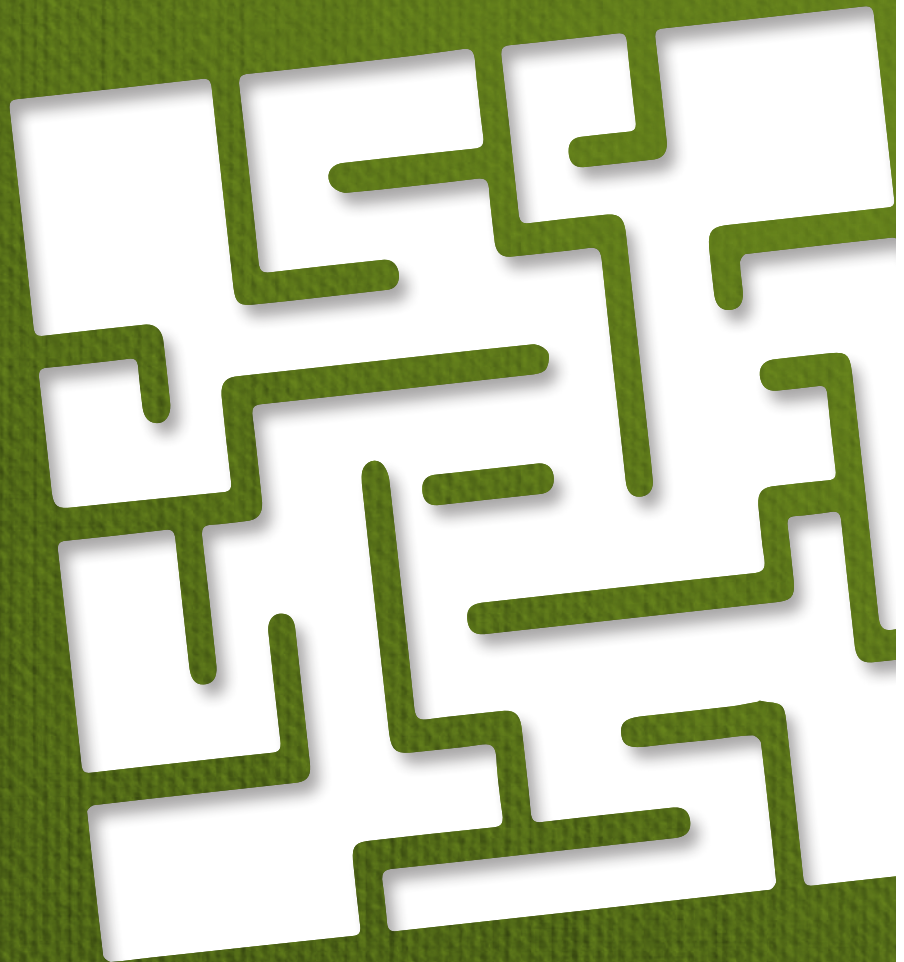




# ADOLESCENTS *in* ADVERSITY

A conceptual framework



## Summary





# About us

## **The Fostering Resilience Initiative:**

Our interdisciplinary team works to ensure positive outcomes for children and youth facing adversity.



By measuring and addressing risks and assets at the child-level, as well as within homes, schools, and communities, we promote a holistic approach to child and youth development. Our goal is to create environments that not only fulfill children's and youth's basic needs, but also promote nurturing relationships, socio-emotional skills, and civic engagement.

We work with non-governmental organizations, policy makers, communities and other stakeholders in seven countries: Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, India, Kenya, Tanzania, and Peru. Our initiative focuses on three key areas:

### **1. Learning and Development**

Improving learning and development of children and youth, both at school and outside of school.

### **2. Risk Measurement**

Developing, validating and piloting measurement tools to assess risks, assets, and outcomes across several countries.

### **3. Global Network for Resilience**

Building a global network of actors who foster systemic resilience.

Neil Boothby  
Director, Fostering Resilience Initiative

Design: Green Communication Design inc. | [www.greencom.ca](http://www.greencom.ca)



# Introduction

**In 2015**, the UNFPA estimated the number of adolescents and youth worldwide to be at an all-time high of 1.2 billion, with the vast majority living in low- and middle-income countries.

Photo by Wilfred Wachira



Extreme adversity, such as displacement, political violence, and natural disasters, can abruptly alter adolescent development, affecting immediate behaviors, the entire life course, and the next generation.



An increase in the scope and scale of humanitarian crises hitting extremely impoverished regions also triggered unparalleled levels of forced migration, with 65.3 million displaced worldwide. Over half of the displaced are below the age of 18.

Extreme adversity, such as displacement, political violence, and natural disasters, pose particular risk to the healthy development of adolescents, including risks of physical injury and harm, disruptions to ongoing learning and cognitive processes, and alterations to the social and cultural environments in which adolescents live.

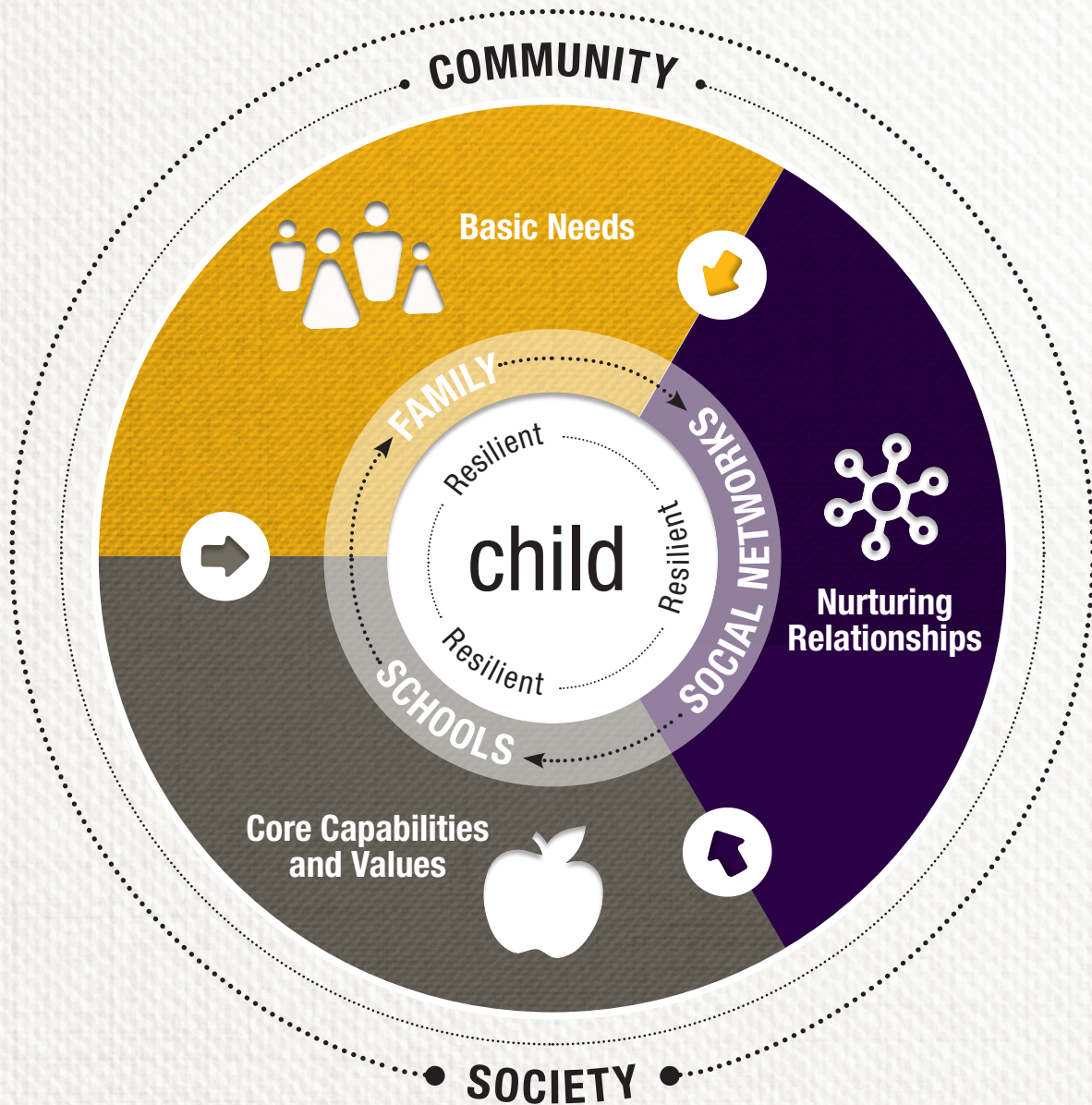
**Imagine a setting...** In northern Uganda, where adolescents from rural areas are abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army and separated from their communities and cultural and religious practices, creating what they describe as "a big emptiness in their lives" (Amone-P'Olak, Garnefski, and Kraaij, 2007). Or in Lebanon, where low education levels, widespread unemployment and poor living conditions, as well as feelings of marginalization and alienation contribute to the rise of extremism among Palestinian refugees in a UNWRA camp. (Knudsen, 2005)

Given that the projected number of adolescents affected by conflict and disaster in developing nations is increasing, the need for research and insight into the effects of extreme adversity on adolescents is of critical importance.

*Adolescents in Adversity* provides an overview of the current research on the effects of adversity on adolescent development. It identifies core concepts and factors that mediate or moderate the exceptional conditions today's adolescents face and the research needed to protect and promote their development in adverse environments.

# Building blocks **for** children's resilience

**A holistic approach**—one that not only addresses children's basic needs, but also promotes nurturing relationships, socio-emotional skills and civic engagement—is the foundation to fostering resilience in children facing adversity.





## Adolescents in Adversity

# at-a-glance

“

Most adolescents around the world live in **low- and middle-income countries** that are disproportionately **affected** by extreme adversity, such as displacement, humanitarian crises, and political violence.

”

**65.3 million** people  
forcibly displaced in 2015.



**1/2** are under 18.



**1.2 billion:**  
Number of adolescents worldwide.

**90%** live in low- and middle-income countries.



Photo by Alex Proimos



**97%** of all deaths among those aged **10-24 in 2004 occurred in low- and middle-income countries**, two-thirds took place in **Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia**.

### What can influence the effects of adversity on adolescents?

- Age and gender
- Early childhood exposure to adversity
- Disruptions to family and social networks
- Disruptions to social status and hierarchies
- Disruptions to education
- Disruptions to livelihoods
- Reduced cognitive capacity and executive function
- Atypical fear and reward conditioning
- Alterations to world views or social maps
- Inability to control emotions
- Psychosocial well-being
- Long-term stress exposure
- Physical injury
- Chronic malnutrition and stunting
- Infectious diseases

Photo by Chetan Karkhanis



# What are the effects of adversity on adolescents?

## Adolescence

“The transition from childhood to adulthood, starting with the onset of puberty. It is not viewed solely in terms of physiological changes, but also in terms of the acquisition and growth of “physical, cognitive, social and emotional competencies required to engage fully in family and society.”

– Aber, et al. 1997

## Adversity

“Events or situations, such as political violence, displacement, natural disasters, extreme poverty, and inner-city violence, which can disrupt or negatively influence the conditions in which adolescents, and the population at large, live, work, learn and age.”

## A framework to illustrate the effects of adversity on adolescents

The type, severity, and chronicity of adverse events all impact adolescent development, health, and behavior. The following framework and description of characteristics illustrates how the effects of adversity are moderated by multiple factors and why not all adolescents are affected by extreme adversity in the same way.

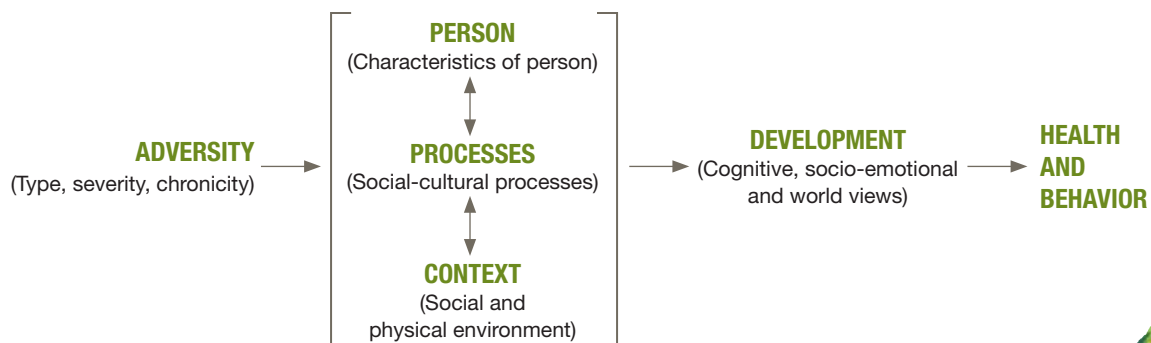
**There are four main factors:**

**1. Nature of the adversity:** the characteristics of the adverse experiences, including type (threat and deprivation), severity, and chronicity (duration of exposure).

**2. Person:** the personal characteristics of the adolescent (gender, early-childhood adversity, resources available to them).

**3. Process:** the socio-cultural processes of an adolescent’s transition from childhood to adulthood (societal expectations, rites of passage).

**4. Context:** the social and physical environment in which the adolescent lives (their home, their school, their community).





# 5 key findings

01

**Adolescence is a universally recognized stage of human development** that, despite cultural differences, is accorded significance across cultures worldwide.

02

**Adolescents are particularly sensitive to their social and physical environments; a sensitivity that shapes their behavior and worldviews as they transition into adulthood.** The physiological and cognitive changes that take place during adolescence enable adolescents to attain adult competencies, responsibilities and reproductive strategies most adapted to their surroundings.

03

**Extreme adversity can negatively impact adolescent development with immediate and long-term consequences.** Heightened brain malleability during adolescence can result in social, emotional and cognitive growth that helps reverse early-life disadvantage. However, in adversity, this malleability can deepen early-life disadvantage and the adoption of behaviors with negative lifelong consequences.

04

**In situations of extreme adversity, adolescents are often cast as vulnerable, dependent children by humanitarian interventions,** which can undermine their ability to acquire the skills, competencies and opportunities that enable social transition.

05

**Interventions that foster adolescent cognitive and emotional development as well as positive social transition have the potential to produce a triple dividend on investment.** These interventions can yield benefits to adolescents in the short term, across their lifespan and for the next generation.



Photo by SDM-IN-097 World Bank



“

The human brain develops through the use to which it is put. If experience limits the brain to self-defensive survival efforts, without opportunities for higher experiences, potential growth and development are thwarted and *future opportunities are lost.*

(Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996).

”

How adversity affects adolescents

## Lessons from the field...

For adolescents in **Haiti**, communicable diseases such as HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases have been associated with extreme adversity, in part due to experiences of sexual violence and the adoption of risky sexual behaviors. The protective influence of family has important implications for HIV prevention efforts (Carver et al., 2014).

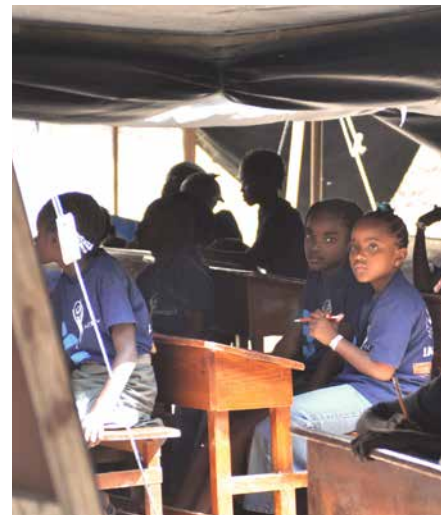


Photo by Direct Relief



Photo by Direct Relief

In **Sierra Leone**, a study conducted with former child soldiers identified the lack of access to education as one of their main grievances. Former combatants reported the collapse of the education system, unemployment and unfulfilled aspirations as reasons for joining the firing forces (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004).



Photo by bonyphoto

Heightened economic vulnerability among adolescents can be exploited for political, economic or other gain, as in **Rwanda** where the **Interahamwe** recruited adolescents who were living in rural poverty into paramilitary groups that subsequently participated in genocide (Tefferi, 2007).



“Survival-seeking behavior” persisted among **Mozambican child soldiers** (ages 8-16) after their release from guerrilla fighters’ base camps, where they were subjected to severe conditioning tactics that required life and death compliance with military leaders’ commands. Many former child soldiers had to re-learn how to engage with caretakers to gain their support and with teachers to succeed in school.



Photo by Pierre Holtz



Photo by Axel Fassio/CIFOR

**Globally**, adolescent well-being is strongly affected by factors such as national wealth, income inequality, and access to education. Those who stay in school longer, marry later, and remain healthy have better development trajectories (Patton et al.).

Displaced adolescents in **East Africa** can have trouble achieving their adult status when initiation rites and ceremonies are no longer performed (Tefferi, 2007).



Photo by EC/ECHO/Wim Fransen



Photo by EC/ECHO/Anouk Delafortrie

Adolescent girls in **eastern Africa** have described an increase in the burdens they face as a result of displacement (Tefferi, 2007). In addition to the normal responsibility of caring for siblings, they were expected to care for incapacitated adults and help generate income for the family.





# The way forward

Photo: World Bank Photo Collection

**Today's adolescents face exceptional conditions:** their numbers are growing rapidly, especially in places with challenging political and economic landscapes. Ensuring their access to education, health care, social support and employment options is critical to community, national and global prosperity and peace. Targeted research on the effects of extreme adversity on adolescent development and effective initiatives to promote their well-being are therefore critical.

**Multi-disciplinary research and multi-sectoral responses are needed**

It is important to explore the effects of adversity on adolescents from a more complex, interactive perspective, to better understand the totality of their experience. It is important, too, that these effects are understood within the context of multiple adversities, including political violence, natural disaster, displacement, extreme poverty, discrimination, and chronic violence.





Holistic interventions work at multiple levels to support adolescent development and can produce a triple dividend on investment.



## Culturally sensitive notions of adolescence should be used

Research and interventions targeting adolescents in low- and middle-income countries have tended to adopt a western understanding of adolescent development and social transitions, which limits insight into the disruption of socio-cultural processes in different contexts.

## Adolescent resilience and agency are more effective than deficits and dependence

Most humanitarian interventions target adolescents through a lens of dependence and vulnerability. This can leave adolescents feeling disempowered, marginalized and excluded from participative processes that acknowledge their strengths and their

role in actively shaping their development and their environment (Sommers, 2006). It is important to uncover how to strengthen the resilience of adolescents in situations of extreme adversity. Although resilience was long seen as an attribute of an individual, it is more helpful to understand it as a characteristic of the relationship between an individual and their social and physical environment. Resilience from an ecological perspective refers to the “capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability or development.”

## Further exploration of the role of families, schools, and the community is needed

Even though safe and supportive families, peers, and schools are crucial for adolescent development, there is a lack of rigorous research on the influences of these relationships on adolescent health and

well-being in situations of extreme adversity. Where evidence from studies exists, it usually comes from high-income countries. Research on the benefits of education for health in low- and middle-income countries have focused on children in early and middle childhood, and insufficiently on secondary education. Learning and school success is not only possible in the face of adversity, but education can also be the vehicle to overcome it.

## Further research is needed on fostering socio-emotional learning and psychosocial well-being

Socio-emotional development refers to the ability to recognize and manage emotions, and to maintain positive relationships with others. Psychosocial well-being is the relationship between an individual's psychological processes and outward social experiences. Both need to be supported to mitigate poor outcomes due to adversity (Alves, 2016).

Photo by Wilfred Wachira





# fostering **RESILIENCE** initiative

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