

# Right to education in South Darfur

by Katherine Reid

**Education is an absolute right for all children, yet in Darfur children have always had limited access to schooling. Innovative programmes and increased assistance are vital if children in South Darfur are to exercise this right.**

Sudan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>1</sup> in 1990, thus committing itself to protecting and assuring the right to education for all children within its borders – including the right of access to education for young refugees and IDPs. This commitment is of particular significance in Darfur where an estimated two million people have been displaced since the conflict started in 2003.

One of the roots of the crisis is the Sudanese government's long-standing neglect of the region. Schools in Darfur are few and far between, and where they do exist they have traditionally been understaffed and under-funded. Darfur is the exception to the rule about conflicts and education, for today there are more children in school than before the conflict. International humanitarian assistance has enabled more children to attend school and provision in IDP camps is generally better than in villages. More children, and especially girls, are in school because their families have lost their land and animals, leaving children with less work to do.

In South Darfur it is estimated there are nearly 257,000 conflict-affected children of school age, two thirds of them IDPs. South Darfur has the largest population of school-age children not enrolled in school. Most drop-outs occur after only a few years of schooling, before children have had a chance to develop basic literacy

and numeracy skills. Government capacity to provide education for these children is limited by lack of resources. Through partnerships with the state's education authorities and international and local NGOs, UNICEF is working to address these problems.

Since 2004, UNICEF has provided support for the education of some 70% of the state's conflict-affected children through the provision of

lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure. Schools often collect fees from students to address these shortcomings (despite protests from UNICEF and other child protection and education organisations), further marginalising those students who cannot afford the fees.

Within the IDP camps, poor infrastructure, overcrowding and lack of both materials and trained teachers all significantly affect the provision of quality education for IDP children and youth. For those who do not have immediate access to schools within camps, long distances to the nearest available schools – sometimes an hour's walk in each direction

– additionally hamper access to educational services. This marginalises girls in particular, many of whom are not permitted to walk long distances for fear of attack. In some areas, corporal punishment is still in use, deterring children further.

Adolescents are particularly affected, with few educational options available. Some attend primary schools supported by UNICEF and local/international NGOs in order to complete their primary

education which was cut short by the conflict. Others join government-supported schools in the local community – if they can pay the fees. The majority, however, have few options open to them for continuing any education. Many are burdened with family responsibilities. Instead of attending schools, girls are required to take care of children, cook and clean, and boys are often expected to support their families financially.

These difficulties are evident in Kalma, the largest IDP camp in Darfur, located on the outskirts of Nyala. At last count, around



Peter Biro/International Rescue Committee

*Elzina Adam  
Ismael teaches  
children to  
read in a camp  
outside Nyala in  
South Darfur.*

educational supplies, uniforms, in-service training for volunteer teachers and construction and rehabilitation of classrooms and school water and sanitation facilities. UNICEF has also prioritised improving access to education by marginalised groups – in particular girls, whose enrolment rates increased from 28% at the start of the conflict in 2003 to 42% during the 2005/2006 academic year.

Despite these interventions, education provision for children and youth in South Darfur is still beset with difficulties such as insufficient and delayed payments for teachers,

87,000 IDPs lived in mile after mile of tightly packed shelters. With bustling markets, the camp is, in effect, a city which struggles to cope with crime, poverty and insufficient social services. Schooling in Kalma is provided by UNICEF and its partners but does not extend beyond completion of primary school at age 13. Secondary school education – which donors do not deem a priority in emergency settings – does not exist in Kalma or indeed in the majority of IDP locations across Darfur. For youth with little to do during the day and few opportunities for the future, the attraction of potentially anti-social activities is sometimes hard to resist. Some young adults have inevitably become involved in petty crime, gang-related activities and, in some cases, violence.

In smaller camps closer to towns, youth have better access to educational services. This is true in Secelee camp, for example, where most schools within 30 minutes' walking distance cater for both IDP and host community populations. Most of the youth attending these primary schools, however, are enrolled at levels below their age.

### Addressing the problem

To help provide a wider range of educational opportunities for displaced and conflict-affected youth, local and international NGOs are offering alternative, more accessible and more flexible methods of schooling. Since mid 2005, for instance, the International Rescue Committee (IRC)<sup>2</sup> has been providing basic literacy and numeracy classes for youth in five camps in Nyala and four in Kass. Some 850 young people – over half of them girls – attend these classes every day, helping them to catch up with children in the host community and do better in their normal schooling. For those not attending formal school – primarily girls – the classes provide their first introduction to reading and writing.

While literacy and numeracy classes obviously provide a much needed service for youth with no access to schooling, they do not offer certification to allow young people to subsequently re-enter the formal education system. To address this

problem, IRC is working with the government to organise accelerated learning classes. These provide opportunities for youth to re-enter their studies at the level they were when they dropped out, to progress at a faster pace than would be possible in traditional schools and to obtain certified proof of their achievements. Provided at youth centres, the classes will enable easy access and flexible schedules even for those youth who are required to work for part of the day.

IRC has expanded its programme to include vocational training for youth as well as training in basic lifeskills, adolescent health and youth leadership, in order to build knowledge, confidence and self-reliance. In terms of formal education, however, there are still a number of gaps that remain.

### Closing the gaps

Alternative methods of education are important but cannot replace the need for formalised education in Darfur. In order to ensure all young Darfurians have the right to education, it is important to:

- assist older youth to complete primary school
- provide free secondary school education for adolescents in IDP camps, rural areas and potential areas of return
- continue training for teachers – including on child rights – to improve the quality of education and responsiveness to the varied needs of children and youth and to ensure communities can provide quality education in areas of return
- advocate for greater government commitment to providing free education, school resources and teacher salaries.

Achieving these objectives will require not only continued assistance from the UN and NGOs but also greater donor commitment to provide resources to ensure equal access to a quality education for all young people in Darfur. Unfortunately, such a commitment does not appear to be forthcoming.

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1. [www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm)
2. [www.theirc.org](http://www.theirc.org)

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