

Time to end neglect of post-primary education

by Tim Brown

When deprived of post-primary education during prolonged conflicts, displaced communities are robbed of potential leaders and of hope for a better future.

When funding for education for displaced people is reduced, it is post-primary education (PPE) which suffers first. Some of the consequences are:

- In Kenya's Dadaab camps budgetary restrictions have capped the number of students admitted to secondary school. The population of out-of-school primary graduates is expected to rise from 2,000 to 10,000 within five years. The increasing tension due to the growing mass of frustrated idle youth may explode into violence.
- In Pakistan suspension of international support for Afghan refugee secondary schools in 1995 forced many to close. Opportunities were lost to provide the skilled human resources desperately needed in Afghanistan today.
- In Uganda in the late 1990s competition increased for a dwindling number of scholarships for secondary education. In order to boost their grades – and scholarship prospects – some Sudanese refugee boys continually repeated their final year at primary school. Teachers observed that girls were harassed, some dropping out of school, due to the presence of these over-aged boys.

Refugee youth are at the age when their immediate protection and psychosocial needs are great and they require crucial life skills to survive. If given education opportunities they are less likely to fall prey to military recruitment or sexual abuse. Moreover, they need to grow into adulthood preparing for their future role in rebuilding a peaceful society. Young females, in particular, need secondary education in order to become teachers and future role models to encourage more girls into school.

Refugees value PPE, sometimes selling their food rations to raise funds to enable children to attend secondary schools. However, donors – swept along in the global drive towards Universal Primary Education – often fail to see the consequences of lack of support. Budget lines available for funding PPE programmes are hard to identify. Donors seem unsure whether PPE for refugees falls under short-term relief or long-term development. For country of asylum or country of origin? For individual rights or the needs of the community?

Funding dilemmas are exacerbated by the fact that PPE – whether in the form of tertiary education, formal secondary school or vocational training – is expensive. Donors have to decide whether to spread the funds thinly without jeopardising quality or to focus on selected refugees who can climb the education ladder and eventually help their communities as professionals and leaders.

Low-cost approaches are ways to deal with limited funding. They could include self-help secondary schools, capacity building of local institutions, cost-sharing scholarships and non-formal education such as training in HIV/AIDS awareness. Community-based schools promote refugee empowerment but they also require outside support and accreditation. Local secondary schools use existing infrastructure and locally available resources but the refugees may need supplementary classes to make their education more relevant. Partial scholarships can spread funds more widely and encourage refugee initiative – but it is important to ensure that students can cope.

Agencies working in PPE need to tackle the difficulties of identifying and selecting beneficiaries. It is necessary to

- distinguish refugees in genuine need from those who make bogus claims
- strive for gender parity and take affirmative action to help girls without causing backlash or putting undue pressure on girl pupils to achieve
- give priority to refugees with special needs
- reward refugee students who show achievement and commitment
- ensure that both urban and camp-based refugees can benefit
- let nationals, wherever possible, benefit from refugee education support: this could involve building the capacity of local education authorities and contributing to the additional costs they incur when they offer education to displaced people.

More research would help us reach a better understanding of the importance of PPE for displaced young people and improve the methods of delivery. Donors need to be better educated about the value of this vital stage of education.

Tim Brown was one of the pioneers in the creation of the Foundation for the Refugee Education Trust (RET), an independent foundation established by UNHCR in 2000 (see p37) to address the need for PPE for refugees.

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