

Education crisis for Iraqi children

by J R A Williams

Displaced Iraqi children – both those inside Iraq and in neighbouring states – are being denied their right to education. It is vital to gather accurate data on displaced children and to engage children and adults in displaced communities in pragmatic ways to provide education despite the current circumstances.

In 2005 UNHCR reported that in Lebanon, 55% of Iraqi households do not send their children to school; a further 25% of households reported that some of their children were missing school. Syria allows Iraqi children access to school but the Ministry of Education found only 26,124 children enrolled, some 13% of the estimated population of 6-14 year-olds presently in Syria. While no quantitative information is available in Jordan, anecdotal evidence suggests that substantial numbers are out of school. Within Iraq, enrolment of children in urban areas is estimated at less than 78% (68% for girls).

There is massive pressure on schools in host areas. Some schools in the northern provinces in Iraq are running four shifts in an attempt to accommodate displaced children. Shifts have been introduced in host schools in Syria where class sizes have increased from 24 to 44 students, and in Jordan there

are up to 60 children in classes in refugee-hosting areas. The foreign ministry in Syria estimates it has had to spend an additional \$60 million to provide education for Iraqis.

Poverty and uncertain legal status appear to be the main reasons for families not enrolling their children in school. Children stay home to look after their siblings or generate additional income. Where children have access to school, families have to pay school fees and for school uniforms, books and school materials. There may be little money left for education after paying rent and for essential food, medicine and basic household items. With the ambiguous legal situation of many refugees, children may not be registered or may be withdrawn from school in case their families are identified as illegal residents and deported.

The situation inside Iraq is similar. Save the Children's recent survey of

barriers to attendance and enrolment in primary schools – Out of School in Iraq – observes that while findings cannot be generalised for the whole country, it is clear that the appalling security situation in Iraq is not yet the main factor excluding children from basic education. Reporting from settled communities, the survey notes that the high cost of schooling in terms of uniform and transportation keeps children away. Demand for children to contribute to the household economy is identified as the major factor causing drop-out and non-enrollment. Only improvements in family living standards will provide the necessary economic security to ensure that children enter and stay at school.

Challenges facing those in school

Displaced Iraqi children face challenges in the classroom on a daily basis. Teachers cannot provide the psychological support the children need and schools are not able to accommodate children from different learning systems, with different languages, accents and abilities. Children out of school in Iraq cite a long list of concerns including poor educational methods, violence

in schools, lack of extra-curricular activities, no consultation with children and an irrelevant curriculum.

For those children outside Iraq who are enrolled in school it is not clear whether they are receiving host-government certification or whether their attainments will be recognised by resettling or Iraqi governments. Children complain that there is no provision for non-Arabic speaking children. Some

students have been expelled because they were too old to be in the class appropriate to their level of learning. Children can face considerable discrimination where they are perceived by schools as 'a problem'. Displaced Iraqi adolescents repeatedly mention discrimination based on their legal status, ethnicity and religion.

Both inside and outside Iraq, children are suffering from the effects of a long-term crisis in education. Forty-three per cent of parents interviewed for the study had no education. Fewer than 40% had completed primary education. This limits the support these parents can give their children in their education.

Response

Host countries need funding and resources from the international community and from the government of Iraq. The first need is for numerical and qualitative data on the scale and nature of the problems facing those displaced and the host communities that are welcoming them. Save the Children UK is proposing to work with communities, local NGOs and Ministries of Education to implement a regional education initiative building on existing education programmes with vulnerable children and youth in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Our initial target is fewer than

25,000 children, so this can only be a small part of what has to be a broad and imaginative response on the part of governments, donors and agencies. In Iraq, Save the Children is supporting the Iraq Children's Rights Network to collect data on the effects of violence on children's development, health, education and social welfare.

There is an immediate need to respond to the rights of children

may have little relevance and must be evaluated for their appropriateness, feasibility and cost-effectiveness. Care is needed to avoid adding to already overburdened curricula: informal approaches may be better for imparting 'life skills' and peace and human rights education.

Host populations tend to suffer when taking in displaced people. The small budgets allocated to education rarely extend to the local population. There needs to be full cooperation between humanitarian and development agencies, and within agencies between relief and development staff, so that local populations are assisted alongside the displaced. In countries surrounding Iraq, the early response of hosts has been to extend traditional hospitality and

take the newcomers into their homes. Some see a benefit for children learning alongside others from different cultures and backgrounds.

Security issues are certainly problematic for interventions to ensure the right to education in Iraq – and are indeed the cause of displacement of so many people – but they themselves are not the cause of children's exclusion from school. Although it is an absolute necessity to overcome the violence and insecurity that presently blights life in many parts of Iraq, this in itself will not be sufficient to deal with the problems that lead to drop-out, non-enrolment and educational failure that characterise so many Iraqi children's experience of school.

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already in school for psychological support and inclusive services. Particular issues to be addressed are:

- support for host educational systems
- reducing barriers to access such as cost, certification and documentation
- regularisation of the status of families
- assuring the quality of education on offer.

Expanding educational provision on the scale needed will have to include a number of options beyond enlarging the capacity of existing schools and building new schools. These may include popular education and new technologies, home-based schools, informal and non-formal education, adult and literacy education, early childhood care and development services. In addition, it is important that caution be exerted in introducing western pedagogies: some creative or child-friendly learning approaches