

Promoting stable post-conflict education

by Dana Burde

When international NGOs sponsor education programmes during and after a crisis they must also invest resources in planning for post-conflict transition.

Many international NGOs rely on two key strategies to provide education services during or just after a violent conflict: fostering community participation and recruiting and training community members ('paraprofessional teachers').

In the early 1990s – a time when education was only beginning to be added, reluctantly and slowly, to the established repertoire of humanitarian assistance – a major US NGO launched an early childhood development programme in war-torn Croatia. Signing of the Dayton Accords in December 1995 led to its extension to Bosnia. For several years the NGO worked to provide pre-school education for 3-7 year-olds as well as offering protection and community development services to refugee, IDP, 'stayee' and returnee populations. The initiative took place throughout conflict-ridden areas, including among refugee populations on the Croatian coast and in the besieged cities of Mostar and Sarajevo.

Community participation was a priority for the NGO but not for authorities

The NGO essentially functioned as a grant-making agency, providing communities with the start-up and operating costs plus training in order to establish schools and parent-teacher associations (PTAs). Half of the teachers in the programme were paraprofessionals who received between three and eight days' training, depending on their experience. The NGO paid their salaries and provided communities with toys, furnishings, a few books in the local language and bathroom supplies. A hundred PTAs were set up and their members trained in fundraising and management techniques supposed to allow them to function independently. After nine months of support, the

NGO would withdraw funding from a school in order to move on to open and fund new ones. It was expected that fees from parents and other locally-generated funds would cover costs after the NGO moved on.

When the NGO won a \$4.5m USAID grant in 1994 the pre-school design became more elaborate. Emphasis on providing quality education in stable, safe spaces increased and training continued for some pre-school teachers and PTAs even after the initial nine months' intervention. As concerns for children's physical safety lessened, the emphasis shifted to focus on children's development. By 2000, when the last grant to the NGO ended, approximately 1,000 pre-school groups had been established throughout Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Failure of post-conflict transition

When international NGOs sponsor education programmes amidst crisis they temporarily assume state responsibilities for paying teachers, providing training, maintaining educational standards and engaging communities in managing schools. This NGO fulfilled these tasks remarkably well – but only as long as funding continued. When peace returned, donor support ended. When the NGO was unable to offer further grants, participation dwindled and communities struggled to pay teachers and provide food for the children.

Community participation was a priority for the NGO but not for authorities in post-conflict administrations in Croatia, Republika Srpska and the Federation. The PTAs were not recognised by government officials who had little interest in community-based pre-schools. Before the war, pre-schools had been subject

to strict procedures and teachers were required to train in pedagogical academies for two years in order to obtain basic certification. When state institutions reasserted themselves the paraprofessional teachers hired and trained by the NGO found themselves rejected and denied government benefits. Government officials who had worked with the NGO to establish the pre-schools ceased to offer them either political or practical support.

Experience from this project highlights the need to:

- develop an exit strategy from the outset
- work with government institutions to invest in teacher training
- fund teachers who have received NGO and in-service training to attend government accreditation programmes
- ensure that NGO education staff work with government teacher-training counterparts
- pay teachers on time and prioritise development of mechanisms to ensure that they go on the civil service payroll.

If investments in education during conflict are to be more than stop-gap measures, government cannot be excluded from funding and decision-making. Local government representatives could be seconded to NGOs and NGO staff could work inside education ministry headquarters to provide technical assistance and improve communications.

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