

The IRC's emergency education programme for Chechen children and adolescents

by Theresa Stichick Betancourt, Rebecca Winthrop, Wendy Smith and Gillian Dunn

Over the past decade humanitarian actors have focused attention and resources on developing education as a specific intervention aimed at mitigating some of the physical and psychosocial distress affecting children during war.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has extensive experience in this field, having administered 40 education programmes in 20 countries of conflict over the past three years. There has, however, been very little research done to confirm our assumptions about the ways in which education interventions support children in times of crisis. This article focuses on the initial findings from a research project on the role of IRC's emergency education programme in the psychosocial adjustment of conflict-displaced Chechen adolescents in Ingushetia.¹

The Republic of Chechnya declared independence from the Russian Federation in 1991. Fierce fighting beginning in 1994-96 and renewed in 1999 destroyed much of Chechnya and resulted in heavy casualties and massive displacement with 150,000-185,000 Chechens, 45% of them under

18, seeking refuge in the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia. Most Chechens in Ingushetia live in host communities but some live in tent camps or in 'spontaneous settlements' located on empty or abandoned land and buildings. With approximately half of the current population of Ingushetia being displaced Chechens, the Ingush public infrastructure is overwhelmed and the education system can only accommodate a small percentage of the displaced Chechens. A mere 10,000 displaced Chechens are currently enrolled in Ingush schools. The vast majority of displaced young people have no educational opportunities whatsoever. IRC started its emergency education programme in January 2000 with non-formal education and recreation activities in 11 spontaneous settlements. The goal was to provide structured activities for the large numbers of displaced children and youth and to build the capacity of the

displaced community to respond to the needs of their children. During the first phase, the programme provided funding to secure education supplies and space for make-shift schools, training for displaced Chechen teachers on how to address the complex challenges of working with few resources and overcrowded or multi-age classrooms, recreation activities such as inter-camp theatre groups, and encouraged youth leadership and parent participation in programme planning and implementation.

At the beginning of the programme, IRC's Children Affected by Armed Conflict Unit in collaboration with a researcher from the Harvard School of Public Health² embarked on a longitudinal study of the impact of the programme on Chechen adolescents. This is one of several studies that are currently underway in IRC programmes, which aim to better determine whether external agencies can play a role in increasing social support structures and promoting psychosocial adjustment for children and youth affected by conflict. The findings summarised below are from the first phase of the research project with Chechen youth.

Can emergency education promote psychosocial adjustment?

Previous studies have found that war-affected children do benefit from individual level interventions. Community-level social support interventions, such as emergency education programmes, and their role in mitigating trauma associated with war have not been specifically studied. The focus of the study was the degree to which IRC's emergency education programme contributed to, or fell short of, meeting such psychosocial goals as increasing social supports for the Chechen youth and alleviating psychological and social strains that they experienced.³

Bogatyr school.



Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in all IRC sites either well established or recently established by late 2000. The study measured participating adolescents' emotional and behavioural distress and factors that contributed to this stress as well as protective factors such as social support from family, friends and significant others, their perceptions of 'connectedness', namely of the closeness, caring, shared understanding and respect in relationships with their family, peers and larger community and their perceptions of the education programme.

Chechen youth... have had to 'grow up fast'.

Multiple stressors

At the time of this study, Chechen adolescents suffered from many emotional and environmental factors that put them at risk and hindered a healing process. They talk of the day-to-day necessities, the difficulty of living in tents or abandoned buildings, the infrequency of food, medicines and educational materials and concern for their parents. They describe the humiliation of having to 'live like animals', being unable to fulfill their simple desire to 'live like other kids' and participate in simple play, school or community activities. They struggle with being a 'guest' in Ingushetia and are torn between a sense of gratitude to the Ingush for taking them in and frustration that they frequently tolerate teasing or harassment from local youth or authorities. Some report concern that they are being 'idle' and 'wasting time' when they should be 'busy with something' or working to support their families. Chechen youth are aware of the way in which their lives have been interrupted and how they have had to 'grow up fast'.

Research indicated that for many young people finding a means to enjoy the company of fellow teenagers has been challenging in the emotionally charged context of some settlements. Before the programme started young people had tried to organise their own activities but encountered resistance from adults, offended by the sight of young people having 'fun' amidst the hardship of displacement.

By the time of their arrival in the settlements, many young people had lost

their homes and their sense of a 'place' to return to. When asked about what was most important to young people at present, many spoke of the importance of having a 'place' to anchor themselves during this transition.

The importance of place

Initial findings indicate that Chechen youth see the education programme as 'helping' by returning young people to their studies as well as giving children a safe and reliable place to go and an emotional space to turn their thoughts towards more age-appropriate concerns. Not only do teens feel that young people need a place to 'forget about the war',

they also need a place to be 'understood'. Relationships between teachers, youth leaders and peers in the education programme were discussed as a potential source of assistance and informational support when parental time for children was unavailable. Indeed, the education programme is seen as providing a place for children to connect to others, gain social support and offer hope for a better future. Many adolescents spoke about the opportunity to study in any form as a means of improving the potential for peace and success within their generation and for the region as a whole. The teens spoke generally about their desire to overcome the ravages of war and have future opportunities to be productive and successful.

The importance of leadership opportunities

Some of the most compelling evidence of the developmental benefits of this education programme for young people is described by the youth leaders in the programme. For these teens participating in leadership roles in the emergency education programme influenced their own sense of themselves and their abilities to help others. Several youth leaders explained that this experience had influenced their interactions with others and their thoughts about future career choices.

The need to move towards formal education as quickly as possible

While the education programme has undoubtedly been a source of social support, it has also created stress in

adolescents due to its non-formal nature. Initially the IRC-supported emergency education schools placed little emphasis on grades because so many children were behind in their schooling, texts and teaching materials were still few, teachers needed training and the programme needed to coordinate with the Ingush Ministry of Education to ensure future formalisation and accreditation. Due to a shortage of teachers trained in multiple subjects, not all subjects could be taught and many classrooms were of mixed ages and grade levels, making immediate formalisation too difficult. Although the non-formal nature of the programme was greatly determined in its early stages by an understandable desire to make children feel safe and comfortable, youth felt that the programme was actually 'not normal'. This created stress among adolescents that effectively contradicted the desire of many adolescents for legitimacy and normalcy. Adolescents eagerly wanted formal schooling situations and testing opportunities legitimised by local education officials. The non-formal education programme was emblematic of displaced Chechens as they felt they were living a parallel but 'abnormal' or unnatural existence by not attending what they perceived as 'regular' schooling.

The primacy of family

Data used to measure the relationship between the stressors and supports identified by participants showed that the most significant factor mitigating adolescent emotional and behavioural distress was the degree to which they perceived a connected relationship to their family. The more adolescents perceived their relationships with their families as close, caring and respectful, the better their mental health. Trends in the data showed that the adolescents also perceived connectedness with their peers and their community as related to improved mental health. These factors did not have the statistical significance of the family connectedness factor but nonetheless showed trends towards mitigating psychosocial distress.

Implications for planning of emergency education initiatives

The findings from the first phase of the project confirm our general assumptions about the role of educa-

tion interventions in meeting war-affected children's needs by helping communities create social support structures that foster psychosocial adjustment for adolescents while also offering continuity of learning. The research also points to specific programmatic strategies that should be followed, highlighting a need for humanitarian agencies working in emergency education to:

- support programmes that do more than target youth individually
- recognise the role of family, peer and community connectedness in the mental health and adjustment of war-affected youth
- encourage parents and extended family to participate in education through family-student-teacher discussion groups, school-based health activities or community education committees
- liaise from the outset with local authorities to ensure that student learning and teacher training are certified with local Ministry authorities
- move quickly, where possible, from the non-formal nature necessary for immediate interventions to formal education programming
- explore collective arrangements for childcare to increase opportunities for parental and student involvement in education programming
- dedicate further resources to studying the impact of emergency education and further improving programme design

IRC's current programme in Ingushetia

IRC's early efforts to move rapidly to formal education have resulted in current Ingush Ministry of Education certification of learning in IRC schools. The programme has evolved to include a wide range of cultural activities, vocational education, accelerated learning and reconstruction of schools inside Chechnya. The second phase of the research project is underway and

publication of the full findings of the study is forthcoming.

Theresa Stichick Betancourt is an independent researcher at Harvard School of Public Health. Email: tstichic@hsph.harvard.edu. Rebecca Winthrop is Education Programme Specialist, Children Affected by Armed Conflict Unit, International Rescue Committee (www.theirc.org). Email: Rebeccaw@theIRC.org. Wendy Smith is the Unit's Education Technical Advisor. Email: wendy@theirc.org. Gillian Dunn is Emergency Response Coordinator for IRC's Emergency Response Unit. Email gilliand@theirc.org.

Editors' note: For further recent information on displacement and human rights issues in Chechnya (where one third of the population is internally displaced) see Human Rights Watch: www.hrw.org/campaigns/russia/chechnya and Medecins du Monde www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2002/mdm- Chec-31jul.pdf

Pupil in IRC school, Tazila, October 2001.

1. For an overview of the work of the IRC in Chechnya and Ingushetia see: www.theirc.org/where/index.cfm?fa=show&locationID=12

2. This project is funded by the Mellon-MIT programme on NGOs and Forced Migration and the Banyan Tree Foundation.

3. This phase of the study was informed by 'grounded-theory' and 'meaning-centred' approaches to qualitative research in which attention is given to describing local understanding of experiences and attending to potential sources of personal and outside bias. This approach is particularly useful when working in cross-cultural settings as it allows a local understanding of experience to take precedence rather than being rigidly constrained by outside theory.

4. For complete information on the findings from phase one of the project, please contact Theresa Stichick at tstichic@hsph.harvard.edu.

Young singers preparing for IRC Culture Center performance, November 1991.

Photos: IRC

