may be of use for cultivating new staff members’ understanding of program goals, indicators, and activities.

The Asset Exercise has not been used during the acute phase of an emergency. Respondents did not recommend modifications to the exercise for use in these time-bound contexts. They agreed that existing inter-agency guidelines already cover essential actions and priorities, including the distinct needs of adolescent girls. Therefore, to promote adolescent girls’ safety, health, resilience and wellbeing in the early stage of an emergency, the emphasis should be on operationalizing existing guidance and to ensuring that existing standards and guidance are effectively and consistently followed. Respondents suggested that a simplified Asset Exercise “grounded in a basic set of core assets” would be appropriate for use in preparedness and disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts. This perspective underscored an important theme throughout our interviews: that the sheer number of cards, and level of detail and specificity on each mean that they are difficult to align with decision-making in the context of preparedness, or during the weeks that immediately follow a crisis.

***Safe Spaces: A Core Asset for Acute Emergencies***

While they did not suggest using the exercise itself in an acute emergency, several respondents pointed out that during the early phases of an emergency, a safe [physical] space, that girls and caregivers could discern as safe and reliably accessible was an essential asset. For girls, establishing routines, having a place to play, to meet with friends and build relationships, and to access information and resources humanitarians have adapted for them are all important in this acute phase. However, respondents pointed out that this is still not the norm: although establishing child-friendly spaces is common practice, establishing adolescent girl-only spaces is more difficult. Caregivers and girls themselves may be reluctant to allow girls to move around a community to reach a space; and funding for this age group is limited; institutional leadership may lack the commitment, knowledge of good practices, or both, necessary to establish appropriate settings; or community leaders may view such programs with suspicion – particularly if social norms or fears about girls’ safety limit their activities in in public spaces.

***High-Migration Contexts:***Several participants noted that it is difficult to adapt the Asset Exercise for settings of high migration, where programs’ contact with girls may be short-lived or inconsistent. In these settings, the relatively long-term view of “asset-building” may seem remote and beyond the reach of what a program can achieve. Respondents also suggested that focusing on a few core/basic assets, and/or to guide discussion toward how a program can support girls of various ages, even where long-term program engagement to build all age-appropriate assets is not feasible.

**Case study:***Girls’ Protective Assets & West African Ebola Outbreak Response.*

During the 2015 Ebola response, one respondent incorporated the Asset Exercise into the planning phase of efforts to strengthen the response for adolescent girls. To introduce staff to the exercise, the respondent first facilitated the exercise with a group of 15 local staff members. A small team of young women staff members selected, translated and simplified asset cards. In order to keep both the asset and other exercise under two hours, they chose a subset of cards and did not use any blank ones. Girls took part in the activity in groups defined by age (10-14; 15-19), with 10 participants per group. The team also conducted similar-sized groups of adult caretakers’ perspectives. One staff member facilitated the exercise and one took notes during each exercise.

*Findings and Use:* Girls placed cards at earlier ages than the facilitators anticipated: often at age 6 or 8; while adults typically skewed toward early adolescence (10-12). When probed, the girls offered two reasons for these selections: the pressure that they felt to provide for families affected by the crisis often meant that they were exposed to exploitative relationships with men that they felt totally unequipped to managed; and because they felt their caregivers were also unprepared. For example, girls expressed frustration with their mothers’ inadequate knowledge about contraception: while they felt girls should use contraceptives, they did not know enough to help when girls experienced frightening side effects. In response to the findings of the Asset Exercise and other participatory activities, the agency’s team developed simple program content, focused on health and social support, for use with girls’ clubs that met in already-existing women’s program spaces.

**Recommendations:**

The following recommendations reflect a synthesis of respondents suggestions and our analysis of findings on adaptations that will support effective use in humanitarian settings.

**Prioritizing Asset Cards:** For practitioners, the most common—and daunting—task was reducing the number of assets from more than 100 to a reasonable number for review in the 90 minutes (or less) that is routinely allocated for the exercise and debrief. While in some cases, a gender-based violence or child protection specialist with experience working in a given context might take on the task of selecting assets before facilitating the activity, this is rare. Even where such specialized knowledge was available, participants described a sense of paralysis—too many to choose from—and a sense that rather than proactively identifying priority topics, their primary task was to weed out irrelevant or inapplicable assets. Respondents affirmed that this may lead to the hasty removal of assets associated with “sensitive topics” that might be both informative and retained with more deliberation. To prevent this demotivating experience, respondents suggested that guidance on selecting a “core set” of assets would enable them to make the most of the exercise.

***Identifying Basic Assets:*** Participants suggested that for humanitarian practitioners, guidance should be framed in response to the questions of: *“What assets are of critical importance in any and all settings? What are the basic core related to safety, health, resilience and well-being?”* Such a focus would help practitioners to think *first* from the perspective of what girls *need,* and then to consider opportunities for what role their program might play in delivering them, whether in delivering programming directly or linking girls with other services. This approach may encourage both creative problem-solving and realistic goal-setting, even in high mobility settings or programs where contact with girls is relatively short-term.

**Simplify Concepts & Create Complementary Visuals:** The combination of complex phrasing and concepts, coupled with the number of assets, presents challenges for applying the exercise in settings where adolescent girls or other participants may have low literacy or struggle with reading comprehension. Likewise, during the exercise, participants must work as a group to make decisions. In communities where girls’ literacy is low, the standard approach of participant-led discussion, reflection and dialogue is not feasible, and facilitators take on a more direct role in reading cards and explaining concepts. Respondents noted that the combination of the number and complexity of assets can also make it difficult to maintain group members’ attention. This challenge is exacerbated when a facilitator reads and repeats every asset at length – particularly for younger participants. Respondents recommended: simplifying phrasing; uncoupling cards that cover two topics; adding complementary visuals to each card; and color-coding the cards by the category or domain of assets (e.g., health, education, safety, personal relationships, economic).[[6]](#footnote-6) Where the first three suggestions would help to make concepts more accessible, even to low literacy groups, the latter would help to emphasize both the cross-cutting nature of assets and the importance of working across sectors to achieve better health and well-being outcomes for girls.

*“If I were working on content right now, I would choose some of the assets and simplify, use drawings. And in presenting them, I would use with the group – and say, “as you look at this, can you give me an example of what it means?” I would use it in up-front design, involve girls and community members. Then I would take results back to the community – which we often don’t do - and say ‘what does this mean to you?’ Then you can use in monitoring, but not necessarily to just develop indicators. Also ask: is this still relevant in 6 months to a year?”* - Education specialist

***Is the purpose of the Asset Exercise to introduce a conceptual shift toward thinking about programming from a girl’s perspective; or is it to guide concrete changes in program design, indicators of success, or content?*** The answer may depend on how much control program staff involved have over concrete decisions, what stage of design or implementation a program is in, and who, specifically, is participating.

Respondents noted that a key value of the Asset Exercise lies in its adaptability for different program contexts and participant groups. However, they also expressed a sense that this flexibility is not matched by directions on how to synthesize or guide discussion beyond the space of the exercise itself. Current guidance supports only one“next step” for using the exercise: selecting program content. This is not only unrealistic—given that the exercise is often used in settings where the primary goal is to simply sensitize staff to the basic concepts, such as the diverse needs and capacities of girls at different ages—but also this focus may create a sense that it has limited value beyond the scope of a single workshop session.

Respondents recommended tailoring guidance so that program staff considering using the Asset Exercise could first consider: (a) who should be included in the exercise; (b) at what stage in programming they were; and (c) at what phase or kind of humanitarian response they were working. They highlighted two overarching potential goals, and suggested that both be made explicit:

*Conceptual Shifts:* The Asset Exercise most often serves as an introduction to the idea of *“asset-building”* as an entry-point for thinking about the purpose or priorities of a community-based program for girls. To foster such critical thinking around what a program can achieve, once cards have all been placed, facilitators may ask workshop participants to reflect during debrief sessions on whether girls *were getting* the assets at the ages they designated. This guidance could also include facilitation prompts – for example, some facilitators ask practitioners (and girls) if the same asset is relevant to boys, and whether boys are also getting (or not getting) them at the ages agreed for girls; this prompt can reveal unjust gender-based inequalities among girls and boys.

*Concrete Planning:* Programs rarely―if ever―use the findings of the exercise as a direct input into design of indicators or identification of concrete content. The gap between the Asset Exercise and program design is likely the result of several factors, many of which the exercise cannot address. To bridge the gap, each asset (or bundles of assets) could be linked to complementary guidance on its program implications and/or where to locate relevant girl-only program content as relevant.

One respondent also suggested that the exercise could be used to identify what one participant called “sticky” topics, or areas where participants strongly disagreed. Such discussions may offer facilitators or programs’ decision-makers important insights. For example, it may reflect an accurate understanding of what “assets” are or are not relevant to girls in a given context; or it may point to a priority that girls may need, but where a program may encounter resistance in supporting them to access.

*It’s often really hard to revise programs once they are underway – program staff are often provided a set curriculum, and there’s so little space to modify even if they start to see important things are missing …maybe doing this early in a response would be easier – some of the assets are not that challenging to provide, or they don’t need to be delivered in a formal way.* – Education and program management specialist

**Conclusion**

While the Asset Exercise is a valuable tool as it is, respondents identified a few specific concrete assets that may be of use in emergency settings. These recommendations related to three themes: (a) prioritizing assets to an essential core. In the words of one respondent: *“More is not better. More is more;”* (b) simplifying language of individual cards and including complementary visual representations of each asset; (c) setting expectations for how the results of the exercise would be used in informing real-world programming, including providing guidance for how to choose from among the 100+ assets to capture an appropriate range of domains and topics that were appropriate to different contexts.. The respondents further emphasized that relatively small changes could create the conceptual links necessary to better understand the asset-building program model, interventions’ rationale, and the evidence-based reasoning for equitably focusing on adolescent girls’ needs, risks, and capacities. The proposed set of revisions to the asset cards and facilitator guidance build upon practitioners’ recommendations.

**Annex I: *Revised Asset Deck***

The attached revised list of Asset cards reflects recommendations for prioritizing assets and simplifying concepts.

* The assets are organized by their recommended new number; and the number of the original asset they correspond to.
* Where we note that a *revision* is recommended, we note “revise” and include the new text
* Assets are also grouped and labeled by domain:
  + Health
  + Education/Cognitive
  + Social
  + Participation/Civic engagement
  + Safety

1. For more information about the Population Council’s Asset Exercise (i.e., Building Assets Toolkit), please refer to the Annex or visit the Council’s website: <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-assets-toolkit-developing-positive-benchmarks-for-adolescent-girls> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Additional adaptations from learning in humanitarian settings and WRC’s I’m Here Approach include the addition the Boy Matrix – a complementary set of questions that generates a profile of adolescent boys; and an adaptation of the Washington Group’s “short set"of six questions to promote disability inclusion in humanitarian settings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2019PGY_GirlRosterFactsheet.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-assets-toolkit-developing-positive-benchmarks-for-adolescent-girls> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Background include: Health, education, protection, and gender-based violence prevention and response. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One respondent noted that in their facilitation of the exercise – using only 20 cards addressing safety and health – (s)he had girls themselves draw visuals that complemented the text. During the readout, girls shared their asset card, their visual and then placed it on the wall for discussion. This activity took place in a high literacy setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)