

# Emergencies, education and innovation

by Rebecca Winthrop

**Armed conflict and natural disasters disrupt ways in which education is delivered and accessed. Disruptions may be traumatic but they provide opportunities.**

The term 'education in emergencies' can be misleading, conjuring up images of tent schools, copybook distributions and other interim measures to keep schooling going during crises. However, for those working in this new and emerging field, the term generally serves as shorthand for diverse formal and non-formal educational interventions in a range of different contexts, including acute emergencies, on-going or 'chronic' crises, protracted refugee and early reconstruction and recovery settings.

Can education in emergencies provide opportunities for educational innovations that support quality? If so, can these innovations be leveraged to support quality education over the long term? These questions are critical ones for the field, and can be explored by looking at the history of home-based schools in Afghanistan.

Developed in response to the Taliban's active repression of schooling for girls and women, the International Rescue Committee began supporting clandestine home-based schools in 1997. In the most difficult circumstances, trusted members of the community opened their houses while the IRC provided educational materials and teacher training. The Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001 but the home-based schools programme continues. Its goal is now to provide schooling for rural girls and boys with no access to government schools. Respected members of the community continue to hold classes inside their homes and some mullahs organise classes in local mosques. Classes follow the government primary school curriculum. Teachers are not paid

and most have not completed 12th grade, a requirement of government teachers. IRC continues to train teachers, provide educational materials and monitor and evaluate the progress and quality of the programme. IRC works closely with the Ministry of Education to ensure that the home-based school project supports the growing capacity of state education and does not develop into a parallel system.



Despite the unconventional nature of the learning environments recent research has shown the home-based schools to be quite effective in terms of access, completion, learning, cost and student wellbeing. USAID research found that IRC-supported home-based schools provide almost the only access to school for girls, and in some cases for boys too, in the communities in which they are located.<sup>1</sup> Completion rates are 68%, which is double that of government schools. Ninety-nine per cent of students in IRC-supported home-based schools pass end-of-year exams. This more effective teaching is also cheaper – the annual cost per student is \$18, compared with \$31 in government schools. Home-based students appear not only to be learning and progressing through their grades but also to be having a positive school experience. Teacher-student

relationships are characterised by mentoring, encouragement and advice – and hardly any of the corporal punishment or psychological humiliation often found in government schools.<sup>2</sup>

Home-based schools are helping to extend coverage of the government education system. As the Afghan education system recovers and state capacity moves outward from urban areas, students and teachers from home-based schools are being integrated into state schools. Thousands of students from IRC-supported home-based schools are now learning in government schools.

However, access is only one part of quality. How can the other components of quality – such as learning, completion, and student wellbeing – be assimilated by the recovering government system? It is unclear whether the features that made home-based schooling successful – small class size and close relationships between teachers and students and their families – will continue. Will the Ministry of Education allow space within the government education system for home-based schools or other similar community-based schooling alternatives?

In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the question of how innovations can be captured in order to sustainably support education quality merits greater attention and investigation.

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1. Kirk, Jackie and Winthrop, Rebecca (2006) *Meeting EFA: Afghanistan – Home-Based Schools*, Academy for Educational Development.

2. Kirk, Jackie and Winthrop, Rebecca (2006) *Creating Healing Classrooms: Education in Crisis and Post-Crisis Transition*, IRC