

Education free-for-all

by Marc Sommers

During emergencies and the early stages of reconstruction the roles and responsibilities of international and local stakeholders are poorly defined. What are the prospects for improving coordination and local ownership?

The fifth of the eleven objectives adopted by the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000 focuses on the rights of children in emergencies. Dakar participants called on all national Education for All (EFA) plans to include provision for education in emergency situations. Realising this pledge is, however, complicated by the lack of coordination of education in emergencies and reconstruction.

Although this trend is changing, education is still rarely accorded a high priority during emergencies – even when vast numbers of children require schooling. Curriculum and accreditation issues which require liaison between ministries of education and aid agencies may be put off for months or even years. Accumulated institutional memories and knowledge are often lost due to dispersal and disappearance of documents and high staff turnover.

The towering significance of coordination to the practice of education during emergencies and early reconstruction is largely derived from its ability to magnify the coherence and utility of education for students, teachers and their communities. Yet

the challenges of coordinating education action during emergencies and early reconstruction periods remain daunting and diverse, and can arise even before international humanitarians arrive in a country. Due to their often-overlapping mandates, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and/or UNHCR have been known to wage turf wars, which can be the starting point for unhelpful, and seemingly avoidable, power struggles. Indeed, research and analysis suggest that the challenge of defining roles and responsibilities between and among UN and international NGO actors ultimately arises from an atmosphere of underlying mistrust and competition. Moreover, in the scramble for favourable media attention – and the funding it helps secure – rhetoric about cooperation and coordination may be bypassed in practice.

During the emergency period, the typical international humanitarian official might be described as young, single, relatively well-paid, well-equipped and forever in a rush. His or her government counterpart is generally older, burdened by family concerns, underpaid – sometimes not paid at all – and unable to move around with ease. From the outset,

it is a bad match: a clash of cultures, backgrounds, expectations and degrees of patience. Stereotypes may develop, such as local officials viewing internationals as disrespectful upstarts and the expatriates judging locals as uncommitted and perhaps corrupt.

The spectre of interpersonal conflicts involving local and international officials is further exacerbated by the fact that, quite often, well-resourced international NGOs and UN agencies charge into the countryside with funding, supplies, expertise and humanitarian mandates, frequently leaving local officials feeling left in the dust. The capacity and morale of education ministries can be further eroded by the departure of better-qualified civil servants for well-paid jobs with international organisations. At the same time, truly coordinated education systems are unlikely to be achieved unless even resource-poor national education authorities are willing to decline aid that does not help fulfil the objectives of their agreed and announced plans.

Challenges involving international agencies and war-affected communities may be just as thorny. While relations between communities and agencies can grow to be excellent, the power relations are usually quite clear. In general, communities are not ultimately in charge of the schooling of their own children. The

terminology that pervades humanitarian work confirms this relationship: people receiving assistance from humanitarian agencies are often labelled beneficiaries or recipients, not partners.

A coordinated education system links people from the same country. When it is properly organised, education can, among other things, help bind together fractured states and limit the chances that trauma, abduction and forced labour will dominate the lives of war-affected children and youth. Accordingly, this requires international educationalists and donors to:

- acknowledge that, with very few exceptions, a coordination framework that does not feature the role of the national government or *de facto* education authority is necessarily incomplete
- not cynically anticipate that impoverished ministries of education will look to receive funding for their operations (and to supplement their salaries)
- start training and capacity building for local and international counterparts as early as possible

to nip in the bud the potential for rancour, disrespect and resentment to bedevil relations between international and local educators

- work with local counterparts and other international agencies to develop joint policies on paying teachers and developing systems for recognising, validating and accepting teacher training activities, and student achievement and national examinations
- do much more to stop the poaching of local staff by international agencies
- be prepared for the increasingly popular option of local education authorities declining aid that does not align with their objectives and plans
- clarify at the early stages of intervention in each post-conflict state the role of UNESCO vis-à-vis UNHCR, UNDP and UNICEF
- ensure that the considerable costs of coordination – for training, transportation, translation, photocopying and communication – are built into budgets, just like any other humanitarian activity.

The significance of an education system that somehow manages to

keep itself even marginally cohesive during times of extreme and often lengthy crises goes far beyond the symbolism of nation building. Teachers are usually the largest corps of non-military civil servants in a government. Leaving education uncoordinated constitutes a tragically overlooked opportunity to unify people separated by ethnicity, region or religion.

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Shemelba refugee camp, Ethiopia

