

Evidence for education in emergencies: who decides and why it matters

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Analysis of educational research funding proposals submitted to Dubai Cares, a global education funder, indicates an alarming absence of input from local actors and end-users at all steps of the process.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016, Dubai Cares¹ made a commitment to increase the share of its support to education in emergencies (EiE) programmes to 33% of its financial portfolio, with 10% of the increased share to be invested in generating evidence in EiE. Later that year we launched the Evidence for Education in Emergencies Research Envelope (E-Cubed). With a total value of US \$10 million, to be disbursed over a period of five years, this research fund is focused on generating evidence for effective preparedness and response strategies in EiE.

Throughout the process of setting up E-Cubed and in liaising with fellow funders of research, we have found ourselves reflecting on what it means to be a funder of evidence for EiE. What role can and should donors play as we engage in providing the necessary funding to address gaps in evidence for EiE? We would like to share our preliminary reflections, with the aim of sparking a conversation about what we can do together in order to generate evidence for the maximum benefit of the education of children and youth in crisis contexts.

Dubai Cares' commitment to funding evidence for EiE is in response to the fact that EiE continues to be underfunded by both governments and humanitarian actors alike. In order to improve the case for investing in EiE and to ensure that already limited resources are directed towards models that are grounded in a concrete understanding of what works in EiE, we need to invest in developing and disseminating a body of evidence that captures the efficacy of these models. However, the act of funding evidence for EiE is not enough on its own. We must ensure that the evidence we fund reaches

the right hands and that it is actively taken on and used by EiE actors at the right level of decision making. This means funding research that is freely accessible to, designed for and inclusive of the voices of those people and institutions who are on the ground in crisis-affected contexts. It means letting their needs and their questions guide our learning agendas, as opposed to setting the learning agendas from the global North.

In order to be able to reach those most aware of what evidence is missing, Dubai Cares partnered with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) for the design and management of the fund. As a global network with over 15,000 individual members from UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, donors, governments, universities, schools and affected populations, working together to ensure all persons have the right and access to quality education in emergencies and post-crisis recovery, INEE is a natural home for the E-Cubed research envelope.

Lack of inclusion of local actors

E-Cubed was established to generate global public goods² for the EiE sector at large. As such, neither Dubai Cares nor INEE have identified a thematic or geographical focus for each call for proposals, recognising that the gaps in evidence on the ground are best identified by those on the ground. The process of reviewing submissions for E-Cubed funding has shown, however, that the narrative of the 'what' and the 'how' is still largely not derived from local solutions. For example, while reviewing submissions from E-Cubed's second call for applications, we observed that the majority of research proposals were looking into Social and

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Emotional Learning (SEL) in emergency contexts.³ When we analysed these proposals, we noticed that most of them were testing the implementation of branded – that is, agency-owned – SEL approaches that were developed by actors in high-income, non-emergency settings for actors working in emergency contexts. Too often, the input of the intended end-users was missing at every step of the research proposals: from choosing the model to be tested, to formulating research questions and the assumptions they are based on, to disseminating the outputs generated by the research. This observation is alarming, especially considering the great interest that research into SEL for EiE has attracted from both funders and researchers in recent years.

A strong body of evidence from high-income, non-emergency settings has indicated that SEL programmes can enhance children's academic, social, emotional and behavioural outcomes. Furthermore, emerging literature shows that SEL skills can be critical tools for building resilience among children and youth affected by crisis. Therefore, studying approaches to integrating SEL into EiE could be promising. But whose needs would be met through this line of inquiry if the intended end-user is nowhere to be seen in the research process? Whose questions are ultimately answered?

Research in EiE can provide crucial guidance for actors working in emergency contexts, enabling them to make the best use of resources and to design models that can improve the lives of crisis-affected children and youth. However, this cannot happen if we do not place the voices of local practitioners at the heart of the research process. Without the input of local actors, the research we fund loses its purpose. Instead of investigating what actually does work in EiE, we end up imposing our own ideas of

what we think should work in EiE. In order to support the generation of a body of evidence that aims to understand rather than impose, we need to take action in order to ensure that we support research approaches that explicitly empower and build the capacity of local actors to set the learning agenda.

Dubai Cares chose to partner with INEE for the design and management of E-Cubed specifically due to INEE's commitment to diversifying its membership and employing collaborative approaches with its members in order to ensure that all voices are included. Since it was created in 2000, INEE has become an essential resource for practitioners seeking tools and guidance on implementing EiE programming. Recognising INEE's mandate as a convener and neutral platform for the EiE sector, we believe that INEE has the potential to be at the core of all efforts to gather and curate evidence for the EiE sector and to bring together all stakeholders working towards this endeavour.

As funders of research for EiE we need to be aware of the power that we hold, and the influence that our own learning agendas and funding decisions could have on the EiE research landscape. We therefore need to ensure that our funding approaches come out of consultative, democratic processes that factor in all voices and that respond to the needs of the EiE sector at large.

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1. A philanthropic organisation working to improve children's access to quality education in developing countries.
2. A 'global public good' is a resource or commodity that is open source and available to everyone, and where use by one individual does not reduce availability to others.
3. SEL can be defined as "a process of acquiring social and emotional values, attitudes, competencies, knowledge, and skills that are essential for learning, being effective, well-being, and success in life". bit.ly/INEE-PSS-SEL-2016



INEE

The Inter-agency
Network for Education
in Emergencies (INEE)

provides a range of resources to inform and guide education providers, humanitarian workers and government officials working in the field of education in emergencies. The **INEE Minimum Standards** handbook sets out the minimum level of educational quality and access to be provided in emergencies, from preparedness and response through to

recovery, and is available in many languages.
www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards

The multilingual **INEE website** contains a wide variety of practical, field-friendly tools and resources – including the EiE Toolkit, the EiE Glossary, a searchable database (to which members can upload resources), a blog, a jobs listing and interactive forums. www.ineesite.org/en