

PARTICIPATIVE RANKING METHODOLOGY: A BRIEF GUIDE



February
2010

VERSION 1.1

Alastair Ager, Lindsay Stark, and Alina Potts

Program on Forced Migration & Health, Mailman School of Public Health

Columbia University, New York.

Participative Ranking Methodology: A Brief Guide

VERSION 1.1

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'PARTICIPATIVE RANKING METHODOLOGY'?

Participative Ranking Methodology is a 'mixed methods' approach to data collection, in which a group of knowledgeable participants are guided in generating responses to a specific question or set of questions. It is a 'mixed methods' approach in that it draws on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to generate rich, contextualized data that can nonetheless be counted, ranked, and compared across or within groups.

This methodology promotes an engaged and participatory process, which rapidly highlights key findings while providing the opportunity for deeper analysis as resources permit. Collected in a structured manner, results can be swiftly consolidated and used to develop action plans addressing identified priorities.

METHOD

Participative Ranking Methodology (PRM), builds upon the tradition of participative rapid appraisal (PRA) methods. Indeed, the PRA acronym can be used to recall and present the key steps in use of the method: **P**ile, **R**ank, **A**ccount. These steps are described below.

NOTE: This manual focuses on the actual ranking exercise, and does not detail steps leading up to its use, such as selection of participants, number of groups, qualities of the moderator, research setting etc. These aspects of research or evaluation design are crucial, but will normally be approached as for other methodologies. However, several of the example protocols provided in this manual touch on these issues.

Pile:

The basic process of PRM is very similar to that of an open-ended focus group discussion: the facilitator, or moderator, first defines the scope of the research question for the participants, and then works to elicit responses from the individuals in the group. However, instead of relying on a note-taker to capture the key features of discussion, PRM uses objects that are selected by participants to represent key themes of their discussion.

This selection process is iterative, in that the facilitator works with participants to negotiate which object represents which theme. Depending on the tendencies of the group and the sensitivity of the research question, the moderator may need to prompt participants to elicit feedback and responses on specific issues. As participants' responses are linked to specific themes or topics, objects representing these issues are 'piled' in front of the group.



Rank:

The facilitator then defines a continuum along which participants can rank the importance of the issues represented by each of the objects in the pile. This can simply be a line drawn on the ground with a heel. Participants are then encouraged to place objects along the continuum in an order that reflects their relative importance. When an individual places an object, the facilitator asks others if they agree with its positioning, inviting others to reposition it as appropriate. Adjusting the positions of objects continues until a final ordering is agreed among the group. (See Figure 1)



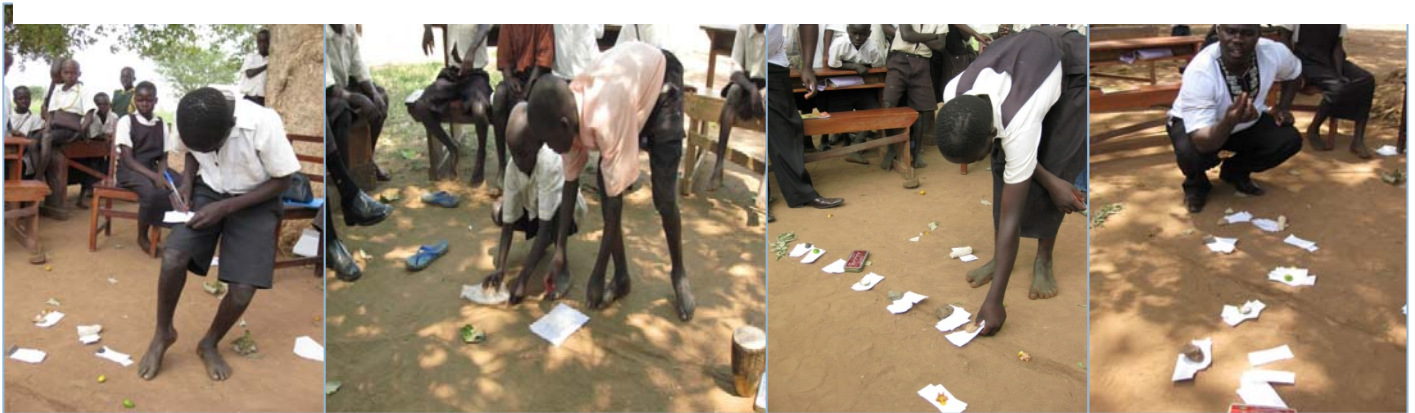
Account:

At each step of the process, responses are recorded. This includes recording all of the responses free-listed in the 'pile' section, as well as the final 'rank' of each agreed afterwards. Crucially, however, the note-taker records the reasons stated any participant – their 'account' for the positioning of any object. These accounts – generally expressed as clear, propositional statements – often provide a rich insight into local circumstances, attitudes and challenges.



FIGURE 1: RANKING CAN PROVIDE A MEANS OF YOUNG CHILDREN ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING & EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS

FIGURE 2: CHILDREN USING PIECES OF PAPER HELD DOWN BY PAPERWEIGHTS TO 'PILE' AND 'RANK' THEIR CONCERNS; THE MODERATOR'S ROLE CAN BE VITAL IN ENSURING FULL UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT FROM THE GROUP (FAR RIGHT).



VARIATIONS

There are several variations to the Piling and Ranking exercises described above.

- Depending on the literacy level of the group, responses can be written on pieces of paper, and these papers ordered along the continuum, in lieu of using objects (Figure 2).



- In a more traditional meeting setting, large sticky notes can be used to record participant views, then placed on walls in order to group and rank responses (Fig 3).

FIGURE 3: LARGE STICKY NOTES CAN ALSO BE USED TO RECORD, GROUP, & RANK RESPONSES

HERE, SMALLER BLUE STICKY NOTES ARE USED BY PARTICIPANTS TO VOTE AS A MEANS OF RANKING RESPONSES

- Ranking can also be done via 'voting', using stones, nuts, or any other objects locally available. In this scenario, identified problems are represented by objects, which are then placed in the top row of a table drawn on a piece of paper. The two rows below – "before" and "now" – allow participants to vote as to the importance of each problem at each point in time (Figure 4, overpage).

FIGURE 4: LOCALLY AVIALABLE MATERIALS, SUCH AS ROCKS OR LEMONS, CAN BE USED BY PARTICIPANTS TO 'VOTE' ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE EARLIER LISTING ('PILE') PHASE. TEMPORALITY CAN ALSO BE INTRODUCED INTO THIS EXERCISE, AS SHOWN IN THE PHOTOS AT LEFT & CENTER, WHICH SHOW THE IMPORTANCE GIVEN TO CERTAIN 'PROBLEMS' BOTH 'BEFORE' AND 'NOW'.



USES

Participative Ranking Methodology (PRM) has been used in a range of circumstances and settings, including:

- conducting gender-based violence assessments in displaced persons camps
- evaluating local programming initiatives in the child protection sector
- developing indicators of reintegration for girls formerly abducted by armed groups
- identifying key factors supporting well-being of national humanitarian workers in advance of a structured survey

PARTICIPATIVE RANKING IN ACTION

The following examples are based on applications of the Participative Ranking Methodology to several of the 'uses' described above.

Example 1: Protocol for Working with Refugee Children

The following is an example of how PRM has been used with children in a refugee camp, in order to understand what they consider to be the biggest problems facing them.

First, the set of problems are identified and represented by a PILE of objects:

- The moderator explains that aim of the group is to understand what are the biggest problems facing children in the camp or community.

- The note-taker lists ‘problems’ in the sequence they are suggested (numbering each clearly in turn). Continue until ten separate problems have been identified, or until there are no additional suggestions.
- The moderator and children then select objects (e.g. stones, pencils, leaves, cloth etc.) to represent each of the problems identified.
- The moderator goes through each concern in turn and decides together with the children what object can be used to represent it.
- Once linked with a concern, the objects are put in a pile on the ground in front of the moderator.

Next, the moderator works with the participants to RANK the objects:

The moderator asks the group to agree which are the biggest problems by ordering the objects in a line on the ground: the biggest problem at one end of the line, and the lesser problems at the other.

Throughout, the note-taker is recording the justifications – the ACCOUNT – for placing objects in a particular position.

The methodology offers many different ways to analyze responses documented as above:

Frequency: Once you have sorted the responses, you can determine which priority concern has been listed most frequently. For example, if “child recruitment” was the one concern mentioned in every focus group, that is a strong indication of a high priority concern.

Average Rank: A concern may be listed very often but, as indicated by the ranking exercise, may not be seen by participants as the biggest concern. The average ranking that a concern (or resource) receives will usually be the best measure of its importance for action. To calculate the average rank for an issue mentioned by the group—for example, “child recruitment”—simply add up the ranking number from each group and divide by the number of groups.

Example 2: Data from a Participative Ranking Exercise in Ethiopia

The following raw data is derived from participatory ranking exercises undertaken with various focus groups as part of a child protection assessment in Ethiopia.

The table below summarizes the contextual issues identified during participant ranking exercises (PRE). The first column shows the issues identified; the second column shows how many of the 53 PRE groups identified each issue as affecting children in their community; the third column shows the median rank

it was given by those groups who identified it. The median rank indicates the priority given to each issue; a median rank of 1 indicates that it was given high priority, whilst a median rank of 5 or 6 indicates that it was seen as lower priority. In this way, data relating to both the scope and prioritization of an issue is recorded and accounted for in the analysis. Issues identified by only one or two groups have been excluded from the table.

TABLE 1: CONTEXTUAL ISSUES IDENTIFIED DURING PARTICIPANT RANKING EXERCISES (N=53)

	Number of groups	Median rank
Food shortage	48	1
Inadequate health service	31	2
Conflict	31	3
Health problems/ disease	23	3
Lack of clean water	15	3
Personal hygiene and sanitation/ Lack of toilets	10	4
Lack of domestic non-food items and cultivation materials	8	4.5
Displacement	6	4
Lack of shelter	5	2
Lack of transportation/ roads	3	3

Further analysis was conducted to identify any differences in the problems identified, or rankings given to problems, between children and adults, males and females, rural and urban populations. The responses across different *woredas* (local authorities) were also compared. The contextual issues identified were then divided into six main areas: food, health, water and sanitation, conflict, accessibility, and material needs.

Focus group discussions focusing on issues which specifically affect children were also held. The table below shows how many of the 53 groups who took part in the participant ranking exercise identified each issue as affecting children in their community, along with the median rank it was given by those groups who identified it. Issues identified by only one group have been excluded from the table.

TABLE 2: CHILD-SPECIFIC ISSUES IDENTIFIED DURING PARTICIPANT RANKING EXERCISES (N=53)

	Number of groups	Median rank
Inadequate education service	33	2
Separation from parents	30	2
Early sexual activity (including early marriage and transactional sex)	32	3
Cost of attending school (uniform, fees, materials)	24	2
Child labour/ workload	19	4
Murder attacks/ abductions	14	3.5
Drug use/ Alcohol use	13	5
Criminal activities (e.g. stealing)	10	5.5
Physical abuse (beating)	8	3.5
Lack of youth centres/ recreation facilities	7	4
Drowning in river	5	3

Attack by known or unknown people	5	5
Street children	4	6
Rape	3	1

Further analysis was conducted to identify any differences in the problems identified, or rankings given to problems, between children and adults, males and females, rural and urban populations. The responses of each *woreda* were also compared. The findings were then described under eight main headings: education; separation from parents; sexual issues; child labour; Murle attacks/ abductions; harmful behaviour & street children; physical abuse; other.

An excerpt from the Focus Group Discussion Guide used in this assessment, as well as a blank Focus Group Data Collection Form and an example of what a completed form would look like, are included as Appendices 1-3.

Example 3: Using PRM to explore GBV Amongst IDPs in Northern Uganda

Participative Ranking Methodology was used to explore local constructions of gender-based violence (GBV) amongst internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Northern Uganda.

Participants were chosen using the following protocol:

- Within IDP camp, 19 participatory focus group discussions (PFGDs; focus group discussions based around PRM) segmented by gender and age (4 women's groups, 6 men's groups, 5 boys' groups, 4 girls' groups)
- Adult groups and half of children's groups 'seeded' from convening participant identified through random household selection.
- Other half of children's groups selected at random from school roll.
- Scope of discussion: 'Major issues faced by women on the camp'
- Domestic Violence (DV), Marital Rape (MR) and Rape by other (R) prompted if not proposed.

The table below illustrates the raw data derived from these group discussions. Column headings are explained in the key below.

TABLE 3: COMPARING RANKS ASSIGNED TO ISSUES ACROSS DIFFERENT GROUPS (E.G. WOMEN AND MEN, OR ADULTS AND CHILDREN) CAN GIVE INSIGHT INTO DIFFERENT PRIORITIES.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
Int No	Group	Camp	Notes	DV Ment	MR Ment	Rape Ment	DV Rank	MR Rank	Rape Rank	DV Prop	MR Prop	Rape Prop
1	W	A	B	1	0	1	1	2	4	8	10	6
2	W	A	A	9	9	9	4	2	5	8	6	8
3	W	A	B	1	1	1	5	4	7	6	9	7
4	W	A	B	1	1	1	4	5	2	9	7	7
5	M	A	S	1	0	1	5	4	2	9	7	10
6	M	A	S	1	0	0	9	8	7	10	8	9
7	M	A	S	9	9	9	5	7	2	7	7	10
8	M	A	S	0	1	1	9	1	2	9	7	10
9	M	A	G	0	1	1	4	3	5	7	7	10
10	M	A	G	0	1	1	2	3	4	10	10	8
11	SG	A	A	1	0	1	3	4	5	8	6	5
12	CG	A	A	1	9	0	3	1	2	7	5	5
13	SG	A	A	1	0	1	2	4	1	10	6	10
14	CG	A	A	1	0	1	3	2	1	8	6	9
15	SB	A	S	9	0	1	4	8	2	10	4	10
16	SB	A	S	1	0	1	5	6	3	9	6	10
17	SB	A	G	0	1	1	5	4	3	7	7	10
18	CB	A	S	1	0	1	6	3	5	10	8	10
19	CB	A	G	1	0	1	7	6	8	10	6	8

KEY FOR TABLE 3:

a. interview number

b. group: W: Women, M: Men, SG: girls in school; CG: girls in community; SB: boys in school; CB: boys in community

c. camp: Ayami

d. initial of notetaker

e. domestic violence mentioned as 'problem for women and girls in the camp' without prompting (1, yes; 0, no, 9, not recorded)

f. m.rape/forced sex mentioned as 'problem for women and girls in the camp' without prompting (1, yes; 0, no, 9, n/r)

g. rape (by other) mentioned as 'problem for women and girls in the camp' without prompting (1, yes; 0, no, 9, not recorded)

h. ranked importance of domestic violence as 'problem for women and girls in the camp'

i. ranked importance of marital rape/forced sex as 'problem for women and girls in the camp'

j. ranked importance of rape (by other) as 'problem for women and girls in the camp'

k. proportion of women/girls (out of 10) estimated to have experienced domestic violence in the past year

l. proportion of women (out of 10) estimated to have experienced marital rape in the past year

k. proportion of women/girls (out of 10) estimated to have experienced rape (by other) in the past year

The questions listed below suggest the potential means of interpreting such data:

- Can you see any potential patterns in the spontaneous listing of problems? (Columns e, f, and g)
- What about the ranking of GBV experiences amongst 'problems facing women and girls'? (Columns h, l & j)
- What do you make of the estimated proportions of those experiencing GBV? (Columns k, l and m]
- Bearing in mind the small number of groups in each sub-category, what hypotheses are prompted by the differences noted across categories of respondent? (i.e. between women, men, girls and boys)

SUGGESTIONS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Compile the response data: While the PRM responses are interesting and informative on their own, they are often more useful when compiled or 'grouped' into common themes or dimensions. This can be done in a variety of ways, from simple large group sorting techniques to quite sophisticated and structured statistical techniques. When selecting a specific technique, consider the ultimate goals for the data, available resources (e.g. time) and the skills of the staff who will be compiling and analyzing the data.

Before data can be compiled into groups the responses need to be transcribed onto cards for sorting. Responses can be entered into a computer database so that they can be manipulated and printed or they can be copied by hand directly onto cards. Computer software like MS Excel or a 'label template' function in a word processing program like MS Word can be used to store the responses and print them onto cards. However, in most situations having the interviewers hand transcribe the responses onto cards is the simplest and most efficient method. Use whatever method works in your situation. It will usually be best to use a different color card (or, failing that, a different color pen) for different categories (for example, 'protection concerns' and 'resources'). To help compile information from across many groups list the 'rank' number (that is, the position on the priority list agreed by participants) on each card.

Narrowing responses: Once the responses have been compiled onto cards or into a computer file you will need to reduce them to those that you believe will be meaningful for your purposes. In most first phase assessments you will be interested in identifying the major types of protection concern that are present. So, in a child protection assessment for example, you might include mention of specific concerns such as "rape", "domestic violence", "sexual abuse", etc. within a

broader category of “gender based violence”. You may want to have more detailed (i.e. narrower) categories for things that are likely to be the focus of potential interventions.

An individual can sort cards into groups in this way, but it is usually better to involve a number of people (who can discuss the reasons of putting certain issues together). *[Best of all is having two or more groups independently sort cards. This takes more time, but you can compare the piles or categories of items created by different groups to see if common themes emerge. It is a way of assessing the reliability of your compiled data].*

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF A ‘MIXED METHODS’ APPROACH?

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies are often placed in opposition to one another, when it is possible to draw on the strengths of each.

Openness to using mixed methods allows researchers to address four key challenges of measurement that often present themselves, from a critical perspective: conceptualization, operationalization, prioritization, and power.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ■ Conceptualization | <i>What is...?</i> |
| ■ Operationalization | <i>How do you measure..?/what counts as evidence of..?</i> |
| ■ Prioritization | <i>How important is...?</i> |
| ■ Power | <i>Whose perspective counts most if there are different views?</i> |

In response to these challenges, the use of methodologies such as the participative ranking described above allow the researcher(s) to work with communities to:

- confirm/amend/change conceptualization of issues
- provide varied evidence reflecting the operationalization of issues
- establish the appropriate prioritization of issues
- empower/access local/beneficiary/marginalized voices regarding all of the above

Participative Ranking Methodology continues to be developed and refined. The authors invite you to share your uses and variations of the method for further documentation of the evolution of its use. Please contact Alastair Ager at aa2468@columbia.edu

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD) GUIDE, EXCERPTED FROM INTER-AGENCY CHILD PROTECTION 1ST PHASE ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT (ETHIOPIA PILOT)

EXCERPT FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Biggest Concerns

1. A moderator and a note-taker should be present for all groups. The moderator explains that aim of the group is to understand what are the biggest problems facing children in the camp or community. It is explained that children should be able to speak freely. Who says what will not be recorded. It is the views of the group that is important. Encourage children to name major problems. Ask clarifying/ supplementary questions to clarify the nature of each suggested ‘problem’. The note-taker lists ‘problems’ in the sequence they are suggested (numbering each clearly in turn). Continue until ten separate problems have been identified, or until there are no additional suggestions.
2. If children do not identify a protection concern that has been reported elsewhere, or you have good reason to suspect may be present in this setting, the moderator may ask “In some communities _____ has been mentioned as a problem; is that a problem here?”. If the children do not report it to be a problem, it should not be listed by the note-taker. If the children do see it as a problem it should be added to the list by the note-taker (with a star or asterisk used to mark it as a concern that was only mentioned after prompting).
3. The moderator and children then select objects (e.g. stones, pencils, leaves, cloth etc.) to represent each of the problems identified. The moderator goes through each concern in turn and decides together with the children what object can be used to represent it. Once linked with a concern, the objects are put in a pile on the ground in front of the moderator. *[This step can be completed once a full list of concerns has been identified; however, it is often easier to find an object to represent each concern as that concern is identified by children].*
4. The moderator then notes that while all these problems are a concern, some are more of severe problems than others. The moderator asks the group to agree among themselves which are the biggest problems and which are lesser problems by ordering the objects in a line on the ground: the biggest problem at one end of the line, and the lesser problems at the other. The moderator helps this process, but does not direct it. The note-taker records verbatim key statements used in negotiating the positioning of objects. *[Note: “Biggest problem” may be replaced or augmented with “most prevalent problem” or “most serious problem” depending on what information is considered most relevant.]*
5. When the line is complete, the moderator checks with the group by asking: “So you are saying that X is the biggest problem faced by children here, then also Y is a big problem, then comes Z etc. etc.”. The

moderator prompts the group to make adjustments to the line if their discussion suggests they wish to change their ranking. The note-taker then records the final ranking of problems. This provides a prioritized listing of protection concerns.

Most Important Resources

6. The above process is then repeated to consider the key resources available for prevention and response. The moderator asks children to identify the things that can help children, or keep them safe, in the circumstances they face. In doing this the moderator draws on the remaining questions (four through nine) in Box 1. Similar to before, for each resource/means of coping that children identify an appropriate object is selected.

7. This process continues as previously until ten different resources (objects) have been identified (or children can not identify any other resources). *[Again, if there are resources that have been mentioned elsewhere that are not identified by children, children can be asked if they are relevant in this situation. If they suggest they are, they should be added to the list (with their having to be prompted noted by a star or asterisk)].*

8. The objects, placed in a pile, are again considered in turn and sorted into a line. The most important resource/means of coping being at one end, and the least important at the other. It is important that the children have opportunity to discuss and revise the positioning of objects on the line. The note-taker records verbatim key statements justifying the positioning of specific objects.

9. The positioning of the objects should provide opportunity to discuss all the remaining questions as required. The ranking exercise provides a foundation for exploring any remaining issues in a standard FGD format.

10. Finally, the moderator thanks the group for their participation, and reminds the children that the names of who said what have not been recorded: it was the views of the group that were of interest to the team. The moderator explains how the information will be used and the note-taker records any parting comments from the children regarding the exercise.

APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLE OF COMPLETED FGD DATA COLLECTION FORM

FGD DATA COLLECTION FORM (CHILDREN) – EXAMPLE

Date: 6 December 2008

Moderator: Jean Aperu

Note taker: John Situ

Camp/Community: Awera

Number of Children in Group: 9

Age range: 10-13

Gender: Girls, Boys/Mixed

Key Protection Concerns Identified:

Free list:

Attacks on girls/rape
Soldiers taking children to the bush
Sickness
Beating (teachers and parents)
Landmines
Fights (between youths)
Lack of food
Crowded houses

Rank Order:

1. Sickness
2. Landmines
3. Attacks on girls/rape
4. Fights (between youths)
5. Lack of food
6. Soldiers taking children to the bush
7. Fights (between youths)
8. Crowded houses
- 9.
- 10.

COMMENTS:

(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

My brothers and my sisters, they are all sick. They have fevers for many days.

The soldiers came last month and took two boys away from the home of my cousin.

There is too much sickness here. My brother and my aunt have both passed away since we came here.

A young boy died when he was playing by the road and he stepped on a bomb left by the militia.

There are mines everywhere. We are afraid to go walking from our shelter.

Girls are not safe here. A girl was defiled yesterday by a man when she went to collect water.

Coping Strategies/Resources:

Free list:

Family
Working in market
Praying
Friends at school
Girls who sell their bodies
Police
Village headman

Rank Order:

1. Family
2. Working in market
3. Village headman
4. Praying
5. Girls who sell their bodies
6. Friends at school
7. Police
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

COMMENTS:

(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

When a child is with his parents he will have a full stomach; when he is alone he may starve.

There are many of us working at the market: portering or selling

Some girls earn money by going with the soldiers. They hang around the barracks until they are picked.

A girl who is with her family will not do such things – her mother or her father will not allow it.

When you are faced with such problems, one can only pray to God and ask for his help.

The police here do not protect us – they beat us if they see us at the market.

If there is a problem you can alert the village headman; they have traveled with us here and they can seek to help you.

APPENDIX 3: BLANK FGD DATA COLLECTION FORM

FGD DATA COLLECTION FORM (CHILDREN)

Date: _____

Moderator: _____

Note taker: _____

Camp/Community: _____

Number of Children in Group: _____

Age range: _____

Gender: Girls/Boys/Mixed

Key Protection Concerns Identified:

Free list:

Rank Order:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

COMMENTS:

(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

COPING STRATEGIES/RESOURCES:

Free list:

Rank Order:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

COMMENTS:

(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

REFERENCES

- Stark, L., Ager, A., Wessells, M. & Boothby, N. “Developing Culturally Relevant Indicators of Reintegration for Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Sierra Leone Using a Participative Ranking Methodology”, *Intervention: International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work and Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict*, 2009, 7(1), 4-16.