Post-conflict education: time for a reality check?

by Peter Buckland

While education does not cause wars, nor end them, every education system has the potential either to exacerbate or to mitigate the conditions that contribute to violent conflict.

Education is expected to contribute significantly to rebuilding shattered societies. Policymakers assert that it can heal the psychosocial wounds of war, solve youth unemployment, deliver decentralisation and democracy, build peace and promote economic and social development. Evaluations routinely fail to test whether these expectations are realistic.

The recognition that education systems are almost always complicit in conflict, that they rarely completely cease to function and that they rapidly resume operations with or without outside support as violence subsides is an important factor responsible for the growing interest in early education response. Humanitarian agencies are starting to recognise that schools can reproduce the skills, values, attitudes and social relations of dominant groups. They are learning that schools and education systems are often surprisingly resilient and that disruption caused by conflict offers opportunities as well as challenges for social reconstruction.

When conflict ceases, education systems must be rebuilt in a context where political authority and civil administration are weakened, compromised or inexperienced. Civil society is in disarray – and more accustomed to opposing than working with governments – and financial sources are constrained and unpredictable.

Yet each of these constraints also contains possibilities. New political authorities are more likely to seek education reform to distance themselves from the previous regime, particularly where international aid provides additional incentives. Weakened bureaucracies are less able to resist reform. Civil society often focuses on education as an activity around which it can coalesce. Publicity around the end of conflict and getting kids into classrooms often attracts an injection of external resources to kick-start reform.

Problems common to many post-conflict states are:

- inability of recovering states to fund either capital or recurrent expenditure: few states have access to domestic revenue sufficient to keep systems running

- chronic shortages of qualified teachers – many have been killed or fled, and many of those who remain or return are often snapped by up international agencies and NGOs

- oversupply of under-qualified or unqualified teachers

- the sheer numbers of war-affected youth, demobilised soldiers and young people who have not completed basic education

- poor record keeping, corruption and lack of transparency in education governance: salaries are often paid to 'ghost' teachers

- the 'relief bubble' in international financial support often subsides before a more predictable flow of reconstruction resources can be mobilised: relief agencies often scale back operations before development-focused agencies can be mobilised

- skills training for youth is seriously under-resourced: even when available, vocational training programmes often fail to prepare people for locally available employment opportunities

- coordination challenges: as education involves an interface of humanitarian action and development in complex ways there is often a plethora of coordination mechanisms

- failure to develop successful initiatives to build the skills of young people and prevent their recruitment into military or criminal activity: youth are seen as a threat to stability and few programmes value young people as an important resource for development and reconstruction.

Donors offer only minimal support to secondary education. This is despite evidence that secondary and higher education suffer a more rapid decline during conflict and a more gradual recovery from it. The most common experience of youth in post-conflict reconstruction is one of exclusion. The slow progress in re-establishing secondary and tertiary educational opportunities, and the marginal status of most adult education programmes and accelerated learning opportunities, add to this frustration at a time when involvement in conflict often leaves youth with a new sense of empowerment.

Neglect of refugees and IDPs

Another area of serious neglect is failure to reintegrate refugees and IDPs into mainstream national education systems. While there is general consensus that the ideal curriculum in refugee education is, in principle at least, that of the country of origin, this is frequently not possible. This creates problems of accreditation of learning, especially for returnees who may be forced to re-enter the system at lower levels because prior learning is not recognised.

The neglect of secondary and post-secondary education typical of post-conflict environments is even more pronounced in refugee education. Only 6% of all refugee students are in secondary education. In both refugee and IDP camps this creates significant problems in terms of motivation for primary students, supply of teachers for the primary schools and cohorts of youth who are frustrated, unemployed and unemployable. Host governments are often unsupportive and concerned about the politicisation of secondary and post-secondary institutions, as well as the possibility of competition for jobs from educated refugees.

Training session by Adriano Matsinhe on HIV/AIDS for peer educators at the UNICEF-supported NGO Kindlimuka, Maputo, Mozambique.

Returnees often include the best educated students and the most qualified teachers. Teachers in refugee camps often develop skills that equip them to make a useful contribution to education on their return. They are more likely to be engaged in curriculum development work, more likely to have experience of multi-grade teaching and often have more exposure to international expertise and alternative pedagogical approaches. Yet upon return to their home countries, they often have difficulties finding employment because of lack of recognition of qualifications and teaching experience.

The way ahead

Provision of education to refugees and displaced persons (even during conflict) is a reconstruction and development issue that warrants the attention of agencies committed to reconstruction and development and should not be viewed simply as a humanitarian activity. Donors and relief and development agencies are improving coordination and sharing knowledge as a result of such initiatives as the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE).[1] There is emerging consensus over the need for:
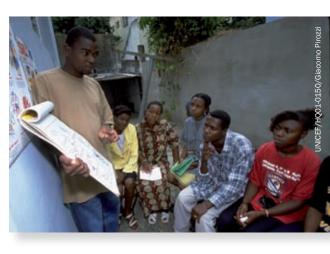
- early focus on getting schools functioning so that the return of young people to classes can be seen as a 'peace dividend' and shore up support for peace

- bold symbolic actions (such as purging inflammatory textbooks) to signal that, while

much about the system remains unchanged, reform has started

- decentralisation reforms to allow parents space to be involved in school governance

- acknowledgement that creating an equitable system able to deliver quality education is an incremental and ongoing process that takes decades and will require national consensus around a wider development vision of where a country is heading

- capacity building, encouragement of participation and coordination between communities, teachers and their organisations, local authorities and other stakeholders

- recognition that returning refugees, and especially youth, can contribute to the process of education reconstruction

- ensuring that external support for education builds on – and does not compete with – the efforts of local communities and authorities already active in supporting education.

The nature of post-conflict reconstruction makes inter-sectoral collaboration particularly urgent. Education systems need to collaborate across sectors on HIV/AIDS programmes, health education, safety and security in schools, landmines awareness and psychosocial support. Education reconstruction must be aligned with social and economic development planning and public sector and labour markets reform.

Education does not cause wars, nor does it end them. It does, however, frequently contribute to the factors that underlie conflict and also has the potential to play a significant role both directly and indirectly in building peace, restoring countries to a positive development path and reversing the damage wrought by civil war. Early investment in education is thus an essential prerequisite for sustainable peace.

The World Bank has long recognised the importance of early engagement

in post-conflict reconstruction of education systems as a key element in conflict prevention and reconstruction. Since the mid 1990s it has adapted its operating procedures to facilitate early engagement. Support for education reconstruction has been a significant element of its emergency response in many post-conflict contexts, including Sierra Leone, Angola, Mozambique, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Education has a role to play in preventing conflict and promoting reconstruction but only as part of wider social, economic and political efforts. Without these linkages and sustained and strategic investment, education reconstruction will fail to deliver on the often unrealistic expectations placed on it. The relationship of education to peace-building and social reconstruction has recently come under greater scrutiny with international attention focused on 'fragile states'. This creates an opportunity for more systematic and rigorous case studies and meta-analyses to identify which interventions have the greatest impact in which contexts.

Peter Buckland is the World Bank's Senior Education Specialist. Email: Pbuckland@worldbank.org. He is the author of Reshaping the future: education and post-conflict reconstruction, *World Bank, 2005 which offers an overview of the main findings of a study of education and post-conflict reconstruction, drawing on a review of literature, a database of indicators for 52 conflict-affected countries and a review of 12 country studies. Available online at: www1.worldbank.org/education/pdf/Reshaping_the_Future.pdf*

1. See pages 29-30 and www.ineesite.org

UNICEF/HQ01-0150/Giacomo Pirozzi