

# Education and conflict: an NGO perspective

by Lyndsay Bird

**NGOs working in education in conflict-affected areas have realised the importance of listening to children, encouraging their genuine participation in programmes and publicising and scaling up the innovations which often arise in the aftermath of war.**

Many meetings on education and conflict fail to consider the perspectives of children. Children should be considered as 'clients' and as the reason for education interventions. Frequently, however, children are alluded to from a theoretical perspective. The emphasis on the effect of conflict on educational systems – rather than on children's lives – compounds this.

As Jason Hart reminds us<sup>1</sup> there is a need to listen to children in more concrete and effective ways. Children should be placed within the context of the community they live in and the learning processes they are engaged in through community life. This implies consideration not only of formal schooling but also of the informal educative processes that can often be more significant – especially in times of conflict when access to formal schooling may

be jeopardised. Determining how and what children learn in times of conflict depends on understanding how they receive information – from teachers in schools, parents, radio, gossip with their peers or storytelling from their elders. By genuinely listening to children and taking note of their concerns and needs in our programming interventions, the policy and research debate can be better informed from a truly 'grounded' perspective.

NGOs and civil society groups – being close to the areas of conflict – become aware of and therefore take advantage of opportunities for innovation that arise during conflict. These may include new curricula, methods of teaching or home-based learning. NGOs, state authorities and donors supporting post-conflict reconstruction need to capture small-scale innovations

and to scale up or mainstream them without losing the freshness and direct approach that give them an innovative edge. We need to ask if the current funding modalities of post-conflict reconstruction – focusing on sector or budget support rather than projects – provide less opportunity for support of innovation? Should donors set aside funds for innovation and directly support the scaling up of innovative approaches? How can academic research institutions be encouraged to support such innovation?

A 'disconnect' still exists – despite the best efforts of events such as the University of Oxford and UNICEF Education and Conflict Conference – between the field and the research communities. There is a need to build on work already being done by some NGOs/agencies to build a research component into country programmes and/or to establish linkages between academic institutions and field-level NGO staff in order to support in-country research, document lessons learned and more widely disseminate best practice.

NGOs represented at the conference set themselves a challenge – to identify ‘something to rally round’. It is evident that the INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies<sup>2</sup> have been bought into at national and international levels,

by academics and practitioners alike. What other key education initiative in conflict situations would we, as an education community, be prepared to advocate for? Perhaps ‘children at the centre of innovation’?

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2. See article by Rebecca Winthrop on page 12