

Education: protecting the rights of displaced children

by Suba Mahalingam

UNICEF and its partners work with displaced communities to provide material assistance and protection, using as their basis the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹ and other international legal instruments. Education has proven a valuable tool in this effort, not only making children aware of their rights but also providing a way to participate in the realisation of these rights.

Education should be a key part of programming and planning for displacement. Every effort should be made to immediately establish or restore educational programmes. In the first weeks of an emergency, education may be simply organised 'play', giving children a sense of structure and daily routine. Any available shelter can serve as a temporary classroom - under a tree, a tent, in a cave - where a child can participate in organised activities. However, education in an emergency must be more than a stop-gap measure and should be designed to evolve and expand into a sustainable education system.

Schools can help monitor the status of displaced children to ensure that their rights are being fulfilled. Displacement makes it difficult to obtain information on whether children have access to basic services. This is more daunting for groups displaced in a variety of non-camp settings. Teachers at schools can keep track of the needs of their students and facilitate screening for children who need special assistance. Schools can also ensure nutritional needs by serving meals to students.

Education can help prevent children being recruited as fighters through a curriculum that teaches non-violent conflict resolution and facilitates peace building. However, schools may be potential targets for recruitment activities by armed groups. Measures must be taken to prevent the politicisation of schools and ensure that schooling helps to stop the cycle of

violence and retribution. In some countries, UNICEF is maintaining databases of children enrolled in school to monitor and prevent recruitment. Education is also an essential component of successful disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes for children. School attendance is a deterrent to re-recruitment because it provides stability and also lays the groundwork for children's reintegration in communities, through access to catch-up education and vocational training.

Education can give the support and guidance children need to be proactive within their communities. Children learn literacy and emergency skills. UNICEF supports education of displaced children on landmines, HIV/AIDS prevention, gender sensitivities, child rights and life skills. Schools have also been used as entry points for psychosocial programming, even a key element of such programming.

Child-friendly spaces in Liberia

Child-friendly spaces are an innovative concept of protection for displaced children and their mothers. First established in 1999 to provide integrated care for children in Albanian refugee camps, they have been successfully adapted to serve the needs of war-affected children in Angola, East Timor, Guinea and, most recently, Liberia.²

In a crisis following the displacement of large numbers of people, the delivery of humanitarian assistance is often fraught with difficulties. In Liberia, UNICEF has established child-friendly spaces in camps for IDPs to enable focused services for children and to provide a sense of security amidst the chaos of conflict. This was accomplished by allocating a safe haven in the displaced camp and providing a range of services, such as early childhood care, nutrition, immunisation, psychosocial support and primary education. Mothers are able to care for their infants in safe areas and children can come together to play and learn. Teacher emergency packages and UNICEF's 'school-in-a-box' have been provided, supplying crayons, books, slates and teaching aids.³ Teachers and nurses have been trained from among the local displaced populations to assist in organising schooling and health care.

the child-friendly spaces approach... promotes participation of children and communities

The key to the success of the child-friendly spaces approach is that it promotes participation of children and communities. It provides a framework for a coordinated effort involving community leaders, parents, teachers and children and helps guarantee children's rights to survival, development, participation and protection.

Education for landmines awareness in Eritrea

Landmines are a particular threat to children fleeing into unknown territory. Children are especially at risk as they may stray into nearby fields and paths, looking for firewood, water or simply a place to play. They may not recognise warning signs around mined areas and their natural curiosity may even encourage them to investigate the sometimes colourful and curious designs of mines and unexploded ordnance.

In Eritrea, UNICEF has established

partnerships with a number of international NGOs to conduct mine risk education within displaced and host communities in Gash Barka and Debub. Mine risk education teams have been trained and equipped by the Eritrean Demining Agency, with UNICEF support. These efforts have enabled further training and the establishment of regional teams of community facilitators. Discussions with the demining agency are also underway to start a school-based mine awareness project. Another milestone in mine risk education is the active involvement of children's theatre groups. For example, the Sewit Children's Theatre group was commissioned to tour communities in Eritrea to provide landmine awareness. The strength of this example lies in its multi-faceted approach. The message is conveyed not just through workshops by mine risk education teams but is also integrated into regular schooling and made interesting and interactive through theatre.⁴

Empowering displaced girls through education

For girls, the problems of displacement are compounded. Girls are at special risk of abuse, exploitation and sexual violence. The stress and tension of refugee camps increase the likelihood of domestic violence. Poorly planned camps can create insecure and isolated spaces where girls are vulnerable to rape. Children who have lost parents may be left to look after and provide for younger siblings. Overwhelming poverty and limited economic opportunities may force them into prostitution and leave them exposed to abuse, even by those employed to protect them.

In Somalia, while distributing sanitation tools in an IDP camp, the UNICEF water and sanitation team discovered that many of the women and girls lacked even basic literacy and life skills. To address this issue, UNICEF and an NGO women's network initiated a pilot literacy project. Literacy and life skills training were provided to women and young girls in the camp. The project built on traditional practices and used non-formal educational materials developed by the UNICEF education programme. This case exemplifies the rights-based

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approach to programming whereby the water and sanitation team sought not just to provide the camp with water services but to fulfil the rights of displaced persons.

Education can give girls greater confidence and self-esteem. It can also provide practical knowledge about hygiene and health care and increase their chances of securing a livelihood, while decreasing the possibilities of exploitation. Yet despite these benefits, it is estimated that only 1

in 10 refugee girls attends class: significantly fewer than boys. Girls are often kept at home to perform household chores or their parents may fear for their safety in walking to and from the classroom. If parents are unable to send all their children to school, girls are more likely to be excluded. Cultural practices, such as early marriage, may also become obstacles to girls' education. Education programmes must address these concerns and create an environment that encourages the participation of girls.

Conclusion

Emergencies can be used to introduce new approaches, teaching methods and curriculum reform so that education contributes to protecting displaced children and promoting social justice and human rights. Monitoring and evaluation of programmes are essential to analyse their impact and ensure that protection needs, such as psychosocial support, landmine awareness, HIV/AIDS prevention, child rights and life skills, are integrated into education in emergencies. Education must be a pillar of programming for displaced children. It cannot be put off until the conflict is over. Education also can help stabilise a country in conflict. In the



recent Afghanistan crisis, the 'back-to-school' campaign succeeded in getting 1.5 million children to return to school in 2002 and also transformed and revitalised an education system that had been inaccessible to girls for many years.

For displaced persons who have lost their home and possessions, education can restore hope and resilience, while providing the essential tools needed to build a more peaceful and just society.

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1. See: www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm

2. See: www.unicef.org/media/newsnotes/02nn05liberia.htm

3. For details, see www.supply.unicef.dk/emergencies/schoolkit.htm

4. For more details of UNICEF's Eritrea programme, see: www.unicef.org/emerg/Country/Eritrea/011212.PDF

5. For more details of UNICEF's Somalia programme, see: www.unicef.org/somalia/

6. See UNICEF Afghanistan's newsletter for details: www.unicef.org/noteworthy/afghanistan/paishraft-july2002.pdf