

# Monitoring Right To Play's Child Protection Impact on War Affected Children in Mali

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*"I have reclaimed a part of myself I thought I had lost"*

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**TOPLAY**



## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to personally thank the Right To Play colleagues who were most involved in this research. In Canada: Nina Valentic, Suzanne Field, Laura Wright; and from the Mali and regional West African teams: Amadou Cisse, Aboubacar Coulibay, Shek, Armel Onugiyi, and Jean Sewanou. Above all, I am grateful for the wise, compassionate and playful input from the young people, their families, community members and government workers. Their voices and ideas form the backbone of the findings and the substance of the conclusions. They opened new gateways for deepening research and practice learning that link the rich relationship between play in it's many human forms and child protection in the context of contemporary civil conflict.

## Acronyms

APJEC - Association Por le Promotion de Jeunes et Communité

AQIM – Al Qaeda In the Islamic Magreb

CBO – Community based organization

CP - Child Protection

CRC – Convention on the Rights of the Child

CS – Case study

DRPFEEF - Direction Régionale de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille

FG – Focus group

GC – General Comment

KII – Key informant interview

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

IICRD – International Institute for Child Rights and Development

INGO – International non-governmental organization

M&E – Monitoring and evaluation

M, E, L – Monitoring, evaluation and learning

MSC – Most significant change

NGO – Non-governmental organization

NORAD - Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation

PAR – Participatory action research

RCA – Reflect, connect apply

RTP – Right to Play

UNCRC – United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO – United Nations Education and Scientific Commission

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

## Executive Summary

Education and play can be powerful entry points for protecting children affected by armed conflict. The opportunities to access humanistic quality education are threatened significantly in times of conflict, violence, and disaster. Children and youth who are most vulnerable, especially girls, are in great need of human centred play and education.

This report focuses on a review of a model of play-based education for conflict affected children in Mali, through the experience of Right To Play (Right to Play), a global leader in play-based experiential humanistic learning. The research is grounded in an ecological theory of understanding of play, education, human development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Cook and White, 2007; Rogoff, 2003).

The context for the research was a NORAD funded Right to Play program supporting conflict affected children and their families in Mali. Right To Play is implementing *Sport and Play for Children's Education in Conflict Affected Settings* in both formal and informal learning settings. Activities focus on supporting marginalized children, especially girls, to engage in quality education. The project works within refugee settlements and local communities to provide quality education to in- and out-of-school children. Right To Play's child safeguarding model is fundamental to the program approach in order to ensuring safe and protective environments for children.

## Purpose of Mali Right To Play/IICRD Research

To advance mutual learning in humanitarian child protection monitoring and evaluation in Mali and to understand the child protection opinions and lived experiences of children and youth in Segou and Bamako, Mali.

## Mali Child Protection Assessment Objectives:

1. Explore community formal (government child protection) and informal (peer networks, kinship relationships, protective cultural mechanisms) child protection systems
2. Understand how these systems are working and not working for children
3. Learn from children and youth, families, and other community members about their ideal child protection support system
4. Identify effective and appropriate ways of measuring and learning from formal and informal CP systems and related outcomes.

## Rationale for the research

Child protection is an emerging programmatic area for Right To Play Mali, but one that will have increasing and significant focus over the next five years. The research was identified as a good opportunity to inform both program design and delivery. In January 2013, fighting occurred between French soldiers and terrorist groups in Central and Northern Mali. Right to Play Mali programs now work in this area towards post-conflict outcomes. The situation is now more settled in these communities and is seeking to expand this program as Northern communities become more stable and families begin returning home.



## Research Methods

Due to the need for a highly contextual, participant centered learning approach to operationalize the monitoring mission, ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) methods were chosen to guide this process.

**Training.** The research started in early November 2014 with a review of Right to Play documentation. Field work took place from November 17 – November 27 with a research data debrief in Toronto November 28. The report was completed in late February 2015. Prior to the research implementation, Right to Play staff were trained in participatory action research and a special focus on child protection research, purpose and use of the tools, ethical guidelines, data documentation and analysis. This capacity building took the form of a one day workshop and included the following Right to Play participants:

- Regional (West Africa) child protection focal point
- Regional (West Africa) monitoring and evaluation focal point
- National child protection focal point
- Local program managers
- Child protection workers
- Local coaches

**Sample.** Sampling was purposive, focusing on diverse beneficiaries of Right to Play programs including: children, care providers and Right to Play program partners (schools, NGO's, CBO's, government). The sample comprised the following groups:

- Children already participating in Right to Play programs in Segou and Bamako (including both conflict displaced, children of the Tuareg minority, and local children) 20 – 25 children per collective activity, roughly half girls and half boys
- Child case studies chosen from displaced children participating in Right to Play activities (2-3 boys and girls per site)
- Child case studies with children unable to participate in Right to Play activities such as street children and working children (2 per site)
- Adults participating in Right to Play activities (e.g. care providers, Right to Play staff, teachers, government and NGO partners) (4-6 per site)
- Adult focus groups with displaced mothers involved in Right to Play programs (25 mothers in Segou, no FG in Bamako)

## Findings

### 1. Child safety and protection

The primary focus of the research addressed children's safety and protection.

#### Individual level outcomes

**Tools applied.** Relational mapping, social mapping, transect walk, focus groups, case study interviews.

**Results.** The research findings suggest that play is reinforcing protection and the resulting social wellbeing is contributing to children's positive outcomes in multiple ways.

### **Impact at the Level of the Children's Developmental Outcomes**

At the individual level children in Right to Play programs shared that these positive outcomes include:

- Enhancing mind-body connection – Boys and girls described feeling better about themselves as a result of physical competencies learned through play such as hand eye coordination, dexterity and a sense of well-being and joy; they also shared that their learning outcomes and work at school had improved as a result of play based skills (e.g. Frisbee, football, free play activities) learned from Right to Play coaches
- Social bonding and solidarity – Many examples were provided in the social mapping and river of life activities, of strengthened social networks and widened circles of friends resulting from participating in Right to Play teams. The need for teams to include both conflict displaced and local children was cited as a key factor leading to greater social solidarity between different groups of children.
- Learning and creative thinking to solve social problems – Young respondents provided a number of examples where problem solving skills such as dispute resolution and mediation were used to include children in Right to Play teams who were otherwise being excluded, for example Tuareg children shunned due to their association with resistance to the Malian government.
- Fostering agency, community engagement and social activism – One of the remarkable results of the influence of collective play based activities is the increased sense of social justice and injustice identified by participants and the ways this is being channelled into various community engagement and activist activities. The following case study of Mariam highlights the strengthened relationship between Right to Play Mali and local youth lead social activist organizations.

## **2. Child protection response mechanisms: Understanding how these systems are working and not working for children**

**Tools applied.** River of life: Most Significant Change, case study interviews, key informant interviews.

**Results.** The River of Life: Most Significant Change activity was conducted with youth in Segou (unfortunately there wasn't enough time to conduct the same activity with young people in Bamako). Results indicated various ways that Right to Play activities have positively influenced both formal and non-formal protection systems.

The River of Life activity revealed key actions identified by youth from when Right to Play began working with them in February 2013 and November 2014 (the time of the present research). Participants described and discussed a rich foundation of trainings, community sensitization activities, radio announcements, debating competitions, interspersed with various Frisbee and football tournaments.

Significant changes that resulted from the Right to Play interventions included:

- Increased youth awareness of unexploded war ordinance
- Use of play to teach about child rights
- Sensitization of adults on rights and protection of children, especially for girls
- Peer support for socially excluded war displaced youth
- Youth in the North using the training for unexploded war ordinance
- Inclusion of vulnerable girls in sport and other community activities

Individual stories describing real life events that occurred in relation to these significant impacts were gathered. After a lengthy debate on the merits of each significant story, the 2 groups selected their most significant change story, including a rationale as to why this story and its message of social change was important.

The two most significant impact stories were: 1. Sensitization of adults on rights and protection of children, especially for girls, and; 2. Peer support for socially excluded war displaced youth. Each team developed a role play to act out the story and performed this to the other group.

Eventually, both groups voted on the most significant story and the drama on *Support for socially excluded war displaced youth by other youth* was chosen due to the importance of social inclusion of ostracized, very vulnerable conflict affected children.

## Recommendations

### Humanitarian recommendations

1. Continue to refine the documentation and dissemination of Right to Play's play-based approach to child protection within the broader humanitarian sector.
2. Build on Right to Play's education model by further engaging non-formal actors such as peer groups, mothers, community leaders and faith leaders.
3. Continue to enhance and integrate play based "soft" skills with "hard" humanitarian skills.
4. Further strengthen Right to Play's focus on most vulnerable children, especially those not attending school, in conflict affected communities.

### General Recommendations

1. Strengthen child centred approach to M&E.
2. Use the opportunity of Mali partnership (and possibly others) to build on collective strengths of Right to Play and IICRD.

3. Connect Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning more closely with core programming practice.
4. Creatively and progressively use qualitative participatory M&E approaches *without* losing rigor.
5. Strengthen children's participation as partners in the whole M&E process.
6. Policy and advocacy, focus on enhanced child rights international policy to play and protection through tools such as GC 13 (CP) and 17 (Play).
7. Scale Right to Play training to target professional teacher training programs and teachers professional associations.
8. Emphasis on capacity building spectrum from development through humanitarian interventions, pre/during/post conflict.

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## Background

Education and play can be powerful entry points for protecting children affected by armed conflict. The opportunities to access humanistic quality education are threatened significantly in times of conflict, violence, and disaster. Children and youth who are most vulnerable, especially girls, are in great need of human centred play and education.

Play is found in all cultures and is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of children's full and healthy development (UNESCO, 1998). Indeed, play is often thought of as an integral part of our humanity as *homo ludens* the playful human (Huizinga, 1944; Sutton-Smith 1996). Unfortunately, the growing cross-cultural evidence base on the benefits of using play to learn and psychosocially flourish is often not integrated into school curricula, particularly in the Global South. It is even less available to children suffering the effects of conflict and community violence (UN Study on Violence Against Children, 2005; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

This report focuses on a review of a model of play-based education for conflict-affected children in Mali, through the experience of Right To Play, a global leader in play-based experiential humanistic learning. The research is grounded in an ecological theory of understanding of play, education, human development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Cook and White, 2006; Rogoff, 2003).

Right To Play's methodology and approach is founded on participatory, experiential learning and the work of educationalists such as Friere, Brown, Piaget, and Bransford. Connecting play-based learning to education in unstable environments further increases young peoples' success in education through regular participation in active, safe learning and child-centred pedagogy. In both conflict and non-conflicts settings, sport and play activities promote children's meaningful participation, coping skills, concentration, problem solving, critical thinking, positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, the capacity to have fun and manage stress, and the ability to envision a future with hope. Engaging traditional leaders, teachers, parents/caregivers, and community in play and learning, and positioning children and youth in play-based peer mentorship roles, have together been shown to strengthen the holistic learning experience.

Play and recreation are enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Global accountability to Article 31 has been further strengthened through the creation of General Comment (GC) 17 (2013), in which state party obligations to children's rights to play and recreation are outlined. GC 17 explains that play is essential to the health and well-being of children and promotes:

*“The development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills. They contribute to all aspects of learning;<sup>1</sup> they are a form of participation in everyday life and are of intrinsic value to the child, purely in terms of the enjoyment and pleasure they afford. Research evidence highlights that playing is also central to children's spontaneous drive for development, and that it performs a significant role in the development of the brain, particularly in the early years. Play and recreation facilitate children's capacities to negotiate, regain emotional balance, resolve*

<sup>1</sup>UNESCO, *Education for the twenty-first century: issues and prospects* (Paris, 1998).

*conflicts and make decisions. Through their involvement in play and recreation, children learn by doing; they explore and experience the world around them; experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences and in so doing, learn to understand and construct their social position within the world.” (UNCRC GC 17)*

The rights provided for in article 31 are often given lower priority in situations of conflict or disaster than the provision of food, shelter and health care. However, in these situations, opportunities for play, recreation and cultural activity can bring significant therapeutic and rehabilitative benefit to help children recover a sense of normality and joy after their experience of loss, dislocation and trauma. Play, music, poetry or drama can help displaced children and children, who have experienced bereavement, violence, abuse or exploitation, to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives. Such activities can restore a sense of identity, help make meaning of their lives, and enable them to experience fun and enjoyment. Participation in cultural or artistic activities, as well as in play and recreation, offers children an opportunity to engage in a shared experience, to re-build a sense of personal value and self-worth, to explore their own creativity and to achieve a sense of connectedness and belonging with peers, family and community. Settings for play also provide opportunities for practitioners to identify children suffering from the harmful impact of conflict and to refer children requiring additional psychosocial support.

**Context of the program in Mali** The context for the research was a NORAD-funded Right To Play program entitled **Sport and Play for Children’s Education in Conflict Affected Settings** supporting conflict affected children and their families in Mali. The conflict originated in 2012, when President [Amadou Toumani Touré](#) was ousted in a [coup d’état](#) over his handling of a crisis in the North, a month before a [presidential election](#) was to have taken place. Soldiers, calling themselves the [National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State](#) (CNRDR), took control and suspended the [constitution of Mali](#). As a consequence of the instability following the coup, Mali's three largest northern cities [Kidal](#), [Gao](#) and [Timbuktu](#) were overrun by rebels, including Islamic militants, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM), members of the Tuareg ethnic minority and Northern separatist groups. With UN support, France sent military forces to Mali in 2013 and with assistance from other African nations, in particular Chad, drove the rebels back to the far north mountainous regions, where ongoing guerilla conflict continues. In the interim, significant populations of displaced persons are living in Ségou, Mopti and to a lesser extent Bamako. Right To Play and its partners are supporting these populations. These families have largely been successfully integrated into informal community social networks and are not living in IDP camps.

Right To Play and its partners are implementing **Sport and Play for Children’s Education in Conflict Affected Settings** in both formal and informal learning settings. Activities focus on supporting marginalized children, especially girls, to engage in quality education. The project works within refugee settlements and local communities to provide quality education to in- and out-of-school children. Right To Play’s child safeguarding model is fundamental to the program approach in order to ensure safe and protective environments for children that “do no harm” and contribute to children’s healthy development and well-being. With support from NORAD, Right To Play trains coaches, teachers, and partner staff in Child Safeguarding and Protection to equip them with knowledge and skills to prevent and respond, and to ensure children’s rights are being respected and upheld.

Through this unique Coach-to-Child model, individuals are either trained as coaches, or supported as teachers, to be first-line responders in providing children and youth with opportunities for learning in conflict settings. Through this delivery model, the coaches and teachers also benefit from developing leadership and employability skills while being trained by Right To Play. Right To Play's well-established sport and play programs and operational structures are replicable, yet flexible to adapt to local contexts, allowing them to be effectively scaled in appropriate and relevant ways. Together, Right To Play and its education-focused partners provide support and services that both build upon and strengthen local systems and assets.

## **Advancing Knowledge on the Unique Contribution of Play to Child Protection**

Right To Play has recently partnered with the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD), Royal Roads University to conduct research to better understand the influence of play based education in mediating child protection outcomes. The context of the research was the ongoing civil war and resulting community and domestic violence in Mali, West Africa. The research draws on IICRD's child centred, participatory action research tools to explore interrelationships between risk and protective factors across children's social ecologies.

This research fills an important gap in better understanding the unique contributions to child rights practice that play can provide in strengthening children's own self-protection as well as the resilience and protection capacity of families, communities, NGO's and government services such as education, protection and welfare, and health care.

### **Purpose of Mali Right To Play /IICRD Research**

1. To advance mutual learning in humanitarian child protection monitoring and evaluation in Mali; and
2. To understand the child protection opinions and lived experiences of children and youth in Ségou and Bamako, Mali.

### **Mali Child Protection Assessment Objectives**

1. Explore community-based formal child protection systems (e.g. government child protection) and informal child protection systems (e.g. peer networks, kinship relationships, protective cultural mechanisms);
2. Understand how these systems are working and not working for children;
3. Learn from children and youth, families, and other community members about their ideal child protection support system; and
4. Identify effective and appropriate ways of measuring and learning from formal and informal Child Protection systems and related outcomes.

### **IICRD and Right to Play's Role in the Research**

IICRD has over 20 years of experience in action oriented research, evaluation, and child protection and humanitarian initiatives and provided technical expertise in leading the research mission. IICRD, represented by Dr. Philip Cook, was the lead research organization in Mali. IICRD's role was to design and implement participatory action research tools with children and families participating in Right To Play's programs in Ségou and Bamako. As part of this work, IICRD trained a group of Right To Play's regional and



country level child protection and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) staff.

Right To Play staff have deep programming experience in sport and play focused interventions supporting children's rights, including to protection. Right To Play's role in the research was to provide a team of front line community staff (including coaches/mentors), the Mali child protection focal point, and West and Francophone Africa regional Child Protection Advisor and MEL Specialist to share these experiences and to help organize the participation of children in both Ségou and Bamako communities, where Right To Play programs had been operational for 2-4 years. In addition, Right To Play International provided overarching guidance and technical support in framing the research objectives and refining the final report.

## **Rationale for the Research**

Child protection is an emerging programmatic area for Right To Play Mali, and is one that will have increasing and significant focus over the next five years. The research was identified as a good opportunity to inform both program design and delivery. As a result of the fighting that occurred between French soldiers and terrorist groups in Central and Northern Mali in January 2013, Right To Play Mali programs are now working towards post-conflict outcomes in this area.

## **Ethnographic, Participatory Action Research Methodology**

Due to the need for a highly contextual, participant centered learning approach, ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) methods were chosen to guide this process. These methods were used to enable a "contextualist" approach emphasizing the role of local community, social norms and cultural influences affecting non-formal/formal systems, in contrast to a "universalist" orientation to protection that applies international norms and standards to laws, policies and community programs, with child and community engagement frequently coming last and in some instances not at all (Wessells, 2009; Myers & Bourdillon, 2012).

PAR acknowledges the importance of children as social actors, and supports the centrality of children's agency in the strengthening of Child Protection systems, in keeping with Article 12 of the CRC (Cook and duToit, 2005; O'Kane, 2008; IICRD, 2012). Finally, PAR applies a social constructionist epistemology that recognizes the importance of children's lived experiences and of young people's social positioning as a determinant of knowledge.

Ethnographic tools such as participant observation, narrative, and group sessions with children and adults were conducted using: observational coding, individual interviews and workshop activities. The latter approach applied, layered experiential activities that both generated qualitative data and encouraged participants to reflect and learn more deeply on protection issues. Working in this way helped to validate data through a process of triangulation in which information was compared and contrasted from various informants and through different activities and discussions. Experiential activities are a mainstay of IICRD's research as they invite youth engagement and allow for immediate embodiment of social phenomena that can otherwise be abstract or hard to understand if only shared through dialogue. A core component of the IICRD's experiential research process enables participants to experience, communicate, reflect, and create. This is very similar to Right To Play's method of reflect, connect, apply (RCA), in that the youth participants are invited to first experience a concept before reflecting on the meaning of the lived experience.

Throughout the research process an ecological framework was applied to better understand the complex interrelation between children's development and childhood risk and protection factors. This framework represents the various systems in children's lives upon which risk and protection factors were mapped, validated and re-assessed throughout the monitoring mission.

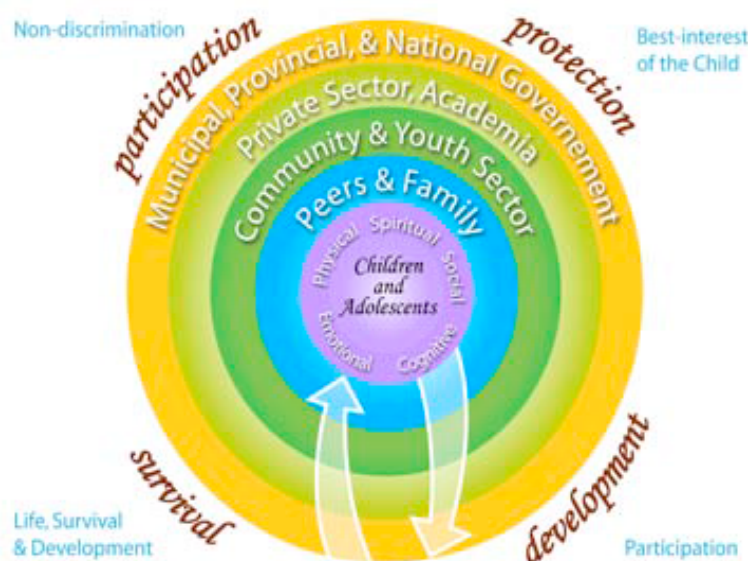


Figure 1: Social ecology of childhood (IICRD, 2012)

Data collection was verified and enriched using a layered approach to activities, in which themes were resurfaced and triangulated – in essence, approached from different perspectives in different sessions. Single person interviews were also conducted to compile case studies on specific issues of vulnerability and resilience and to explore protection from different “ecological” adult and child perspectives (e.g. child, caregiver, committee member, community leader, government service provider, Right To Play staff etc.).

The mission also focused on creating a learning experience to explore the co-creation of M&E tools between Right To Play and IICRD. Thus, the Right To Play Mali team was asked to play a significant role in the planning and defining of the project. The fieldwork was a highly collaborative process between IICRD and Right To Play Mali.

## Research Methods

**Training.** Prior to the research implementation, Right To Play staff were trained in participatory action research and a special focus on child protection research, purpose and use of the tools, ethical guidelines, data documentation and analysis. This capacity building took the form of a one day workshop and included the following Right To Play participants:

- Regional (West and Francophone Africa) Child Protection Advisor
- Regional (West and Francophone Africa) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Officer

- Mali Child Protection Focal Point
- Mali Program Manager
- Local child protection workers
- Local coaches

**Sample.** Sampling was purposive, focusing on diverse beneficiaries of Right To Play programs including: children, care providers and Right To Play program partners (schools, NGO, government). The sample comprised the following groups:

- Children already participating in Right To Play programs in Ségou and Bamako (including both conflict displaced, children of the Tuareg minority and local children) 20 – 25 children per collective activity (most activities were roughly half male and half female)
- Child case studies chosen from displaced children participating in Right To Play activities (1-2 boys and 1-2 girls per site)
- Child case studies with children unable to participate in Right To Play activities such as street children and working children (2 per site, one boy and one girl)
- Adults participating in Right To Play activities (e.g. male and female care providers, Right To Play staff, teachers, government and NGO partners) (4-6 per site)
- Adult focus groups with displaced mothers involved in Right To Play programs (25 mothers in Ségou, no FG in Bamako)

**Child-Centred Reflective Research Methods.** IICRD research approaches provided unique advantages to engage vulnerable young people and adults in a reflective, child centred process:

- Research activities were entirely voluntary and involved informed assent and consent
- Engagement stimulated endogenous (naturally arising) individual and collective resilience
- Experiential activities simulated deeper reflection on local rights concepts related to underlying factors shaping well being such as human dignity, belonging and justice
- Appreciative Inquiry principles helped to better understand human strengths in mediating risk factors
- Outcomes from the research were action oriented and suitable for program learning and ongoing enhancement

**Tools.** The following tools were applied using ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) tools:

1. Relational vulnerability mapping: (Purpose: to better understand children's key relations and explore basic risk and protection issues for children participating in Right To Play programs, self-protection and program inclusion). This tool also helps build trust, introduces the concept of child protection and underscores the role of creative thinking and the importance of children as experts on their lives in understanding basic risk and protective factors).
2. Social mapping and transect walks: (Purpose: to deepen an understanding of key risk and protective factors as experienced by boys and girls, explore key people in children's lives who

can play a protective role, and understand the role of physical and social space as a risk and protective factor through social activities, rank ordering of risk and protection and the use of a gender lens)

3. River of Life and Most Significant Change (MSC) (Purpose: to assess the specific impact of Right To Play activities in relation to changing behaviour, attitude and social norms using interactive, engaging activity discussing impact, self-protection and vulnerability through reflective storytelling and prioritization of key stories, final rank ordering of most significant changes and dramatization of MSC)
4. 2-3 case study interviews with most vulnerable children involved in Right To Play programs (Purpose: to generate a deeper, more personalized understanding of risk and protection, and the impact of Right To Play programs through a gender, vulnerability and resilience lens)
5. Focus groups discussions with adults involved in CP committees, (Purpose: to explore key social networks and other non-formal structures of protection, understand diverse community perspectives on childhood risk and protection and the changes over a child's lifespan, through the use of group reflection, and sharing perspectives on Right To Play program impact and role, and contrasting of Right To Play role with government and community stakeholders in child protection)
6. Key informant interviews with adults (Purpose: to understand the perspective of local experts such as social workers, teachers, police, NGO workers, on Right To Play's role in community and impact on war affected children and other children in the community)

**Ethics.** Ethical procedures were implemented to ensure children's safety. This included informed assent and consent in which the purpose of the research was first explained to the young participants in advance of each session. In explaining the child protection focus of the research young people were encouraged to ask questions to clarify their role in the research. It was also emphasized that they could withdraw from the research at any point and that names would not be used unless participants requested this (which many did). Finally, while participants were asked to respect the privacy of those sharing personal information, it was clarified that this could not be guaranteed due to the collective, open nature of many of the group activities. Counselling and referral resources were also made available to the young participants if required, and plans were made for Right To Play staff to follow up with the youth following the sessions to see if any additional support was needed.

The research started in early November 2014 with a review of Right To Play documentation. Fieldwork took place from November 17 – November 27 with a research data debrief in Toronto on November 28<sup>th</sup>. The report was completed in late February 2015.

## Findings

The following research findings are presented in relation to the specific research objectives:

### Child Safety and Protection

The primary focus of the research addressed children's safety and protection. Findings are organized with an initial focus on individual program outcomes/impact, followed by a summary of findings at the level of family, community, school, before looking more closely at the impact of Right To Play's programs on other INGO's, CBO's and government.

**Tools applied.** Relational mapping, social mapping, transect walk, focus groups, case study interviews.

**Results.** The research findings suggest that play is reinforcing protection and the resulting social well-being is contributing to children's positive outcomes in multiple ways.

### Impact of Right To Play Interventions

#### Positively influencing Children's Developmental Outcomes

At the individual level, children in Right To Play programs shared that these positive outcomes included:

- Enhancing mind-body connection – Boys and girls described feeling better about themselves as a result of physical competencies learned through play, such as hand eye coordination, dexterity and a sense of well-being and joy. They also shared that their learning outcomes and school work had improved as a result of play-based skills, this was attributed to improved levels of confidence, social skills, concentration skills, and generally feeling more “at ease”(e.g. Frisbee, football, free play activities) learned from Right To Play coaches.
- Social bonding and solidarity – Many examples were provided in the social mapping and river of life activities of strengthened social networks and widened circles of friends resulting from participation in the Right To Play-facilitated teams. The requirement for teams to include both conflict displaced and local children, as well as girls and boys was cited as a key factor leading to greater social solidarity between different groups of children.
- Learning and creative thinking to solve social problems – Young respondents provided a number of examples where they used problem solving skills such as dispute resolution and mediation to include children in teams who were otherwise being excluded, for example, Tuareg children shunned due to their association with resistance to the Malian government.
- Fostering agency, community engagement and social activism – One of the remarkable results of the influence of collective play based activities was the increased sense of social justice and injustice identified by participants and the ways this was being channelled into various community engagement and activist activities, most of which focused on improving the situation of vulnerable groups of children and youth in Mali (e.g. Street children, girls, displaced children).

The impact on individual children's developmental outcomes and the broader impact this had on children's solidarity and social activism is captured in the following case study of Miriam a Right To Play participant in Ségou.

## CASE STUDY MIRIAM (17), LEARNING ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION AND BECOMING AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE<sup>2</sup>

I was born in Bamako, though I have lived in Ségou most of the 17 years of my life. My family life has been challenging and I failed my baccalaureate exams but I still want to go to college and study Agro-economy. In between studying, I look after my 2 younger sisters. I have known about Right To Play for some years but only joined 2 years ago. I love the games with other youth and have become much more confident in expressing myself in public and improving my understanding of child protection issues such as child labour, family violence and social exclusion of war affected children living in Ségou. The biggest problems in Ségou are discrimination against these war affected children, as well as children who suffer from polygamy, and boys and girls who are forced to work in harsh conditions. I have



Figure 2: Miriam shares her experiences with Right To Play

recently joined the *Association Por le Promotion de Jeunes et Communité* (APJEC), and we are using some of the Right To Play activities to sensitize local youth and adults on child protection issues as well as reporting protection cases that we hear about through peer networks. Recently we went to the government Child Protection Bureau and helped report and manage a case of domestic violence affecting one of our friends, Sara. The conflict in the North has affected all children in Ségou, specifically in 3 ways: 1. Spreading fear among children that the war will come to Ségou; 2. Displacing children from their communities in the North who must resettle here; and 3. Some local children have directly lost fathers who were fighting as government soldiers in the North. We want to help IDP children develop their own action plan. We hope that APJEC and Right to Play can work together as they are both national organizations. We want to be part of finding solutions not just seen as victims.

### Reducing Risk Factors at the Level of the Family, Community and Government

Right To Play programs had a clear influence on identifying and reducing specific risk factors for children. This is exemplified in the following findings on young peoples perceptions of risk and protective factors and the strategies they were taking in implementing knowledge, skills and self-awareness in self-protection. This is important given the increasing global emphasis on better understanding children's experience of risk across the lifespan and also developing child protection responses that are rooted in naturally occurring child, family and community protective mechanisms

### Rank ordering of risk factors in Ségou and Bamako

Children in Ségou listed the top five risk factors as:

1. Bars where adults abuse children: children described girls being manipulated while working in the bars and being coerced to exchange sex for money as part of their employment, girls with

<sup>2</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names



- weak social support were identified as being at particular risk of this exploitation and abuse.
2. Homes where domestic violence occurs: both boys and girls described examples of harsh corporal punishment of children in families, this included neglect and some extreme cases of psychological abuse.
  3. Koranic schools (*Maribout*): many children mentioned the abuse of children in Koranic schools in which children are beaten and forced to beg to financially support their teacher. Many of these children are displaced from the conflict or come from neighbouring countries where Koranic Schools have been strictly controlled or outlawed.
  4. Socially unsafe places in the community where peer-to-peer violence occurs, triggering memories of conflict for displaced children: both boys and girls mentioned locations in the communities where children abuse drugs and alcohol. Gangs were often associated with these locations, which had time-specific elements of risk, for example during evenings or at night.
  5. Schools where violence against children is practiced by teachers: Many children described corporal punishment being used by teachers, though this varied in classrooms where Right To Play was working in which more child friendly practices were found.

Children in **Bamako** listed the top five risk factors as similar issues to those described in Segou, however, they were ranked differently.

1. Homes where domestic violence occurs
2. Koranic schools (*Maribout*)
3. Dangerous traffic and violence in the streets (Bamako is one of Africa's most rapidly growing cities and this was reflected in young peoples concerns about traffic injuries, especially for young children)
4. Schools where violence against children is practiced by teachers
5. Risky playgrounds

## Rank ordering of risk factors across the social ecology

### Children

Several examples of local risk factors at the **child level** were highlighted in the social mapping activity done by the children. These included:

- Social isolation – Children frequently mentioned abandoned children as well as orphans and children who were socially isolated due to the conflict in the North.
- Disability – Children with physical and mental disabilities were also mentioned as being especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation



Figure 3: A place in Ségou where guns are used (by gangs)

and examples were given of these children having to beg for a living and not being able to attend school.

- Trauma – During the social mapping and case studies with children displaced by the conflict, examples were given of the trauma that some children still carried, and how this trauma could be triggered by local places or social activities in the community. Figure 3 was taken from the social mapping exercise in Ségou. It identifies a place in the community (#2 red square) where gun battles have occurred between gangs. This was identified as a place of risk and also a place where memories from the conflict could be triggered causing secondary risks for war affected children.

### Family

- Domestic violence – At the family level domestic violence was described as one of the leading causes of child protection threats. This was mentioned as one of the top two highest ranked risk factors in Ségou and Bamako for boys and girls and involved both physical violence as well as psychological abuse where children, especially girls were humiliated or ridiculed as a form of punishment. Figure 4 displays a home where children know about domestic violence affecting their peers.



Figure 4: A dangerous family home

- Isolation and stress of mothers – Social isolation of mothers often accompanied domestic violence, though in some cases it was also mentioned in regards to mothers displaced by the conflict who lacked extended family, friends and supportive social networks. This isolation was compounded for mothers from the Tuareg community who experienced additional challenges in integrating due to the widespread hostility and mistrust towards Tuareg people in both Ségou and Bamako in relation to their role in the conflict in the North.

### Community

- Sexual exploitation – Girls spoke of sexual harassment and exploitation as a prevalent threat in both Ségou and Bamako. Some areas in the community such as parks at night, dangerous unlit



roads, and bars with child prostitution were frequently mentioned. This sense of risk of sexual abuse was heightened for girls from the North who described having fewer protective factors such as a father or other protective male figures.

- Substance abuse – The threat of adults misusing alcohol and then abusing children was a constant theme, followed by the threat from peers who had been misusing drugs and alcohol. This abuse was often located in specific places (e.g. certain bars), which young people would go out of their way to avoid.
- Violence in schools – Children in Ségou and Bamako mentioned teachers using corporal punishment as a prevalent threat, sometimes this included schools where Right To Play was working though not in classes where teachers had been trained by Right To Play coaches.

## Government

- Lack of awareness of IDP issue – At the government level, children mentioned the lack of local awareness of challenges facing displaced children. Most young people mentioned that in general young people either don't know about government child protection services, or where they do know, won't use these services as they feel their best interests will not be safeguarded.
- Lack of skills to manage children's psychosocial needs – Lack of government capacity to manage children's unique protection needs, including understanding children's psychosocial development and management of trauma was mentioned by both government workers in the focus group discussion with government partners as well as with children in the social mapping activity. Frequently government protection workers described feeling overwhelmed and ill prepared to deal with issues of war and trauma experienced by children and their families due to lack of practitioner skills and knowledge.

## Strengthening protective factors at the level of the family, community and government

Children mentioned many examples of the benefits from programs to themselves, peers, families and other instrumental adults. Examples across the social ecology that children provided include:

### Children

- Confidence - Children mentioned many examples of the benefits they had received as a result of participating in Right To Play programs, including increased life skills (e.g. public speaking, working in groups), and new knowledge (e.g. self protection, child rights) as well as the confidence to implement/use them. This was documented both in relational mapping, social mapping and most significant change activities.

### Peers

- Peer Support - Many examples were provided of children supporting their peers. This was particularly evident in children sensitizing their peers to issues of child protection, for example discussing issues of discrimination against young people from the North after Right To Play training on child rights, then taking action to include these youth in Right To Play clubs and other

social activities. Other examples of peer support included: referral of child protection cases to relevant child welfare authorities, working collectively with other children to identify unexploded ordinance, inviting children with a disability to participate in games and activities, and collectively mobilizing to create public awareness campaigns through community drama, radio and conference presentations.

## Family

- Safe homes belonging to members of the children's clubs – This theme emerged in both Ségou and Bamako communities where young participants described how certain families had begun taking in vulnerable young people as a result of their children sensitizing them to the protection needs of their community.

## Schools

- Right To Play program Classrooms/Schools - One of the most significant and often-mentioned findings of strengthened local protection mechanisms was the change in schools involved in the Right To Play program. Both school grounds and classrooms had changed from places of risk of violence and psychological abuse (see risk factors above) to places of safety where Right To Play coaches and trained teachers provided a safer, more joyful learning environment. This was created by a spectrum of interventions with children from: 1. Building the skills amongst teachers and coaches to better understand children's lived experience and empathise with children; 2. Identifying and engaging especially vulnerable children; 3. Using play as a core tool for learning in various subjects; 4. Promoting greater opportunities for free, constructive play during school breaks and outside of school.
- Fear mitigation - Interestingly this also seemed to be mitigating the fear from the local **Ebola outbreak** in Bamako, which had just started at the beginning of the research visit. In this context, Right To Play youth participants stated that they felt they benefited from both from the sanitation programs that Right To Play was running in schools, and the broader life skills they had learned, which allowed them to communicate messages to their peers and reduce the overall level of fear in communities using play based social activism.

## Community

- Playgrounds as safer places – Similarly, playgrounds which in some cases were identified as risky places in the social mapping activity (e.g. at night when drugs and sex are sold there), were changed during the day time through Right To Play free play sessions into places of safety where young people could come and relax, enhance their peer and adult networks, learn new skills and gain knowledge on self-protection.
- New safety skills - This also included learning skills on safety in relation to armed unexploded ordinance. For example, identifying unexploded ordinance such as hand grenades, and notifying the local authorities for safely defusing and removing these threats. While these latter skills were not being practiced in Ségou and Bamako, examples were collected of their use in communities in other war-affected regions of Mali when displaced children returned home (e.g. to Timbuktu)

## INGO's

- Skill building - Various interviews were conducted with local INGO's working in child protection. A more in depth interview was conducted with Caritas, that highlighted the importance of ludo-educateur (play therapy) skill building for CARITAS staff working with street children.

## Government

In the focus group and key informant interviews with government “duty bearers”, various examples were given of the beneficial impact of Right To Play programing in Ségou and Bamako. These included:

- Operational support – Transport to and from community sites, as well as assistance in identifying and providing access to vulnerable families (who were already involved in Right to Play programs), including displaced families from Northern Mali.
- Technical support – Even more important than operational assistance was the technical support that Right To Play provided to government workers and other INGO's working with vulnerable children. For example: psychosocial training for the Government Ministry responsible for child protection (La Direction Régionale de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille - DRPFEF), and educational play knowledge and skills for teachers.



Figure 3: Cheik with Mr Dow and Mr Barago

## SUPPORTING MOSA <sup>3</sup>(11) A WAR AFFECTED BOY FROM THE NORTH

In Ségou, an interview is conducted with Mr. Dow and Mr. Barago, two government workers with the DRPFEF to learn more about Right To Play's support for vulnerable children affected by the conflict in the North. They describe recent support from Right To Play in caring for Mosa, an 11 year old boy from a village near Tombuctou who lost three fingers and suffered severe stomach wounds after picking up unexploded war ordinance that then detonated in his hands. Mosa was brought to a hospital in Ségou, badly wounded and in shock. Though his physical injuries were being adequately treated by the Ministry of Health hospital staff, the DRPFEF was at a loss as to how to care for his psychological trauma and eventual reintegration to his community. A Right To Play coach provided ideas on how to gently introducing Mosa to adapted Right To Play play activities that he could practice from his hospital bed. Mosa was severely traumatized, in great pain, and was forced to lie on his back all the time to allow his stomach wounds to heal. Nevertheless he loved the games, which helped to reduce his stress and expedited his rehabilitation by learning important new skills such as managing fine motor coordination with his remaining hand. When he posed for his final photo

<sup>3</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names

in the hospital before returning home he even showed both his good and injured hands with a proud expression acknowledging how much he could still do with one hand. Mr. Dow and Barago had just visited Mosa the day before our interview and described the community celebration for which they had brought a cow to honour his reintroduction to the community, and the new role he is forging in his family and community. As we prepare to leave, Mr. Dow reflects, “If Right To Play was not here, we (the government) wouldn’t have had the skills to treat the difficult psychological healing of Mosa – we only deal with paper. We can give food, milk and other support, but we don’t know how to treat the core of a child”.

#### **CASE STUDY: MIRIAM<sup>4</sup> (DISPLACED MOTHER AND Right to Play SEGOU FRISBEE CAPTAIN) REGAINING A PART OF HER CHILDHOOD AND SUPPORTING HEALING FOR OTHER CHILDREN**

Miriam has a bright, inquisitive and warm face - you might not guess that she is the most respected opponent on the local women’s Frisbee team. Miriam hails from Kidal, a town not far from the Northern border with Algeria. She describes the first days of the conflict and her flight to Ségou: “Our community had always been peaceful, then one day armed Tuareg rebels arrived and overtook the town. Later foreigners arrived. Arab bandits went from home to home and robbed people and shot anyone connected to the military. I hid in our house with my four children for two days then we fled in the back of a truck.

We were frequently stopped at rebel checkpoints, some of which were manned by extremist Islamic groups. Everyone

had to get out, luggage was searched, valuables were stolen and any photograph or letter from a loved one in the military meant certain death, often execution by the side of the road. We would then get back in the truck. Sometimes the more militant Islamic groups made us put a curtain down the middle of the truck to keep the men and women separate. After 3 harrowing days we arrived in Gao and were forced to live on the street for 4 days as we knew no one and everyone was fearful of helping refugees. Eventually, I heard of a man from our community living in Ségou and we spent our last savings taking the bus to Ségou. We were kindly taken in by a business family from Kidal. They were involved in a local IDP business association, Collective Reserve du Nord, CRN. I heard about Right To Play through CRN and because I was bored I helped form the first mothers Frisbee team. I chose Frisbee because I loved sport when I was a child. I always played football with my older brothers and was heart-broken when my father forbade me playing when I reached puberty, stating that it was improper for girls to play games. At first it was funny because people thought I was too heavy to play Frisbee, but then they saw I was a good player and I gained new respect. Other women were curious and joined. Husbands were hesitant at first, but then thought it was healthy. I like



**Figure 4: Miriam (right) Captain of the Ségou Frisbee Team**

<sup>4</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names

speaking with children. We share life skills with younger girls and boys while we play, children love this because they are drawn naturally to play. I feel it is important that we use play to educate children about the importance of peace, not taking up guns. Many children who have fled the war are in shock or they are shy, children in our society are not encouraged to participate, but Frisbee encourages children to share and be heard. I have been helping a young girl called Kata who lost her mother and father in the war and is orphaned. She is Tuareg and was very isolated and traumatized but through the new skills I learned with Right To Play, I have been able to support her. Now she is participating in activities, learning Bambara (the local language) and making friends. Right To Play has helped me regain a part of myself I thought I had lost.

### CASSIM'S<sup>5</sup> STORY: AN IDP YOUTH LEADER AND THE LINKS BETWEEN SPORT, SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND JUSTICE

Cassim is 18 years old and lives with his mother and younger sister in Ségou. His family had lived peacefully for generations in Tomboctou and fled the conflict when rebels overran the town in 2011. They had to depart quickly and left most of their belongings behind. They came to Ségou with the assistance of a relative, and were taken in by a local family in exchange for domestic labour. Cassim's mother became a Right To Play Frisbee coach and that is how he became familiar with Right To Play. Cassim and some of his IDP friends in Ségou wanted to form a Frisbee team but didn't have enough members. This encouraged them to overcome their social isolation and meet other children in their neighbourhood and eventually they created a neighbourhood team. Another challenging prerequisite was having equal numbers of boys and girls on the team. Their Right To Play Coach increased their awareness on gender issues and ways that boys and girls could play and learn together. This proved easier than the boys imagined and they started winning their games and made more friends in Ségou through the Frisbee tournaments and youth life skills training workshops. Some of Cassim's friends have recently returned to Tomboctou and have started local Frisbee teams there, even though Right To Play does not have programs currently operating there. They are also using the training they received on managing unexploded ordinance and have trained other youth in identifying, not touching, referring and reporting unexploded grenades and other munitions that litter the streets. They feel they have saved many children through this process. Cassim discusses how he does not want to return to Tomboctou, as he proudly displays his three trophies that he has won as the Frisbee captain of his team. He shares his goal to go to college, and eventually he wants to be a judge. He feels his personal experience with war has highlighted not only the injustices in the world but also the ways young people and adults working together can create a safer, more just society.



Figure 5: Cassim with his trophy

<sup>5</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names



## Effectiveness of Child Protection Response Mechanisms

**Tools applied.** River of life: Most Significant Change, case study interviews, key informant interviews.

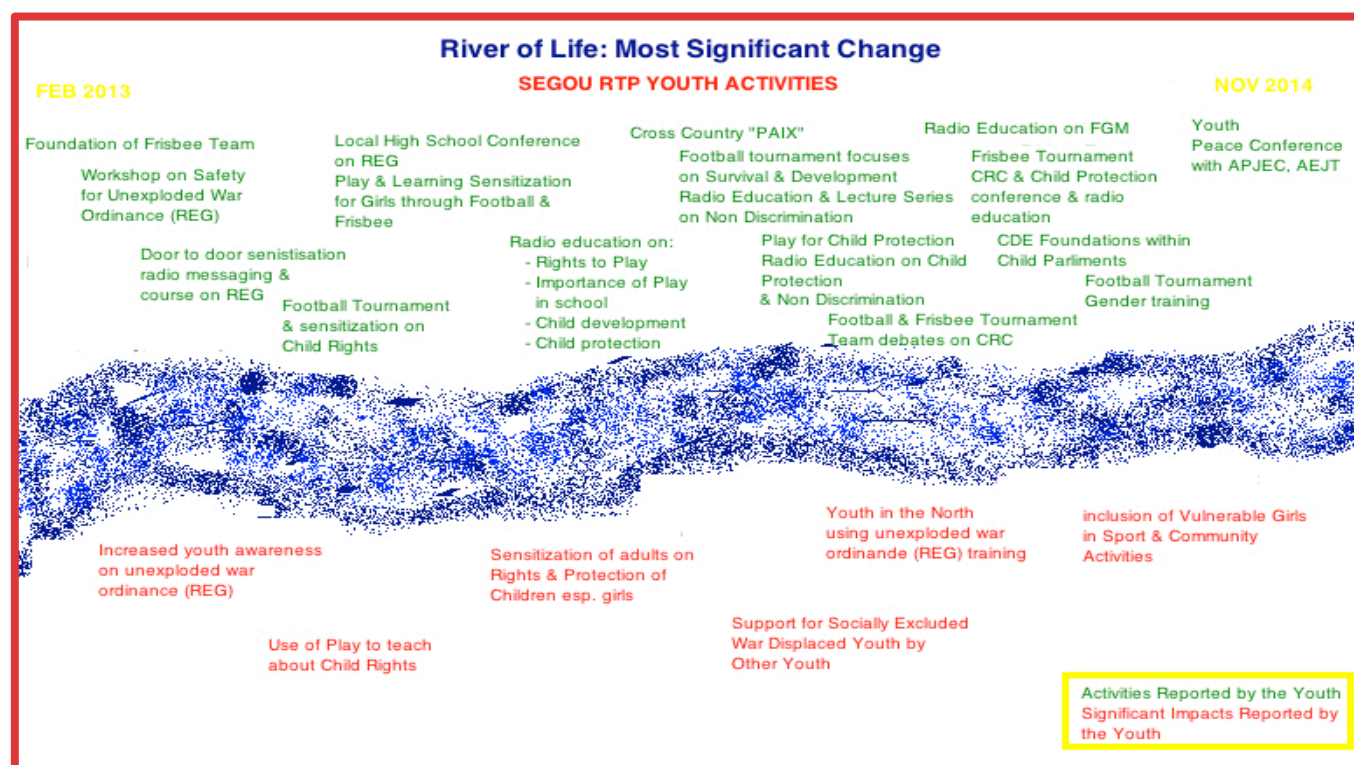
**Results.** The River of Life: Most Significant Change activity was conducted with youth in Ségou (unfortunately there wasn't enough time to conduct the activity with young people in Bamako). Results indicated various ways that Right To Play activities have positively influenced both formal and non-formal protection systems.



Figure 6: Most Significant Change Activity

### What is working

The figure below indicates key activities identified by youth from when Right To Play began working with them in February 2013 to November 2014 (the time of the present research). Participants described and discussed a rich foundation of trainings, community sensitization activities, radio announcements, debating competitions, interspersed with various Frisbee and football tournaments. They were divided into two groups to discuss the most significant changes occurring over a ten-month period.



As displayed on the figure, the significant changes that resulted from the Right To Play interventions

included:

- Increased youth awareness of unexploded war ordinance
- Use of play to teach about child rights
- Sensitization of adults on rights and protection of children, especially for girls
- Peer support for socially excluded war displaced youth
- Youth in the North using the training for unexploded war ordinance
- Inclusion of vulnerable girls in sport and other community activities

Individual stories describing real life events that occurred in relation to these significant impacts were gathered. After a lengthy debate on the merits of each significant story, the 2 groups selected their most significant change story, including a rationale as to why this story and its message of social change was important.

The two most significant impact stories were: 1. Sensitization of adults on rights and protection of children, especially for girls, and; 2. Peer support for socially excluded war-displaced youth. Each team developed a role-play to act out the story and performed this to the other group. Eventually, both groups voted on the most significant story and the drama on *Support for socially excluded war displaced youth by other youth* was chosen. The full story of this drama is shared below.

#### **Ghak's<sup>6</sup> introduction to Right To Play's Ségou Frisbee Youth Club**

Ghak is a Tuareg boy (15) who has recently arrived in Ségou. He is befriended by Amir from the local Right To Play youth club. Amir notices that Ghak is lonely and invites him to join the Frisbee team, but when Amir brings Ghak to meet the other members some are resistant to this idea. They don't like that he is a Tuareg as they are associated with starting the conflict. Also, he comes from the North; he may be a security risk; he could be dangerous. The group discusses this and Amir and others argue that this goes against the training they have received in children's rights, especially Ghak's right to non-discrimination, as well as his right to social inclusion and his right to play with his peers. After some time the group concedes and Ghak is welcomed - with warm greetings and the appropriate fist bumps and other contemporary youth social bonding rituals. He becomes a valued member of the team and contributes to the Frisbee team and the social fabric of the youth group, bringing a unique youth strength grounded in his personality and Tuareg cultural perspective.

When the youth explained why they chose this story as their most significant change, they shared the deep-rooted nature of cultural stereotypes in Mali and the challenges in changing these strongly held beliefs. They then spoke of the skills they had gained from Right To Play, learning about child rights and the communication and dispute resolution tools that allowed them to defuse situations of conflict and reach consensus with their peers using principles from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Finally, they shared the power of play in crossing cultural boundaries and the attributes of play, camaraderie, and common purpose that Right To Play's Frisbee tournaments have brought to youth in Ségou.

<sup>6</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names

## What is not working

While significant protection achievements have been made, some gaps remain. Evidence from the focus group discussions with adults, social mapping with youth, and key informant interviews identified the following gaps in the support for the following groups of very vulnerable children:

- Children living and studying in Maribout (Koranic schools) – The lack of access to play for children living in *Maribout* was mentioned frequently by youth participants, as was the poor quality of education that makes finding employment challenging. A final risk to these children identified by youth in Ségou and Bamako was the forced begging that they must frequently engage in to support their teacher. It should be noted that the risks of *Maribout* were not found in Mosques many of which were identified as places of safety by children.
- Street and working children – Interestingly young people did not mention street children as being a group at risk, even though there were frequently street children working in the vicinity of the spaces used for the research activities. Adults however, did mention these two groups of children as being in need of specific Right To Play support. It should be noted that in Ségou, Right To Play had provided training to the INGO Caritas and this was directly benefiting street boys (see reference in section on government and INGO beneficiaries).
- Girls in domestic labour – The practice of girls working as domestic servants was reported by both adults and children as being widespread with many of these girls being displaced from the North. This is a challenging issue. They were identified as one of the highest risk categories due to the hidden nature of this group, their exposure to heightened levels of violence and abuse (including sexual abuse), and their lack of friends. They also have less opportunities to join their peers in play and many do not attend school.



Figure 7: A local bar where girls are exploited in child prostitution

## Strengthening Other Government and Non-Governmental Systems

**Tools applied.** Focus groups, KII, case studies

**Results.** There was general consensus on ways that formal and non-formal supports were best interacting. Examples from across the social ecology of childhood in which Right To Play was impacting these systems include:

- Education – Groups of adults and children in both Ségou and Bamako mentioned the special focus on play in school and the ways in which protection issues were highlighted through teachers better understanding children's lived experience in relation to local risk and protective factors and community sensitization fostered through more effective interaction with parents and local children's advocates. This is exemplified in the following case study of a teacher in Bamako.



## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ISES FANTA THESA<sup>7</sup>, SCHOOL TEACHER IN BAMAKO

Mrs. Ises has been a coach with Right To Play since 2009. She is a teacher with many years of experience. Ises describes the high level of vulnerability of children in the community ironically named *Sabalibagu* - City of Tolerance. Children come to school hungry, as there is not enough food at home. There are high levels of substance abuse in many families; single mothers are common as is violence at home. There is also often not enough money for books and school uniforms resulting in many children missing school and dropping out at an early age. Only this morning, she was consoling and helping refer a girl who had been sexually abused by a relative. Ises describes many benefits of the Right To Play support this school has received. Primary amongst these is the:

“Joy children bring to learning through play – playing together is both healing for the children and their learning is enhanced, I can see this clearly. I have also noticed that play for girls, has increased their school attendance. Many girls used to drop out or miss school and now we notice a reduction in absenteeism. Play motivates children to learn, it energizes them during the day and makes teaching easier for the staff. Boys and girls also learn life skills and children are more respectful towards each other. Individually, I have noticed that play improves children’s language skills, problem solving, cooperation, and team spirit. My only concern is that not all the teachers in our school have benefited from the Right To Play training and this can be a problem for children transitioning from a play friendly curriculum to the old style of top down teaching. We need all teachers in Mali to receive professional development in play centred education!”

- Protection – As already described, La Direction Régionale de la Promotion de la Femme, de l’Enfant et de la Famille (DRPFEF) listed specific support received from Right To Play both in regards to operational (e.g. transport) and capacity building skills (e.g. knowledge and skills in supporting vulnerable children’s psychosocial healing).
- Health - During interviews with children and family members, as well as in the protection round table focus group discussion with government and INGO partners, a number of health benefits were mentioned in relation to Right To Play support. These included: support to children in hospitals, nutritional benefit to children through the peanut butter micro enterprise support for mothers, and Ebola prevention through school sanitation measures.
- Police – While fewer direct interventions were mentioned by police in relation to Right To Play support (in comparison with other government agencies), children did report referring a number child abuse cases to the police, including complex cases of rape. Children also described seeking safety at the local police station in some instances of domestic violence after receiving the Right to Play training. This is a significant finding given the low rate of youth trust in police accountability on child protection cases in many countries. It may not be a generalizable finding and requires additional inquiry.
- Other INGO’s (Caritas) – A notable example of Right To Play support for an INGO working with especially vulnerable children was the training in child centred play-based methodology provided to

<sup>7</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names

staff from Caritas in Ségou. In an interview with the Executive Director from Caritas, an agency with a globally respected approach to complex work with high needs street involved youth; a very sophisticated model of play-based therapy has evolved from this initial Right To Play training. Aspects of Caritas play therapy involve using Right To Play games as initial icebreakers with street children who enter their services with low levels of trust in adults, exploring trauma through imaginative games, and developing ongoing recovery plans with children using games as strategizing and planning tools.

## Effective and Appropriate Ways Of Measuring and Learning From Formal and Informal CP Systems and Related Outcomes

**Tools applied.** Ongoing discussions with Right To Play staff, including a final debrief.

**Results.** The research findings indicate that play reinforces protection in a myriad ways. Ethnography and Participatory Action Research (PAR) tools were used in this study of Right To Play programs in two sets of communities in Ségou and Bamako. While there was not an opportunity to exhaustively and systematically compare these approaches with existing Right To Play monitoring and evaluation measurement, the primary IICRD researcher did have a variety of discussions with Right To Play staff, in particular those involved in measurement, and the following points for reflection emerged from these discussions.

- Child protection M&E benefits from child centred mixed methods approaches
- Play, deep reflection and action are a good fit with Right To Play's *Reflect, Connect, Apply* approach
- The Role of the Right To Play Coach provides fertile ground for a model of a reflective child protection practitioner who brings a knowledge of child well being, protection to bear on complex child protection interventions
- Right To Play Programs and Monitoring cycles can be more creatively integrated by opening space for creative play in M&E and in embedding reflective spaces into play coaching practice
- Emergency and development approaches to monitoring and evaluation, while different in emphasis, can have common points of overlap in engaging community, meaningfully involving children and using strength based interventions that address vulnerability and risk
- Children and their care providers can be more actively involved in ongoing M&E and program learning perhaps by establishing learning committees within the adult and youth groups that could be formally involved in participatory action research tied to ongoing M&E and practice strengthening

The community coach is central to these processes and this is evident in the following description of Harasan, community coach in Bamako.

## CASE STUDY HARASAN<sup>8</sup>, RETURNING PLAY TO HIS COMMUNITY

Harasan has a gift in working with local children that is rooted in his own experiences growing up in Niamakoro as well as his desire to help other vulnerable young people. When Harasan was 10 he was supported in joining a local sports club in Niamakoro. He came from a turbulent family home environment and the engagement in sports and the supportive mentorship from his coach helped him excel in school and eventually win a scholarship to attend university. Motivated to support the rights of others, he studied law but could not find legal employment in an area suiting his ambitions, so at 24 he returned to his home community to join Right To Play where he has been trained as a community coach. He sees his present role as the perfect fit between his past experiences and his present and future goals to help vulnerable local children. He notes that Right To Play is making a big difference in creating places of safety for children who



Figure 8: Right To Play Coach Harasan

frequently experience high levels of violence and chaos in their home and community environment. He describes how the games help boys and girls “forget their troubles, have fun, make friends and learn some important life skills”. His local soccer team includes more than 100 children, both boys and girls, and this is evident when the core group of 20 children we have spent the early afternoon with suddenly grows to over a 100, as local kids finish school and run gleefully to join in the activities. He describes how boys and girls used to play separately and now play together, learn life skills that help them avoid risk, establish goals, work supportively together, and achieve in school. Harasan wants to continue to work with children, maybe blending his play skills with a new profession such as social work, striving to improve his community and the lives of local children. He keeps records of the children’s progress and would like to better understand how research can strengthen practice and would like to develop social work tools that bridge practice and monitoring.

## Conclusion

### Play: A Potent, Inherent Human Resource Fostering Individual Child and Collective Resilience and Flourishing

There are some limitations that need to be recognized within this research, such as the limited sample size of children included, the short timeframe of data gathering, and primary focus on qualitative tools. Nevertheless, the research conducted with children and their communities in Ségou and Bamako does highlight a number of important contributions that Right to Play programs are making to improve

<sup>8</sup> Note: The study uses the real names of the primary participants in keeping with their wishes to be personally identified in the research. Other youth mentioned in the case study are referred to with fictional names

developmental outcomes for vulnerable children affected by the conflict in Mali. Equally important, they also highlight wider impact across children's social ecologies (e.g. family, community, schools, and government) in ways that are important as they strengthen formal and non-formal systems of protection for very vulnerable children.

Current Right To Play monitoring tools, focusing primarily on individual developmental outcomes while useful in assessing program impact on the child, may not be capturing the richness and benefits of program interventions in reinforcing key instrumental actors who can secondarily support positive developmental outcomes, including child protection. The unique dimensions of play (both organized sports and free play), uncovered in this research, are shown to be reducing childhood risks and enhancing protective factors, and point to a significant contribution that Right To Play can make to the global child protection discourse. This is pertinent both in regards to humanitarian interventions, such as the focus of this research, and more broadly across development contexts. At its core, the results highlight the inherently human potential in recognizing play as a key driver in mitigating the effects of trauma induced by the hardships of war and forced displacement, and in promoting child recovery, resilience and flourishing.

In the Mali humanitarian context, Right To Play's interventions are helping children who have directly experienced violence and other harms in various forms, as well as ameliorating some of the secondary risks associated with displacement and having to start a new life far from their homes, often in context of increased poverty, social isolation and in some cases discrimination (e.g. against Tuareg families).

## Benefits of Play to Children in Mali's War Affected Populations

### Improvement in Individual Level Outcomes

The current research findings on Right To Play's educational interventions supporting conflict-affected children in Mali highlight significant benefits from programming through play and learning. Specific outcomes at the individual child level summarized in this report include:

- Strengthening social bonding, both with other war affected children and with the general population
- Using learning and creative thinking to solve problems
- Overcoming protection risks and associated life challenges, developing "grit" and determination
- Enhancing mind-body connection both in organized and free play
- Providing release from mental stress and daily suffering from traumatic experiences
- Increasing social agency and community engagement
- Increasing gender equality

These outcomes echo other research findings (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ungar, 2005; Wessells, 2009) indicating a cluster of variables that in concert seem to enhance children's resilience. While these findings were limited in scale and timeframe, and may not be sustainable in children's lifespan development outcomes, they do make a compelling case for further research on the unique contribution that play based interventions can make to enhancing child protection outcomes. Some of these variables, such as the

benefits of mind body connection and harmonious conjoining of joy and creativity, offer important opportunities for broadening the range of emergency options that are afforded to children in more typical child protection interventions such as trauma informed counselling interventions and the creation of safe spaces.

## Improvement in Collective Level Outcomes

Additional benefits were also apparent at the more distal level of family, community, school, and government. These included:

- Creating safe houses for children at risk of domestic violence
- Fostering safe schools and playgrounds
- Enhancing child centred play capacity for other INGO's
- Supporting government agencies with operational and technical support (e.g. understanding and responding to child trauma)

These results speak to the importance of school based interventions as an entry point to broader community protection systems strengthening in ways that can secondarily support children's developmental outcomes, including providing protection and safety. Much of the current debate on community based child protection systems approaches are focused on the role of local mechanisms such as community committees (Wessells, 2009). Right To Play's education programing and child protection approach in Mali underscores the important role that schools can play in creating a key safe, creative, and protective learning environment for vulnerable children. This can be crucial in communities where child committees don't exist or are unviable due to the effects of conflict in disrupting these mechanisms. The results also highlight the important role schools can play in bridging the nurturing effects of creative, human centred learning in daily classroom environments with other play based activities in children's wider family and community environments. The one challenge identified in this research that warrants consideration by Right To Play and its partners is seeking ways to engage children who are unable to attend school, such as working children, children begging on the street, children in Koranic schools, and girls employed as domestic servants.

Right To Play's success in equipping mothers and other care providers with a variety of skills and knowledge, highlights an untapped potential in buttressing non-formal systems of protection for children. This was revealed in the Right To Play women's networks in Ségou, where mothers provided invaluable emotional support for many boys and girls as well to generate much needed income through mothers local income generating projects such as making and selling peanut butter. Once again play provided an important community opportunity for increasing human and social capital amongst these mothers as well as opening social space for women's role in community recovery and human flourishing.

## Play, Reflective Monitoring and Resilience

One of the central child protection practice themes to emerge from the research collaboration between IICRD and Right To Play in Mali was the potent process of starting with play based activities, engaging children in reflective dialogue, and then taking action based on these steps. Right To Play already applies a similar 3 stage process of reflect, connect, apply which is similar to IICRD's Circle of Rights approach of experience, engage, plan, create with the latter process involving a more intentional initial experiencing of the activity. Like Right To Play's activities, IICRD activities are playful and experiential, while adding another dimension of "mindfulness" to basic human rights or thriving concepts such as dignity, unity, respect, inclusion etc. with tools such as the "Unity Circle".



Figure 9: Unity Circle

Mindfulness is defined as "the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment." It is frequently used in meditation and other reflective practices and has been integrated by IICRD in many intentional games with children and adults to stimulate empathy and evidence informed engagement in support of children's rights.

IICRD's experience is that the process of adding an experiential component at the outset of playful, reflective activities strengthens young people's intentionality in the resulting action. This coupled with the rights based themes of the actions heightens young people's natural capacity for social engagement grounded in wise compassion. It also allows for play and rigorous research to be co-joined. Finally, the collective empathetic, and self-selecting nature of these activities frequently result in direct therapeutic benefits to vulnerable children that likely play a role in their psychosocial recovery from conflict and other protection risk factors. The Right To Play Coaches observed in Mali showed great skill in fostering many of these life skills and qualities in the young participants. These skills could be further enhanced by intentionally integrating more experiential, mindful reflective activities in practice and providing them opportunities to develop knowledge and skills to carry out M&E activities.



## Recommendations

### Humanitarian Recommendations

1. **Continue to refine the documentation and dissemination of Right To Play's play-based approach to child protection within the broader humanitarian sector.** Right To Play's approach brings an important, and not well understood, addition to the humanitarian CP sector. It adds specific value to children's psychosocial support, agency and resilience in conflict-affected situations such as the conflict in Mali. Efforts should be made to continue documenting Right To Play's humanitarian work and sharing this more widely within the sector through groups such as the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) and the Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Resource Group (CPMERG).
2. **Build on Right To Play's education model by further engaging non-formal actors such as peer groups, mothers, community leaders and faith leaders.** One of the significant findings of the research was the extent of Right To Play's contribution to non-formal systems strengthening. Building on the successful work with care providers, further programming entry points could be identified and enhanced through new programming models that use play as an important human/social capital in targeting and engage these protection actors.
3. **Continue to enhance and integrate play based "soft" skills with "hard" humanitarian skills.** One of the unique features of Right To Play's work in Mali was the integration of so called "soft" play based skills (communication, agency, self efficacy) with "hard" skills of identifying and helping destroy unexploded ordinance. Interviews with the participating children indicated a reciprocal relationship in which soft skills helped strengthen hard skill interventions (e.g. youth working in teams to identify and appropriately communicate the whereabouts of unexploded ordinance), and vice versa (helping successfully clear ordinance brought youth together, and provided a sense of purpose and competence in situations with limited social opportunities). This dynamic relationship warrants further strengthening in other contexts of Right To Play's humanitarian interventions.
4. **Further enhance Right To Play's focus on most vulnerable children, especially those not attending school, in conflict-affected communities.** While Right To Play is making significant gains in supporting conflict affected children who are attending school, the research identifies a gap in reaching similar children who are not able to attend school. Specific outreach approaches and monitoring tools should be developed to identify especially vulnerable children, and community-programming adaptations facilitated to include these children in Right To Play activities. Special consideration may need to be given to the heightened psychosocial needs of these boys and girls in light of their unique healing needs. Targeted outreach, coach training and program monitoring tools will likely need to be developed with this in mind.

## General Recommendations

1. **Strengthen child centred approach to M&E.** Child centred, protection focused M&E activities provide a useful place to begin this collaboration. IICRD could assist in enhancing Right To Play's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) capacity in better understanding the protection benefits of Right To Play play based educational activities, in integrating participatory play research methods into Right To Play ongoing monitoring, creating more of a virtuous circle between practice and research, and helping with documentation in the process.
2. **Identify and use upcoming opportunities to build on collective strengths of Right To Play and IICRD.** The research collaboration between Right To Play and IICRD provided a rich learning experience that builds on both agencies strengths in child centred interventions. There is mutual value added in continuing this learning. Right To Play brings deep experience in play based education activities that benefit vulnerable children. IICRD's experience affords opportunities for Right To Play to enhance agency understanding of broader social impact, and to articulate a unique position in child protection systems strengthening.
3. **Connect monitoring, evaluation and learning more closely with regular practice.** Right To Play's play based, reflective activities could be further enhanced to provide fertile ground for creating a virtuous circle between practice, monitoring, evaluation and continuous learning. This could be achieved by developing and implementing a mixed team approach in which lead protection and monitoring staff are trained in an integrated M&E, practice-learning model.
4. **Creatively and progressively use qualitative participatory M&E approaches without losing rigor.** More emphasis could be placed on integrating child centred, participatory M&E research tools with the existing quantitative tools for quality mixed methods research. This would assist in strengthening monitoring validity and reliability.
5. **Strengthen children's participation as partners in the whole MEL process.** Given the appropriate, safe and creative tools, children would be natural partners enhancing M&E and program learning. This could be introduced by training cohorts of participating Right To Play children in PAR monitoring and program learning methods, and engaging children in peer to peer monitoring activities, including participation in data analysis and program refinement.
6. **Policy and Advocacy-focus on enhanced child rights international policy to play and protection through tools such as GC 13 (CP) and 17 (Play).** Right To Play's existing community success could be further enhanced by reinforcing relevant social policy frameworks. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comments (GC) 13 (child protection) and 17 (play) are natural supports to Right To Play national and local programming. This process could be 2-pronged: a) exploring how the GC can strengthen Right To Play programs; b) understanding how Right To Play community successes and lessons learned can be shared internationally to strengthen national and global accountability to children.



7. **Scale Right To Play training to target professional teacher training programs and teachers professional associations.** One of the limitations identified in the research was the fact that not all teachers in a given school would be using Right To Play's approach. This could be avoided by a more strategic targeting of teacher associations and professional development programs in university Faculties of Education and continuing professional development training offered in Ministries of Education.
8. **Emphasis on capacity building spectrum from development through humanitarian interventions, pre/during/post conflict.** While the current research focused on the conflict in Mali, there were many examples where humanitarian and development contexts for children and their care providers overlapped. As this is increasingly the norm in many countries experiencing conflict, protection programming interventions and associated monitoring frameworks should be designed along an intervention spectrum from development to conflict to crisis management.

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