

South Sudan education emergency

by Tim Brown

UNHCR's education challenges in South Sudan highlight the gap between relief and development.

UNHCR's leading role with refugees in countries of asylum is not in doubt. However, when refugees return to their countries of origin – which are often trying to recover from the devastation of war – donors do not agree on the extent of UNHCR's involvement in reintegration activities. Some donors say that UNHCR is not a development agency and reintegration is not its job while others say that UNHCR should be helping devastated countries to absorb returning



Kinji Primary School, Yei, South Sudan

refugees by building schools and health centres. After decades of discussion about closing the gap between relief and development the international community needs to settle this problem once and for all. Development agencies have a different sense of urgency, timing and culture and they do not come onto the scene soon enough. UNHCR has a crucial reintegration role to play during transitional recovery periods.

UNHCR has been engaged in the education of Sudanese refugees for many years and is now working in South Sudan to assist their return. The education gaps are strikingly evident in this vast region devastated by 21 years of civil war from which half a million refugees and four million IDPs have been displaced.¹ Eighteen months after the January 2005 signing of the Comprehensive

Peace Agreement – which sets out a framework for a transitional regional government pending a decision on future independence for southern Sudan – the capacity of the Government of Southern Sudan remains weak. Most government officials have not received salaries and almost all teachers continue to work on a voluntary basis. Inter-ethnic clashes, LRA rebel attacks, disaffected ex-soldiers and banditry continue to make the security situation precarious (two UNHCR colleagues were killed in Yei in March 2006). Destruction of infrastructure, the impassable state of many roads during the wet season and extensive presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance continue to obstruct movement of people and goods. The spontaneous return of refugees and IDPs to major towns has led to acute congestion and several cholera outbreaks. How will these conditions improve in the six-year interim period leading up to the elections – during which time hundreds of thousands, if not millions, more refugees and IDPs are expected to return?

The situation in South Sudan is unique in terms of gender inequalities and violation of girls' rights to education. South Sudan has proportionately fewer girls going to school than any country in the world. According to UNICEF, fewer than one per cent of girls complete primary education and only one schoolchild in four is a girl. The lack of female teachers – just 7% of the teaching force – reinforces this gender imbalance. It is estimated that around 90% of women in South Sudan are illiterate.

Education is a priority for the southern Sudanese and they are keen to make efforts to improve the education system. Sudan is potentially a rich country, with abundant natural resources and fertile land. There are many educated

Sudanese in the diaspora – including educated females – who could return with skills and new attitudes. Those who stayed behind during conflict have adopted remarkable coping strategies and many communities remain resilient. If provided with government support and help from the international donors, community-based initiatives and local education opportunities could drive sustainable and equitable development.

UNHCR has been helping to create conditions conducive for the return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs by building, renovating and expanding schools and training centres as well as providing educational materials and equipment. UNHCR has also been training and supporting teachers, promoting female education and sensitising communities on peace-building, HIV/AIDS, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and gender issues. UNHCR has opened 11 offices in key return areas.

Challenges are enormous:

- There are great disparities in education provision between locations.
- Huge numbers of youths and adults have completely missed out on education.
- Schools have no capacity to absorb large numbers of returning refugees and IDPs – most are temporary structures, often under trees.
- Many teachers themselves have not completed primary education.
- Various curricula (used by Uganda, Kenya and the Khartoum government) are taught in South Sudan and progress on developing a unified curriculum is slow.
- English is to be the language of instruction, yet many students

– especially those in towns formerly garrisoned by the Khartoum government troops
– have only been taught in Arabic and some returning from neighbouring Francophone states know little English.

- There are few secondary schools and post-primary/technical institutions in South Sudan. Southern universities which relocated to Khartoum during the civil war have yet to return.
- Many communities have negative attitudes towards female education.
- Education fails to provide relevant practical experience or teach marketable vocational skills.

If care is not taken boys will benefit more from the few post-conflict education chances available and gender-based discrimination will be further entrenched.² Experience elsewhere suggests the need for affirmative action:

- appointing female education coordinators and teachers to mentor girls
- including gender issues in all teacher training
- providing scholarships to ensure more girls complete secondary education and can become teachers and role models
- building girls' schools and female dormitories to encourage girls to remain in school in a safe learning environment
- constructing girl-only school latrines and providing female

students with sanitary materials and decent clothing.

Inadequate and irregular funding hampers reconstruction of education. There is no evidence yet that funds from the World Bank-administered Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) for Sudan have provided any support for education in South Sudan. Unfairly blaming UNHCR for the low rate of official refugee returns in 2005, some donors are pressing the agency to focus on the return itself and to abandon development-type activities such as school construction even in areas where UNHCR is the only agency on the ground. UNHCR has had to severely cut plans and divert from its earlier strategy of providing schools, health centres and boreholes which would have encouraged refugees to return.

The Government of Southern Sudan, UNICEF (the lead education agency in South Sudan), UNHCR and international NGOs need to:

- ensure that all communities – whether returning refugees and IDPs or those who never left – benefit from assistance to create conducive education environments
- promote affirmative action in support of the education of women and girls
- support education decentralisation – to promote democracy and reduce inequalities, the capacity of education authorities must be built at local levels and not just at the centre
- assist schools in rural areas to avoid concentration of returnees in major towns

- engage communities in supporting schools and education activities – a challenging task in urban areas where a sense of community is often lacking
- urge the authorities – in Khartoum and in the Government of Southern Sudan – to start using oil revenues to ensure teachers receive salaries
- prioritise teacher training, especially in the English language
- urgently finalise a curriculum for South Sudan – including life-skills issues around HIV/AIDS, peace and reconciliation, SGBV, gender and human rights
- develop policies on vocational and higher education.

How can we expect displaced people to return if there is nothing to come back to? Donors need to be informed and educated on UNHCR's broad protection role in returnee situations which is a crucial element in successful post-conflict recovery. Agreement is needed on a coordinated response which will bridge the gap between relief and development. When donors make visits, fieldworkers need to highlight realities on the ground and show donors how the slow response of development agencies is hindering the sustainable return of displaced people.

By building schools and supporting education in this transition period UNHCR and the international community have an ideal opportunity to stabilise peace in South Sudan. Without adequate education and other vital services, the volatile mix of thousands of returning refugees and IDPs with impoverished host communities is a recipe for future conflict.

Tim Brown was formerly UNHCR Education Officer, Yei, South Sudan. Email: brownunhcr@yahoo.com. This article is written in a personal capacity and does not reflect the views of UNHCR or other UN agencies.

1. See FMR24 'Sudan: prospects for peace' www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR24contents.pdf

2. See Tim Brown, 'Promoting the education rights of girls in south Sudan', *Human Rights Tribune* 12, www.hri.ca/tribune/12-1-2.html

Falling between relief and development

Kinji Primary School on the outskirts of Yei town was built with UNHCR funding on the site of a school completely destroyed by war. A hand-over ceremony at the end of April 2006 was well attended. As UNHCR anticipated, the school is a magnet, encouraging people to return and settle nearby. By the time of the official opening about 1,300 students – over half of them girls – had already enrolled. Teachers are dedicated, well-regarded by pupils and prepared to put up with low wages. Children are keen to go to school, with some boys working as labourers to pay their school fees of about \$5 per term. Communities are digging latrines and offering other practical support. However, each classroom has more than 100 students. There are few Ugandan textbooks although the students are following the Ugandan curriculum. There is no source of water nearby. None of the teachers, as in all the neighbouring schools, has been paid a salary by the government. Many children go hungry because food is not provided at school. Support is urgently required for this and all other schools in South Sudan.