



SUDAN:

FUTURE SEARCH TECHNIQUE CREATES A VISION FOR PEACE

In a Nutshell

Future search is a task-focused planning meeting used all over the world. Together, diverse groups of stakeholders explore their past, present and desired future, confirm common ground, and commit to joint action plans.

In Sudan, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) employed a future search to help imagine a vision of peace for the children in the south of the country, where war has raged for many years. UNICEF hoped this would help place consideration of the lives of children outside the context of political disagreements and inspire everyone to contribute to improving their future.

The Story

Southern Sudan is one of the world's poorest and most chronically underdeveloped areas. It has lost a generation of children to the turmoil engendered by a brutal civil war that has ravaged the region since independence from Britain in 1956. During the present phase, over a million people have died as a result of war and famine, while thousands more die from preventable diseases or grow up malnourished.

While the debate on Sudan's future has tended to focus on whether development should follow peace or vice-versa, the situation of children grows worse. Children can no longer wait for political leaders to declare peace. Against this background, and to mark the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a cross-section of southern Sudanese adults were invited to a conference to see whether they could put their differences aside and find common ground for the sake of the next generation.

The event was held in Nairobi in 1999. People came from many areas within southern Sudan, as well as from the Sudanese diaspora, and included health workers, NGO activists, elders, teachers, chiefs, women, administrators and academics. The result was a unique coming together of people who under normal circumstances would never meet. They were invited to leave their political perspectives at the door as they sat together and imagined new possibilities for their children.

An important part of the undertaking was to listen to children on their vision of the future. Some 40 children accompanied by their teachers came to Nairobi for their own conference, held just before the more general meeting. Aged 13-17, most had suffered displacement and separation from their families, and some had even fought in the war. For many, this was the first time they were able to meet people from different areas and tribes, in an atmosphere of calm and hope.

It became clear that all had suffered to a greater or lesser extent from the conflict. They were all poorly educated, yet they had something positive and unique to contribute. Working together, they analysed their past and present. The message they developed was clear: children want peace, they want access to health services, and above all, they want to go to school and learn.

The children approached their tasks with great maturity, humour and tolerance. This was displayed in the debate on which children should be selected to participate in the main conference. It centred on whether the ten children most capable of articulating a common vision should be chosen, or whether each region or ethnic group should be represented. The discussion was intense and lively, with the children finally deciding to select two representatives from each of five mixed groups so that each mixed group would be heard – even though this meant more boys than girls were selected and some regions were not included.

The inaugural ceremony for the main conference was an emotional occasion. Several participants were meeting for the first time in years. Many were overwhelmed when the children presented their painful experiences, bringing to life exactly how they had been affected by war and how much they yearned for peace in a way that stark statistics can never show.

The future search methodology was unknown to most people, and everyone had to take time to understand that the conference was not about presenting papers, analysing data and going over the same ground covered at umpteen earlier meetings. Once this was clear, participants threw themselves into the tasks with great will and enthusiasm. Given the deeply difficult past they all shared, which included bitter conflicts between some of the different ethnic groups in the room, the ease with which everyone focused was impressive.

Every participant had suffered trauma and loss as a result of the war. Personal tragedies – the deaths of children, parents or siblings; bombing of schools; fleeing in terror from attacks – were all recounted. The list of stories included the helplessness of parents unable to provide for their families during famine, as well as the inability to prevent widespread death or to provide adequate social services for children. However, when people discussed initiatives of which they were proud, it became apparent that they have tried, even under overwhelming circumstances, to improve their lives.

When the adults veered into politics, the children were there to bring attention back to what really mattered to them. The dream for the future of children created by the main conference was striking in its similarity to the dream of the children themselves. Peace and reconciliation came out very strongly, as did the pressing need for education and health services. The adult stakeholders also identified one other issue, which for them is key to securing a functioning society: good governance, with accountable structures that respect human rights.

Results and Critical Factors

The conference had a dramatic impact on the lives of some of the children. Sudanese living outside Sudan joined in a plan to develop curriculum material and deliver textbooks to villages. Another task force agreed to identify community members with existing teaching skills. A third group talked about training courses for agriculturists and farmers, while health care professionals collaborated to train health workers and assist local citizens in erecting buildings to be used as health centres. In the children's conference, regional action groups formed and discussed what they wanted to tell people back home about their experience in Nairobi, and the kinds of gatherings they could arrange.

Seven months later, 54 Sudanese NGO staff were trained in future search principles and methodology. Subsequently, UNICEF/OLS staff went to Southern Sudan and ran a future search on demobilizing child soldiers that included former child soldiers themselves, community representatives, and most significantly the local authorities and commanders from the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). In February 2001, UNICEF announced that it had airlifted more than 2,500 child combatants out of conflict zones and into safe areas where a rehabilitation and family tracing process began.

In the first future search meeting in 1999, the children said that they desired peace in 2005 and peace through education. In 2002, a peace agreement was signed between the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Over 50 schools have opened, including two boarding schools for girls, whose enrolment in these areas has tripled in one year.

The story of future search in Sudan offers three messages:

- First, the exercise helped children realize that their views count and they can make a difference. This was proven when their theme – peace through education – became a reality through the opening of new schools.
- Second, the future searches challenged the paradigm that development can happen only after peace is in place. In fact, as was shown here, development can lead to and prepare the ground for peace.
- Third, peace is not an event, it is a behaviour. Most conflicts start over disparities in resources, even when they may present themselves as ethnic or religious disputes. Education, therefore, can become the most important tool for peace. It provides an alternative to war.

Further information

Future Search. *Future Search and Its Realisation in Southern Sudan* (http://future-search.net/network/activities/special_features/sudan.cfm).

———. *Future Search to Demobilize Child Soldiers in South Sudan* (http://futuresearch.net/method/applications/world/africa/child_soldiers.cfm).

———. *Future Search Stories from Around the World*
(<http://futuresearch.net/method/applications/world.cfm>).

———. *What is Future Search?* (<http://futuresearch.net/method/whatis/index.cfm>).

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Sandra Janoff, Future Search Network.