6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Emphasis on Qualitative Research Methods

The research described in this document is based solely on qualitative research methods. This permits (indeed requires) a flexible and iterative approach. During data gathering the choice and design of methods are constantly modified, based on ongoing analysis. This allows investigation of important new issues and questions as they arise, and allows the investigators to drop unproductive areas of research from the original research plan.

6.2 Sampling

Unlike quantitative research which uses a random sample generalizable to a larger population, qualitative research uses a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling involves selection of informants based on an important characteristic under study, such as where they live (rural or urban), position in society (for example, community leader or ordinary householder), or specific cultural knowledge (for example, caretakers of children, farmers, traditional healers). We select informants with the assistance of local leaders and other local persons. Unlike most quantitative studies, we interview informants repeatedly in order to explore issues in-depth.

Before we began SC had already taken the first step; identifying the important subgroups or categories of people to be sampled. These were: (1) people who had remained on their traditional lands during most of the civil war; and (2) people who had fled their traditional lands to other communities or regions of Angola for extended periods, and who had only recently returned with the assistance of SC/Angola and others. Within their area of operations, SC/Angola selected six villages for the study: Three were composed of people from group 1 and the other three of people from group 2. All six communities belong to the same ethnic group (NGOIA-speaking) to minimize the influence of cultural differences. Descriptions of the study villages are presented in Section 7.2.

6.3 Types of Qualitative Methods Used

Data gathering methods included key informant interviews, direct observations, illness narratives, and systematic data collection techniques (free listing and pile sorts). We used a variety of methods to achieve triangulation (confirmation of the same information by different methods or sources) to increase the validity of the results. A short description of each of the main methods used is presented below:

**Key informant interviewing** proceeds much like a dialogue between informant and interviewer. Questions are open-ended and the interviewer makes an active effort at building rapport with the informant. The interviewer can use an interview guide (a general outline of the topics to be discussed), but does not need to follow it exactly. Usually, the interviewer explores relevant topics as the informant brings them up during the interview. In addition, the interviewer usually interviews the same informant several times to discuss certain issues in-depth.
Direct observation emphasizes observing and recording actual behavior, rather than reported or recalled behavior. Observations may focus on an individual (caretaker), a location (water collection site), or event (healing ceremony). The observer records as much behavior as possible, including actions, conversations, and descriptions of the locale and persons observed.

An Illness narrative records actual events surrounding a case of an illness (in this study, childhood diarrhea). The interview focuses on the sequence of events such as when each symptom appeared and what decisions caretakers made in response. The interviewer refers to a list of topics as a guide but remains flexible as to the order of discussion of topics listed. Frequently, the initial interview is followed with another, to clarify and discuss decisions made during the illness.

Free listing is a systematic data collection method where an informant is asked to list all the different kinds of some category (for example, all the different illnesses that children get). This method is used as a preliminary exploration of a “domain” (a list of words or concepts in a culture which belong together). Delineating relevant domains is the means by which researchers understand a culture’s beliefs.

Pile sorting is a systematic data collection technique used to further explore a cultural domain by allowing informants to group together items according to their own system of categorization. Informants are asked to sort cards on which relevant items are written, drawn or attached. They are then asked to explain the basis on which they sorted the cards.

A Timeline is a participatory data collection method for gathering time-related information such as the sequence of key events in the history of a community or a child’s first year of life. Informal groups of people knowledgeable about a topic under study are asked to use appropriate materials, such as a pen and large paper, a stick or a straight line drawn on the ground, and stones, leaves and bark for marking events. Participants are asked to describe each key event. The dates or names representing important events are marked on the timeline. This exercise provides important background as to the population’s situation. When used it is usually the first research activity done in a community as it helps to introduce the research team to many people at once.

A Community Map is an alternative to a timeline, and is also a participatory data collection method. Community members are gathered and asked to draw a map of their community, using appropriate materials (for example, drawing in the dirt, or using pen and large paper). Like a timeline, this exercise provides important background information for working with the community. When used, it is usually the first research activity done in a community because it introduces the research team to many people at once.

6.4 Selection and Training of Interviewers

Interviewers were selected by SC/Angola and the provincial ministry of health, from their respective staffs. However, none of the four individuals selected (two male, two female) were fluent in the local language, Ngoia. Neither the ministry nor SC/Angola could find Ngoia speakers who had good reading and writing skills. Therefore, we also hired four persons who lived and worked in the study
area to translate between Portuguese and Ngoia. Each translator was assigned to work closely with an interviewer. Together they formed a data gathering team.

Training was done by Bill Weiss, Paul Bolton, Hirondina Cucubica and Carlos Antonio in Cuanza Sul. Training emphasized both the theoretical background and practical application of the qualitative methods described above. The course was prepared in the United States, and drew heavily on the input of faculty members from the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health with many years experience in this type of research. We adapted many of their training methods to the NGO situation, and produced a course which can be used by SC in other regions, and by other NGOs.

The initial training consisted of three days of classroom exercises. Didactic teaching was kept to a minimum, and focused on description of the methods and their rationale. As much time as possible was spent by trainees practicing these methods on each other, and giving feedback to the group. Further training in observation and systematic data collection methods was provided in the field, in each case just prior to their use.

We took this approach because qualitative methods are fairly easily understood, but require much practice: The interviewer must learn how to build rapport; and how to keep the interviewee talking on the topic of interest without imposing his own belief system. This requires an appreciation of how much the interviewer’s belief system affects their conversation. For example, asking a villager in an interview to describe the mental health problems in his community carries the implication that deviation in mental function is a health issue. The villager may consider this to be a spiritual issue (for example) and a sign of particular favor. Or he may simply not distinguish between mental and physical disorders. In either case he will not be answering the question which the interviewer thinks he is asking. To avoid these kinds of problems the interviewer must learn to open the interview in very general terms and speak only as much as is necessary to encourage rapport and keep the interview going. On first interview key informants are asked very general questions (‘Tell me about your day’). When the informant mentions something related to the topic of interest, the interviewer then asks him/her to talk more about that thing, referring to it using the local term used by the interviewee. The same principles apply to the other qualitative methods.

After each classroom exercise, and each interview in the field, interviewers and translators were given feedback, based on their own transcripts of the interviews. In this way they continued to improve their skills throughout the data gathering period. Training was done in Portuguese, and all materials were translated from English to Portuguese prior to leaving the USA.

6.5 Qualitative Data Management

Data management and analysis were designed to preserve as much of the informants’ conversation as possible, and to permit ongoing analysis:

6.5.1 During each interview or observation data collectors wrote abbreviated notes in hardbound
notebooks. These are “raw” field notes gathered from key informant interviews, direct observations, case narratives, etc.

6.5.2 The same day as the interview, these “raw” field notes were re-written by the data gatherers into another hardbound notebook. These are “expanded” field notes and are written in full sentences; the data gatherers adding commentary as well as anything relevant which he remembered but did not have time to write down. Certain kinds of structured interview data (case narratives and pile sorts) did not have to be re-written in an expanded form and were tabulated and analyzed by hand.

6.5.3 The “expanded” field notes were coded in the field by hand by the data gatherers. Coding was done in the page margins of the expanded field notes. The research began with a preliminary coding scheme that was adapted and refined during the study; additional codes were created and added as needed. Text mnemonic codes were given color equivalents for quick finding of relevant text during analysis.

6.5.4 A data manager helped the data gatherers copy the coded and expanded field notes three times. She then put them into separate file folders so that several persons could analyze the field notes simultaneously. We placed a cover sheet on each file folder with the following identifying information: date of interview, interviewer name, pseudonym of informant and community, type of qualitative method used, which codes appear in the margins of the field notes, the number of times each code appears and the pages on which each code appears.

6.5.5 At weekly intervals, the qualitative data was reviewed by visually searching through the paper data files of expanded field notes for relevant codes.

6.5.6 Based on this review, study teams made decisions about specific questions to ask, what to observe, which methods to use, and types of informants to interview during the coming week.

The paper file database initiated by this research constitutes an on-going resource for SC/Angola. Because the data are in the form of words, they can be shared with other programs and can be used by anyone. The information is context-rich and applicable to many different subjects. For example, if SC/Angola decides to work on malaria or infant feeding, much of the data they collected here will be useful. Thus, the data is something the program can build upon continually.