

War Child Canada “Life Story Board Toolkit” Pilot Testing in Northern Uganda

Summary

The Life Story Board toolkit, an alternative approach to engage and interview children and youth, was pilot-tested in War Child Canada’s (WCC) Northern Ugandan Legal Defence Program for Conflict-Affected Children, supported by the DFAIT– funded program enhancement. A prototype toolkit was devised for Ugandan school children (12-16 yrs). WCC project personnel and six local paralegal / child rights trainees received two-day training, who then facilitated the 2-3 hour sessions with groups of 6 girls or boys in Gulu, Lira and Kitgum districts over 5 days of field testing, 54 children in total.

In all locations the children were interested and focused throughout the sessions and found the process relatively easy to understand. The process drew out information and, in the context, was felt superior to questionnaire or focus group discussions. None of the children seemed uncomfortable despite issues which included abduction by rebels, terminally ill siblings and other family members suffering from AIDS and problems experienced with defense forces (primarily by girls). All talked openly during the follow up sessions. The Chip Pouch activity was very popular due to the confidentiality of the exercise; this enabled anonymous reporting of physical and social threats that might not otherwise be disclosed in a group setting or by questionnaire.

Optimum conditions for the Life Story Board depend on several factors; the training and interpersonal skills of the facilitator, assuring relative privacy within the group, freedom from outside distractions, and ethical practices that may call for follow-up of certain individuals in distress.

A photograph of the final layout of the LSB is the means of recording, to be later encoded in a relational database for analysis. The toolkit offers mixed qualitative-quantitative assessment methods for the measurement and evaluation of child, family and community indicators.

From this preliminary work, guidelines will be developed for the Life Story Board toolkit to be applied in different WCC program contexts. The sequence of activities can be re-ordered for better time- efficiency, the marker sets fine-tuned for program contexts that include HIV/AIDS, gender violence, child rights, education and livelihoods.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank all those who helped with the project, in particular Jennifer Johnson, Naomi Johnson, Cathy O’Grady, WCC’s Monitoring and Evaluation consultant who accompanied me throughout the field testing. Ogen-Rwoi Simon, WCC Child Desk Officer was the principal facilitator and translator of the sessions. I’d also like to thank Anna Arnbourg, WCC LAP project Gulu coordinator and the local trainees: Kassim (Gulu), Sam and Wendi (Lira), and Rose and Bush (Kitgum); Waidehi Gokhale and other WCC staff persons in Toronto, as well as Remy Beauregard and Barry Sesnan for helpful discussions and orientation to the Ugandan context.

Background

Genogram Game methods

Alternatives to questionnaires in public health and mental health research in conflict zones have been explored since the writer's fieldwork in a large 1991 child mortality and malnutrition study in Iraq (Ascherio et al, 1992). The conventional genogram diagram to plot family kinship, death and intermarriage was used by interviewers in a 1995 study of psychological distress and war trauma in 308 Sri Lankan schoolchildren in conflict affected communities (Chase and Doney, 1999). The genogram schema was rendered into a card and mat activity for war affected children attending an expressive arts program (the Butterfly Peace Garden) in Batticaloa Sri Lanka (Chase, 2000). The 'Genogram Game' was incorporated into evaluation methods in MSF Canada's "More Than Bandages" creative arts-based mental health program for war affected children 2001-2003, but the project was not implemented in the field. Subsequent sessions with refugee children in Winnipeg and demonstrations with First Nations child and family service workers and social work undergraduates have further refined the process.

The toolkit and activities, collectively called the "Life Story Board" (LSB), has been used thus far in one-on-one sessions to facilitate narrative, provide insight, and, within a therapeutic context, to affirm personal resources that promote resiliency as well as identify risks. The LSB is an interactive process to create a picture of their 'life story' using sets of cards, markers and symbols on a patterned mat. Guided by semi-sequential questions about home, community and personal aspects, the 'story board' is rich in information and meaning. Sessions varies according to the purpose, typically 2-3 hours. The photographed boards become the record of the session without disrupting the enquiry process. A picture also serves as a memento and the starting point for further sessions.

The genogram-based methods in the Life Story Board have several advantageous features. The process is engaging: the session flows naturally using a visual array of symbols to constructed layer by layer a meaningful picture of one's world, that transcends language and concepts. When facilitated non-judgmentally, the process is an authentic experience with considerable therapeutic potential for insight, trauma recovery, problem solving and supportive counseling. The degree to which this property is utilized varies according to the purpose, context and participants. The recording format is versatile, inclusive of personal, family, community and environmental dimensions embedded within the markers sets and layout.

WCC in Northern Uganda: DFAIT pilot project

One of the challenges for WCC's Northern Uganda Legal Defense Program for Conflict- Affected Children is evaluation- how to document the individual and community context of youth in IDP camps and measure indicators of project impact. Interviews and focus group sessions have limitations in quantitative information gathering, particularly discussions about sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), criminal activity, violent family conditions, etc. Questionnaires can be time-consuming, emotionally disassociating, disempowering, and of questionable reliability. Children may seek to give the 'right' answer like a school test. There is little opportunity for self-expression nor empathetic response to disclosures.

In November and December 2006 preliminary meetings at WCC Toronto office presented the existing toolkit (Genogram Game and Statement Game) to six staff persons. The discussion and feedback focused on suitability and feasibility of the methods to current and future programs in Ethiopia (50+ AIDS orphan led households), Congo (youth education programs) Sierra Leone (child soldiers and community rehabilitation) and Northern Uganda. In WCC Legal Aid Project

(LAP) in Gulu, Uganda the toolkit could be part of an 'intake' interview in child client legal cases or a component of anticipated projects on sexual and gender based violence,(SGBV) and family health.

DFAIT's Global Peace and Security Fund project enhancement of WCC's Northern Ugandan Legal Defense Program for Conflict-Affected Children was an opportunity to explore alternative methods to engage youth and evaluate both resiliency and negative risk conditions in that context. It was decided to pilot test with children a prototype 'Life Story Board' toolkit in Uganda in IDP camps February 19-28, 2007.

Purpose (Aims and Objectives)

The aim of the project was to explore the use of the Life Story Board toolkit (Genogram Game, Statement Game and Chip Pouch Collection) as alternative participatory methods to engage Ugandan youth at risk and as an instrument of community assessment and program evaluation for the themes of child rights, conflict, physical and psychosocial risks and resources.

WCC Legal Aid Project's mandate and codes of practice were ethically suitable for dealing with sensitive information about armed conflict, gender based violence and child rights abuses. Local project trainee assistants were experienced LAP staff / volunteers (2) in Gulu or selected from DFAIT Child Rights trainees (4) from the local sties in Lira and Kitgum districts.

The specific objective was to trial the LSB toolkit with small groups of youth, 6 at a time: previous use had been in individual sessions. In general terms the pilot test sought to evaluate the process of the toolkit- do youth engage comfortably in the sessions?- as well as specific content- can it draw out and ably record the life experiences, risks and resources relevant to WCC's programs, in a form practical for assessment and evaluation?

Secondary research questions included:

How readily do youth disclose sensitive problems in group sessions re: personal safety, household health, abduction?

Do youth and paralegals respect confidentiality of disclosure in group settings?

Are there ethical concerns using the Life Story Board re: disclosure, psychological support, unintended consequences?

Can the toolkit be adapted to the anticipated scale of WCC program and its community base? What are the time and resource requirements?

Process (Implementation/Testing)

The Life Story Board Toolkit: Description of Methods and Instruments

The anticipated scenario for the pilot test was 3 hour sessions with 6 boys or 6 girls in the age range of 12 to 16, led by spoken instruction, to complete his/her Life Storyboard pictures (Genogram and Statement mats) without personal narrative or discussion, only to clarify instructions. The setting would be indoors with relative privacy, done on an open floor with wall space for instructions on flip charts; follow-up feedback and discussion sessions would be held the next day.

In each pilot setting the primary school principal was briefed on the project's purpose, and permission given for student volunteers. Before each session informed verbal consent was given by participants with permission to take photographs to record. Project planning gave due attention to possible unintended outcomes and appropriate responses. Sharing of genogram

disclosures are similar to revelations in community contexts e.g. within focus groups, and appropriate guidelines for research behaviour on confidentiality and psychosocial support were followed (e.g. when a session should be terminated), with follow up contact provided.

The Life Story Board Toolkit used in the Uganda pilot consisted of three different activities: the Genogram Game; the Statement Game, and the Chip Pouch Collection.

1. Genogram Game (estimated time: 45 minutes)

The Genogram Game is an interview process using an interactive board game based on the genogram (family kinship diagram) adapted to extend to broader relations, social networks, common activities and sources of risks and resources to personal safety and integrity. The completed layout can be likened to an ecological map of a person's world, past and present. No names are recorded— instead each child draws a picture and models a symbol or shape out of modeling clay to represent themselves. At the end of the game the boards are photographed, after which the pieces of the genogram are mixed up together and in a symbolic act the clay used in the game is shaped to form a multi-layered egg; they can take the egg and a Polaroid picture portrait as mementos. See Annex 3 for detailed protocol.



The Genogram Game

1. **Present Household:** The sequence begins with molding a simple clay figure to mark the People card for the subject (index card). People Cards are round and square, for female and male respectively, and different colours for siblings (green), parents, aunts and uncles (red), grandparents (yellow) and other relatives (blue). Age of family members is written on the card, the layout of the household encircled with string. Unrelated people inside and outside the household are denoted by brown cards.

2. **Past Household:** The second step adds People Cards for all past household members who the subject can recall who are no longer there, because of death or departure. Marker sets for types of Death, Departure and Disability are introduced and placed on cards. Age and calendar year at time of death or departure are written.

3. **Extended Family and Significant Others:** The third step adds significant people outside the household as appropriate and feasible, so that the game board is inclusive of those most important in the subject's world.

4. **'Spheres' Outside the Home:** Six social or geographical settings are added by drawing chalk circles on the mat in the green (proximal) field to designate: school (S), village / homestead (V) (for households displaced to an IDP camp); neighbors (N) in the vicinity of the present household; church (C), peers (P), and market (M) where the child may frequent for work or family duties. In the blue (distal) field, 4 circles designate: rebels (R), defense (D); Karamajong (pastoral cattle raiders) (K), and luwak (robbers) (L), for sources of violence and insecurity. Those Spheres that do not apply are crossed out.

5. **Activities** Using triangular coloured cards and a numbering system, common activities are added to the board. Activities include: at home (child care, various chores, collecting firewood, fetching water, making bricks); recreation (sports, radio, leisure activities, reading); work (for money/ household livelihood). Self-made cards can be added- their meaning can be written on a separate recording card.

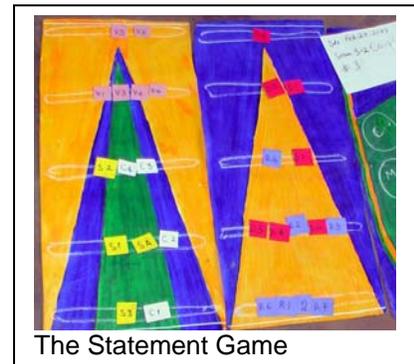
6. **Risk and Resources:** 20 yellow 'Threat' and 20 green 'Support' chips are then handed out to be distributed over the household, spheres, household members and activities presenting the

locus and intensity of 1) threats to safety and personal integrity, or 2) positive 'resources' that the child draws upon to feel good about being a person.

Other markers sets in the Genogram Game Toolkit were not used in the pilot test: **Relationship Markers** to categorize interpersonal dynamics (based on conventional genogram symbols), and **Role Markers** a set of 10 cards depicting object relations with other people, e.g. Protector, Comforter, Role Model, Nurturance, object of Longing, Providing care, Anger, Fear etc.

2. Statement Game (Estimated time: 30 minutes)

Following the genogram the children play the Statement Game. This involves responding to a number of spoken statements by ranking answers on triangular inversely coloured mats for Inner and Outer Factors. The children can agree very strongly with a statement, not agree at all, and there were also a number of options in between, essentially a 5-point scale, measuring change on repeated measures over the study period (pre- post). 28 statements were read out from the domains of: **Psychosocial Distress** (D- 7 items), **Resiliency** (R- 7 items), Exposure to **Violence** (V- 6 items), **Child Rights** (C- 4 items), and **Social Supports** (S- 4 items) [see Annex 4]



3. Chip Pouch Collection (CPC) (Estimated time: 20 minutes)

The Chip Pouch Collection adapts anonymous polling booth research methods used by social researchers for sensitive topics e.g., GBV, and HIV/AIDS risk behaviour. The questions are quantitative and time-specific, Each receives a pile of plastic bingo chips of 6 colours. In response to a sequence of 6 questions read out one at a time, chips of a given colour for each question are put in an unmarked sock or pouch. This is done secretly with their hands under a cloth so no one sees whether any chips go in or not. Domains included: alcohol use at home; death by violence at home; household physical and mental disability; sexual threats at home, school or community; and physical beating at home, school, community, e.g. "How many times in the past month have you been beaten at home?", or "How many times in the past month have you had sexual advances made towards you at school?". (See Annex 5)



More than one round of 6 questions can be administered sequentially. When finished the pouches are collected, and tallied later. It can be a stand-alone activity or used to triangulate Genogram and Statement Game information. The CPC is feasible with larger groups, e.g. a classroom.

Schedule of Project Activities and Fieldwork Timeline

In January and February 2007 the prototype was revised with the Chip Pot Collection devised and added as a complementary activity for groups of youth. 6 toolkits and related materials were prepared, including instruction cards.

Field Work Timeline	
February 15	arrived Toronto: WCC meetings, assembly of materials, recording equipment.
February 19	arrived Entebbe Uganda,; met Kathy O'Grady (WCC Monitoring and Evaluation consultant); flew together Gulu, met Anna Arnbourg (WCC-LAP Project Coordinator)
February 20, 21	Orientation and training of paralegal assistants; activity marker sets and other local factors added to Life Story Board. Day 2: first sessions piloted with Gulu school children (volunteers from Christchurch Primary School Peace Clubs): 2 sessions (6 girls, 6 boys)
February 22	AM: Follow up session with Gulu schoolchildren, PM: travel to Lira; meet Remy Beauregard (WCC-DFAIT project manager)
February 23, 24	2 days of pilot tests in Ogur Subdistrict (Luo dialect)- Day 1: 6 girls, 6 boys; Day 2: follow up session from Day 1 ; 2 new sessions (3 boys, 3 girls)
February 25,	Travel to Kitgum; meet Kitgum trainees
February 26, 27	2 days of pilot tests at Pajimo subdistrict primary school (Acholi dialect)- Day 1 6 boys, 6 girls; Day 2 Feedback from day 1 children; 2 more sessions (6 boys , 6 girls)
February 28	Return to Gulu;
March 1	're-test' with Gulu schoolchildren; de-brief, consolidate feedback, notes, revisions, plan next steps, final report plans
March 2, 3, 4	leave Gulu for Kampala, meet Barry Sesnan, education program consultant, depart Entebbe-Amsterdam-Toronto
March 5	De-brief with WCC Toronto staff; depart for Winnipeg

Results

Ethical considerations

Sessions with children established ground rules that any information forthcoming was to be respected as confidential and not for gossip. Disclosure in the LSB was permissive, led by open questions and the nonjudgmental options in the cards and marker sets, not interrogative or elicited under pressure. Mats were set up facing away to reduce distraction and peering at one another's boards. Assistance with questions was done quietly so as to not draw unnecessary attention of others. The completed mats and anonymous chip tallies had no personal identifiers, thus recording was anonymous.

Selection

For the purposes of the pilot test, selection criteria was for senior primary school volunteers from unrelated households, and who currently live in the home of their biological mother or father (i.e., not in alternate care such as foster or orphanage care), and without gross mental impairments that might affect basic comprehension or participation.

Narrative Report

Re: training. On the training day began with presentations of past applications of the genogram game and toolkit to the local WCC staff and the trainees: four paralegals involved in the WCC DFAIT-funded project (two from Lira and two from Kitgum), the WCC-LAP Child Desk Officer (CDO), and a LAP volunteer (male). We discussed adaptations to be made for the Ugandan context of displacement, child rights, physical security, psychosocial risks and sources of resiliency among youth and communities. Categories to be included were typical activities for

children in Northern Uganda: at home, for recreation, personal time and for work, to be incorporated into the Genogram Game. The trainees then played the Genogram and Statement Game (choosing a year of life when they were a school child); this clarified earlier questions raised.

Of the four paralegal trainees, the two from Kitgum were weak. Their command of English was not sufficient to fully understand the game, and they did not seek assistance. One was so passive that he hardly participated at all. The CDO noted that some children seemed uneasy with the female paralegal.

Gulu sessions Sessions in Gulu were conducted with youth volunteers from the local WCC Child Rights Club (Acholi speaking). As in all locations children were met with the following day to review the session and talk about what they did and did not like, to check for distress or need for support. In the girls' session we learned that the female facilitator spoke Luo, and comprehension of the Statement Game was unclear on several items. In the boys' session, the teacher was present in the room initially; this demonstrably inhibited them. Subsequently, teachers and other adults not directly facilitating the sessions were not allowed to be present. For these reasons however, performing "test re-test" reliability on the Statement Game with the Gulu groups was not feasible. However, returning to Gulu a week later to repeat with the same children, with the revisions and the Chip Pouch Game was informative; the children's enthusiasm for the opportunity to play the game again was quite evident and they provided much feedback.

IDP camp sessions: The WCC Child Desk Officer traveled to Lira and Kitgum and facilitated the sessions with the assistance of the local trainees. In the initial sessions word-for-word instruction translation made for lengthy sessions, over three hours. Eventually the session length was shortened to two hours at an unrushed pace.

In Lira sessions with schoolchildren living in an IDP camp were conducted in Luo, as were the instruction wall charts. The 'Chip Pot Game' was added to the session. On the first day's session in Lira one of the boys was tearful so the following day a private session was arranged with the male paralegal, an experienced community mediator with Concerned Parents Association (CPA). This was quite insightful and helpful; he further related the family problems which came to light the day before (see case studying Annex).

The second day's session in Lira were conducted with smaller groups of three girls and three boys so as to promote more discussion and sharing, but there was no appreciable difference in the outcome. It was decided that sessions of six were more effective; so 24 children in 4 sessions participated over the two days in Kitgum. In the girls' session, one disclosed considerable sexual abuse in the home; team discussion led to a follow-up plan by the Lira paralegal. This highlighted ethical and practical needs for local resources and plans in subsequent program work in IDP communities.

Some locations were not ideal as they did not afford much privacy; noise levels from adjacent classrooms or meeting rooms tended to be high; children were sometimes distracted by their peers gathering at windows to look in. Despite this, in all locations the children were interested, focused, and found the game easy to understand. The team became more efficient facilitating the sessions. In feedback, children stated they preferred the group setting than one-on-one sessions; we observed that they are not used to focused personal attention and were more comfortable being with peers. Several commented that they would be less nervous initially if the facilitator was introduced early and the session purpose was explained in advance - most had volunteered without knowing what was to happen.

The Genogram Game

The children all enjoyed the genogram game itself. None of the children were demonstrably uncomfortable with issues raised in the process, which included abduction by rebels, terminally ill family members including children suffering from AIDS, and problems experienced with defense forces (primarily by girls).

Group de-briefing were held the next day to discuss how they experienced the activities, to probe for any emotional consequences, comments about difficulties, or suggestions to improve the sessions. While Acholi youth are generally shy about talking with adults about personal matters, they were comfortable providing feedback; the LSB process had been trust-building and meaningful. In general the feedback was positive; many described how creating a colourful picture of personal relevance was empowering and comforting, even when elements related to suffering and past loss. Several who recounted loss of close family also described feeling warmed by the opportunity for recollection and reflection. Many felt the sessions were helpful, enabling them to see their family, past experiences, and present circumstances in perspective. With the exception of one girl, all said that the genogram was a preferable to questionnaires.



De-briefing participants the next day

The Statement Game

The statement game seemed to pose some problems. This may be due in part to the Western-oriented nature of social concepts such as 'respect' shown by adults to children, which may not be similarly understood by Ugandan children. Translation of such concepts and terms may be problematic. Peering at each others boards in the initial pilot sessions also inhibited them, as they waited to see what others did before responding to a statement. Questions should be pre-tested and scripted in the local dialect.

The Chip Pouch Collection CPC

Putting coloured bingo chips into plastic cups made audible clinking sounds that could actually be counted. Instead identical socks were used, using rubber bands to separate the chips from different rounds of questions, they were all collected in a cloth bag and tallied up later. The secrecy of the CPC was very popular—it had a fun quality despite questions which in other circumstances might be embarrassing or shameful. Some results were rather shocking, particularly in Lira, finding high frequency of school beating and sexual threats at home and community. The CPC tool has definite advantages for surveying larger groups e.g. classrooms, or as a community youth screening tool, after which the more involved genogram game could be used with a subset for triangulation and validation.

Information and data analysis

The LSB was conducted with 12 youth in Gulu (6 boys, 6 girls), 18 youth in Lira district (9 boys, 9 girls) and 24 in Kitgum (12 boys, 12 girls), 54 children in total. All completed mats of the Genogram Game and Statement Games were photographed digitally, and coded. Not all information gathered by the genogram game is necessarily relevant to evaluating program outcomes, but it is felt as personal, authentic experience, qualitatively rich, and conducive to the process. Relevant data will be entered into EXCEL spreadsheet and summarized (to be completed June 20 2007).

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The genogram game is a novel method for eliciting important information from children with greater face validity and comfort than questionnaires and other conventional methods. It is less language-based and more transferable cross-culturally and adaptable to gender, culture, and context. The feedback was generally positive from both girls and boys in the pilot test as well as the trainees and WCC field staff. That being said, there are details and considerations that bear on the quality and validity of the LSB toolkit in the field. Some factors important for optimum sessions (to be developed in LSB Guidelines):

Ethics:

- The questions asked and issues addressed can be intensely personal and potentially upsetting; those facilitating should be sensitive to this. If serious issues come to light a referral system should be in place whereby children can receive counseling or similar help if necessary.
- Ensure that child attend voluntarily, and that information will be treated respectfully and confidentially
- Circumstances when a LSB session should be called off

Training:

- care should be taken to ensure that those using conducting the LSB sessions are carefully chosen and thoroughly trained in how to guide the process and analyze the information.

Protocol:

- Sessions should be comfortably conducted in no more than 2-1/2 hours.
- Language should be carefully considered and facilitators must be sensitive to local dialects and comprehension of translated terms and concepts; delivery of instructions should be consistent across sessions- have basic script.

Conducting LSB sessions:

- Introduce facilitators to school children early (day before) and arrange an orientation
- Separate sessions for girls and boys
- Minimize observers, particularly teachers and authorities
- Minimize peering at one another's mat in the group by setting up stations facing away from each other, and at least 6 feet apart; using a smaller mat for the Statement Game (could be 1/3 the size)

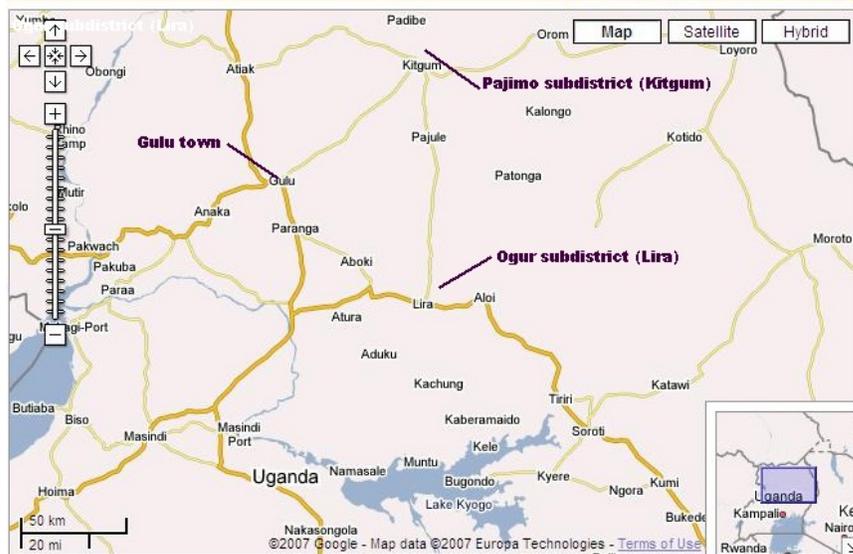
Facilitating sessions

- Plan for 2 facilitators, one to lead, giving instructions, guide session flow and timing; and an assistant to help leader respond 1-on-1 to questions, check individuals' comprehension / interpretation, ensure accurate placement of cards and markers; recording
- Avoid drawing undue attention to a child's disclosures by pointing or talking about details (keep voices low), be discrete;
- Discourage peering at one another's board

Data collection

- Photographing boards- check digital pictures- they may be blurred or glare from flash; double-check, take duplicates;
- Include at least one photo of LSB set with session card
- Download photographs, copy and re-name best set of each participant for data uploading

Map



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Annexes

1. Trainee feedback notes
2. Lira Case Study
3. Life Story Board instructions
4. Statement Game- Statements Used
5. Chip Pouch Collection- Questions