

# Education in emergencies



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'Education in emergencies' refers to education for populations affected by unforeseen situations such as armed conflict or natural disasters. There have been over 50 significant armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War – mostly taking place within rather than between countries – and they have had a devastating effect on the lives of those in affected areas. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that in December 2005 there were 20.8 million people worldwide 'of concern' to the organisation, including an estimated 8 million refugees, of whom 6 million are hosted by developing countries. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) provides support to another 4.3 million refugees from Palestine. Some 24 million people are displaced within their own countries due to conflict. Conflict also has a lasting impact on those who have returned home after displacement and have to re-establish their lives and livelihoods: almost 4 million internally displaced people returned home during 2005 alone, while 6 million refugees returned from exile between 2002 and 2005. Millions more have been affected by conflict but without leaving their home areas; often they were too poor to make the necessary arrangements to live elsewhere. Furthermore, over 150 million people were affected by natural disasters in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

Emergencies cause major disruption of education systems. Schools and colleges are often damaged during armed conflict, or used for temporary accommodation of people rendered homeless or displaced by war or disasters such as earthquakes, floods or hurricanes; and students, teachers and their families may seek safety in other countries as refugees. In situations of chronic conflict, the quality of schooling may deteriorate if governments are unable to distribute teacher salaries due to security problems and/or lack of funds. The early phases of educational reconstruction are also emergency-like, with the need to meet quickly the urgent requirements of a large number of students, despite a lack of buildings and other educational resources. There may be also problems of access by education managers to rural areas due to infrastructure deterioration and sometimes continuing insecurity, and there are usually insufficient government funds to pay teachers a viable salary.

During the 1990s, many organisations provided support to education of emergency-affected populations, and the concept of 'education as a humanitarian response' gained ground (Retamal and Aedo-Richmond, 1998). The near universal ratification of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child meant that

governments and agencies could not argue that education of refugees or internally displaced children should wait until they returned home, since there is no way to be sure whether the wait will be for weeks, months, years or decades. The Convention obliges governments to promote or facilitate access to education for children within their territory, regardless of their status. Even children who are asylum-seekers must have access to education.

At the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, the world's education ministers endorsed these principles, and pledged themselves to 'meet the needs of education systems affected by conflict, natural calamities and instability and conduct educational programmes in ways that promote mutual understanding, peace and tolerance, and that help to prevent violence and conflict'.

A follow-up technical consultation in November 2000 led to the creation of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), catering to institutions and individuals with an interest in emergency education. The governing body comprises UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Bank and leading NGOs. This network organised regional and global consultations, leading to the widely endorsed *Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction* (INEE, 2004). These standards are currently being disseminated through regional training of trainers and subsequent national and local training.

## The right to education in emergencies

Education is a human right, important in itself and also 'enabling' access to other rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires governments to promote free and compulsory schooling at primary level, access to secondary education, and access to tertiary education on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means.<sup>2</sup> In emergency situations, it may be more difficult to meet these goals but they cannot be ignored. In fact, people displaced by war or calamity accord high priority to restoring education – they see education as important for the future of their children and of their society. Education in emergencies can help to:

- provide a sense of normality;
- restore hope through access to the 'ladder' of education;
- support psychological healing from traumatic experiences through structured social activities in a 'safe space';

- convey life skills and values for health and prevention of HIV/AIDS, gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence, conflict resolution, peace-building, responsible citizenship and environmental awareness;
- protect the investment that children, families and nation have made in children's education;
- provide protection for marginalised groups – minorities, girls, children with disability, out-of-school adolescents – often at risk of exploitative or unsafe work such as prostitution or recruitment by militias.

Responsibility for promoting children's access to quality education rests primarily with national governments, as States Party to the Convention. However, in many crisis situations in Third World countries, UN agencies and NGOs are well placed to get assistance quickly to crisis-affected areas. In practice, the education of refugees is often organised by NGOs, since camps are generally located in remote rural locations where local schools do not have the space to accommodate additional students, even if the language of instruction is a shared one. In other crisis situations and early reconstruction, the international community typically assists the national government in restoring access to education.

Children's enrolment in school in emergency situations can be constrained by situational problems such as insecurity and household poverty, as well as poor educational quality leading to early drop out from school, and the breakdown of educational management systems. Where prolonged insecurity has led to weak educational provision before the outbreak of armed conflict, there may be adolescents who need special help to enter or re-enter primary schooling: some of these may have been associated with militias as child soldiers, combatants' wives, etc. Ensuring the right to education in such circumstances requires action to overcome situational barriers and to improve the functioning of the education system.

## Promoting access

Strategies for supporting emergency education depend on the type of emergency. For example, if large numbers of refugees arrive from a neighbouring country and are accommodated in camps in a remote location, then new schools have to be established as a matter of urgency. Often the refugees will themselves start simple lessons for young children, with volunteer teachers, improvised blackboards and no books. This does not meet the need, and prompt assistance is required, as soon as logistics permit. Where security permits, international NGOs will normally support the prompt establishment of refugee schools, in liaison with the host government and UNHCR, and supported by donor governments.

If repatriation is delayed, a full range of education activities must be developed. Formal refugee schools have been established at primary and secondary level in the refugee camps of northern Kenya and Uganda, for example, catering to the needs of refugees from South Sudan, Somalia and elsewhere, and funded largely by UNHCR. Bhutanese refugee children in Nepal benefit from a well-functioning system of refugee primary and secondary education, while their teachers – many of whom studied in the

refugee schools themselves – often follow distance learning university courses from India.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat similar conditions may prevail in camps for the internally displaced, provided that the national government is supportive. In some parts of northern Uganda, for example, most of the population has been displaced due to insecurity, as have the schools, and several international agencies assist the government with education materials and teacher training.

In conflict-affected areas, the education system may remain operational to some extent but enrolment and quality suffer. Teachers migrate from the countryside, and distribution of salaries and education materials to far-flung areas is very difficult. In such situations, innovative approaches such as the use of radio to support teachers can be considered, depending on local circumstances.

Support to early reconstruction should include capacity-building for national or local education structures, according to need. In war-affected rural areas, educational reconstruction is difficult logistically, with the need to establish or support small schools in many remote locations. A current example is educational reconstruction in Afghanistan, where many villages are difficult for education officers to reach and some areas are affected by insecurity. Logistics can also be a problem for reconstruction after natural disasters.

Infrastructure can be very simple initially – many emergency schools are temporary structures made of plastic sheeting or local materials. For prolonged emergencies, semi-permanent structures may be more economic. Schools for displaced populations should, where possible, be located so that they can be used after the refugees or internally displaced people have left. Furniture is not a first priority either – the urgent task is to empower teachers (experienced or volunteers) from the affected community through supply of educational materials and in-service training.

Certification of studies (and of teacher training) can be problematic in refugee situations. There needs to be cooperation between the governments of countries of asylum and countries of origin, so that school leaving examinations can be recognised after repatriation. A noteworthy example has been the effort made by education authorities in Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo to enable refugee students in Tanzania to sit their home country primary school leaving examinations.

## Inclusion and protection

The biggest constraint on access, after insecurity, is usually poverty. Even where education materials and books are provided by the school and there are no official fees, the students may lack clothes that are considered decent, and cannot afford the various 'facilities fees'. Instead of attending school, children or adolescents may have to contribute to the household livelihood through paid or unpaid work, scavenging, or having to take care of younger siblings or sick relatives. Moreover, families often do not see girls' education as a priority when money is scarce.

For this reason, school uniforms should not be insisted upon during emergencies; rather, consideration may be given to distributing cheap clothing to those who need it. On one



occasion, the opening of schools in a Tanzanian camp for newly arrived refugees from Burundi was delayed pending the arrival of a shipment of second-hand clothes. In prolonged emergencies, the community may be mobilised to ensure that children from the poorest households have the clothes they need to stay in school, and to assist them in other ways according to local conditions.

Increased access requires increased resources – to ensure that schools provide the required educational materials and books, for example. Fee exemption for vulnerable students is difficult to organise except in extreme cases, but obviously helpful. Direct incentives may be provided to help offset the indirect costs of attending school – distribution of edible oil to Afghan refugee girls in Pakistan in return for regular school attendance was followed by a sharp increase in school enrolment and retention. School meals can have a similar effect. Scholarships for upper primary and secondary school can be considered in prolonged situations – if the funding is external, then the scheme needs to be time-limited with an objective such as creating a cadre of female teachers for the future or takeover by the government.

If the aim is Education for All, then further resources are needed to reach the most marginalised groups. Essentially a community mobilisation team is needed, which can work with parent-teacher associations, school management committees, youth and women's groups to help enrol children from the poorest families, child-headed households, child servants and labourers, and those with disability, as well as to provide the material necessities and remedial tuition needed to keep them in school.<sup>4</sup> Special programmes may be needed to help children and adolescents who had been associated with militias.<sup>5</sup> Youth can play an important role in prioritising education and training needs of young people (WCRWC, 2001, 2002, 2005).

The ladder of educational opportunity needs to be open, since children may not see the point of completing primary school if there is no access to secondary school; and even completed primary school often does not give sustainable literacy and numeracy. 'Basic education' increasingly includes lower secondary education, and young people affected by emergencies can benefit from having this activity to occupy them constructively.

## Promoting quality

As noted above, school shelter often begins with plastic sheeting and is hopefully upgraded later to semi-permanent materials (preferably a good roof and floor) or permanent quality buildings. There is a temptation to save on space and materials by using double shifts, but these reduce the hours of schooling and should not be considered for classes above lower primary level: there are frequent interruptions to schooling in crisis situations, and education in emergencies should seek to achieve the various goals noted earlier, including meeting psychosocial needs and conveying key messages and skills. Likewise, class size should be monitored closely and huge classes should be avoided, since children affected by crisis may have difficulties in concentrating or may suffer from lack of support at home, and so need the maximum attention from the teachers.

School furniture is not the top priority but education materials and books are. UNICEF's Core Corporate Commitment to

education in the first six to eight weeks of a crisis includes setting up 'temporary learning spaces with minimal infrastructure', re-opening schools, and 'starting the reintegration of teachers and children by providing teaching and learning materials and organising semi-structured recreational activities'. Subsequently, emphasis is given to learning materials, teacher training, water and sanitation, with the aim of resuming quality education for literacy, numeracy and life skills such as prevention of HIV infection and sexual abuse, conflict resolution and hygiene (UNICEF, 2005). UNHCR has introduced exemplar standards for class size, writing materials, textbook supply and education aids (UNHCR, 2003); however, under-funding of the organisation by donors and a decentralised budget system means that UNHCR is unable to fund education programmes to its suggested standards except perhaps in 'popular' emergencies.

Teachers are the key to quality but in emergencies many are new to the profession, untrained and lacking in confidence (Winthrop and Kirk, 2005). Even experienced teachers have not been trained in emergency response. Hence a quick way of assessing programme quality is to look at the resources allocated to teacher training, as well as teacher remuneration.<sup>6</sup> The Jesuit Refugee Services refugee education programme in Uganda employed trainers who gave vacation and term-time training to refugee teachers, as well as sponsoring some to participate in national teacher training programmes. The education programme for refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia in Guinea was implemented by the International Rescue Committee and had a separate teacher training division, which organised vacation courses, together with in-school training by mobile trainers and by teachers trained to mentor their colleagues. Teachers in the Bhutanese refugee schools in eastern Nepal receive vacation training as well as weekly training sessions and classroom mentoring by 'in-school resource teachers' (Brown, 2001). In situations of reconstruction, priority should be given to capacity-building for education faculties at national universities and teacher training institutions, including preparing students for leadership roles in in-service teacher training.

Regarding curriculum, the aim should be to continue with the applicable national or local curriculum – if necessary omitting any controversial elements arising in social studies or other lessons, pending a longer term process of national curriculum renewal. For refugees, the curriculum should initially be that of the country or area of origin, to facilitate reintegration after repatriation. The refugees from Mozambique who took refuge in Malawi and Zimbabwe in the 1980s followed the Mozambican curriculum, using textbooks supplied by the Mozambique Ministry of Education and taking school leaving examinations set by this ministry. Consequently, they had the necessary Portuguese language skills for reintegration into schools after repatriation. Following this success, UNHCR adopted a policy of 'education for repatriation' based on the curriculum in the place of origin, if this is acceptable to the refugees. South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and Kenya chose to follow the curriculum of the host countries, since they resembled the previous curriculum of southern Sudan: the refugees envisaged a similar curriculum in South Sudan after repatriation.<sup>7</sup>

In order to meet the goals of emergency education, the national curriculum needs to be enriched with elements relating to the

crisis, such as health measures, landmine awareness and environmental awareness, etc. UNHCR notably developed an innovative peace education and life skills programme, which has been used in all refugee schools in Kenya, as well as in situations of internal displacement, repatriation and reconstruction, including Sierra Leone and Liberia. The programme provides a weekly lesson in grades 1 to 8, with extension materials for secondary students, as well as non-formal and informal approaches, and has received favourable evaluation. The peace education teachers, though not highly educated, were able to use the student-centred participative learning methods, which are especially needed for attitudinal and behavioural objectives. The secret was to develop structured education materials and provide intensive teacher training and mentoring, as well as an additional period in the school week to allow for the activity-based approach.<sup>8</sup> The materials could be adapted for participative life skills education for HIV/AIDS prevention: the same basic skills of active listening, emotional awareness, empathy, inclusion, cooperation, assertiveness and negotiation are needed, but with practice in their application to refusal of unwanted or unprotected sex. HIV/AIDS education focused on behaviour change should be considered a priority, given the increased prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases associated with combat areas.

## Strengthening education systems to improve access, quality and protection

Some crises lead to weakening of local educational administration and some even weaken or destroy the education ministry and its functioning, whether as a result of warfare or natural disaster. In situations of reconstruction, top priority should be given to capacity building for ministry, regional and district levels of educational management, with provision of needed equipment. The responsibility for such strengthening of education systems should be a primary focus of the government-chaired inter-agency emergency education committee – avoiding the not uncommon situation where a year or more passes before the gap is filled. The focus on school provision should not distract from the need in many post-conflict situations for strengthening national capacity in teacher training and curriculum renewal, where coordination of external assistance for updating national education specialists and institutional development is again vital.

## The good of all

Maintaining the access to education of populations affected by conflict or disaster helps affected children and adolescents to see a positive future rather than suffering debilitating depression or seeking aggressive outlets for their feelings. Often these populations already suffered from inferior educational and economic opportunities, which may have contributed to conflict or to vulnerability to disasters<sup>9</sup>. Such fissures in society lay the foundations for future violence. If Education for All can become a reality for the young people at the fault-lines of social conflict or natural disasters, then the whole society has a better chance of peace and prosperity. If the education itself promotes skills for peace and citizenship, then the chances for a better future may be further enhanced.

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## Endnotes

- 1 These statistics are taken from the websites of UNHCR, UNRWA, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, and the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. The estimated total of refugees and internally displaced due to conflict is about 36 million. Including those who returned home over recent years and those remaining in insecure areas, the total affected by recent and ongoing conflicts is of the order of one per cent of the world's population. For statistics on access to education in recent major crises see WCRWC (2004).
- 2 Other human rights instruments have similar provisions, and are not restricted to young people under the age of 18. WCRWC (2006) gives a helpful synopsis of treaty obligations applicable to the right to education in emergencies.
- 3 For an overview of refugee and other emergency education programmes, see Crisp et al.(2001), Sommers (2002), Burde (2005), World Bank (2005), Lowicki-Zucca and Emry (2005). For policy and programming guidelines, see Aguilar and Retamal (1998), Pigozzi (1999), Sinclair (2002), UNHCR (2003), Save the Children (2002, 2003), INEE (2004), Williams (2006). The child protection dimension is presented in Nicolai and Triplehorn (2003). Case studies on country programmes and thematic issues have been produced by UNESCO International Institute of Educational Planning, leading to the publication of a major guidebook on education in emergencies intended for use by national education authorities (IIEP, 2006), available online at [www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/emergency/guidebook.htm](http://www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/emergency/guidebook.htm). IIEP supports capacity building for educational planning and management in situations of early reconstruction. UNESCO International Bureau of Education provides technical support for post-conflict curriculum renewal and has published an analysis of curriculum change in several conflict-affected countries (Tawil and Harley, 2004). Several of these publications can be accessed online through the website of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies ([www.ineesite.org](http://www.ineesite.org)), together with other relevant materials. The January 2005 edition of Forced Migration Review provides a concise policy-oriented overview entitled Education in emergencies: learning for a peaceful future (online at [www.fmreview.org](http://www.fmreview.org)). Vocational training and higher education are not discussed here for lack of space. A UNHCR manual on skills training for refugees (Avery et al., 1996) is available as part of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies' Technical Kit (available on CD-ROM and on [www.ineesite.org](http://www.ineesite.org)), and emphasises the need to relate skills training to work opportunities. Lyby (2001) provides a case study of vocational training in the refugee camps in Tanzania.
- 4 Exemption from the various types of school fee can be negotiated, though experience suggests that people with influence often channel fee exemptions or scholarships intended for the poorest to members of their own extended families or groups; this is especially problematic if there is no external check on the selection process. If education is to serve as an active tool of protection, then additional trainers are needed to mobilise community concerns over child-headed households, exploitative or dangerous child labour, reintegration of ex-combatants, children with disability, etc., including identifying and helping those concerned to enrol and stay in education programmes.
- 5 Many children and adolescents who have been associated with militias enrol or seek to enrol in normal schools. In some settings, there are also accelerated primary school courses for adolescents or ex-combatants, but these take longer to establish. Programmes for reinsertion of ex-combatants often focus on males and neglect the education needs of adolescent girls and the children born to them while with militias.
- 6 In displacement situations, teachers may initially volunteer their services; but in all settings quality education requires teachers to be paid at least the 'income forgone' from spending their time in school rather than on the next best alternative. People's mobility may be high in crises, so reducing teacher turnover is a priority in order that in-service training is not wasted.
- 7 The main requirement is for refugee students to have the language skills needed for reintegration into schools in their home area after repatriation. In prolonged situations, they may also learn a host country language; thus Afghan refugees in Pakistan learn Urdu as a subject, even though their main studies are conducted in Pashto or Dari (the main languages of Afghanistan).
- 8 The 'Peace Education Programme' developed in Kenya by UNHCR, now an education tool of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies and available on the UNESCO website (UNESCO, 2006), is described in Baxter and Ikobwa (2005), while an external evaluation is documented in Obura (2002). Insertion of life skills education oriented to peace, HIV/AIDS prevention, environmental protection, human rights, etc., into normal lessons is difficult for teachers, and should be part of longer term curriculum and textbook renewal, supported by improved teacher training. In the short term, the most effective approach is to use specially trained teachers with special supportive materials and an earmarked timetable allocation (extra time is needed to permit participative approaches using stimulus activities and role play together with class discussion, whether a separate subject approach is used or some form of carrier subject or integration) (Sinclair, 2004).
- 9 Smith and Vaux (2003) document the ways in which education systems can contribute to the outbreak of conflict and suggest the need for indicators to ensure that post-conflict reconstruction does not replicate these conditions.



## Biographical notes

**Margaret Sinclair** is an education planner who has worked in the field of refugee and emergency education since 1987. She joined the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1988, advising on education and training for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and then served as Senior Education Officer for UNHCR Geneva from 1993 to 1998. Since retirement, she has undertaken consultancies on emergency education for UNHCR, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), NGOs, and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). She initiated UNHCR's life skills for peace education pilot programme in 1997, and advocates the 'enrichment' of emergency education with life skills for HIV/AIDS prevention, peace/human rights/gender/citizenship, and psychosocial elements. She is a member of INEE's Task Team on teachers and other education personnel and its Interest Group on youth and adolescents.