

Improving learning environments in emergencies through community participation

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An education in emergencies toolkit developed by Save the Children looks at how learning environments can be improved through community participation. Piloting the project in Syria and Uganda has also shed light on some of the tensions and contradictions that underlie education provision in humanitarian settings.

The Improving Learning Environments Together (ILET) toolkit¹ uses assessments to improve learning environments in humanitarian contexts through community participation. Its aim is to respond to the need for greater and better evidence of what works in education in emergencies (EiE). It puts Save the Children's Quality Learning Framework (QLF)² into practice by turning the five foundations it identifies as providing a basis for the well-being and learning of all children – emotional and psychosocial protection, physical protection, teaching and learning, parents and community, and school leadership and management – into measurable, quantifiable and actionable questions. These questions are put to students, teachers and parents to identify

ways to improve the learning environment. ILET's added value comes in providing school communities with evidence based on data and by supporting their advocacy efforts to improve the schools within a rights-based framework. In this way, Save the Children's role becomes, ideally, that of a facilitator or catalyst for change.

Steps one and two of ILET's five-step process relate to programme design, proposal development, coordination and training, and are mostly carried out by programme staff. Step three is the start of engagement with the communities. This third step is about programme staff collecting data from five sources: teachers, parents, children, a head teacher or school checklist, and through a classroom observation. A web-

based data management platform offers real-time data collection, processing and storage and produces data visualisations and automated reports that summarise the strengths and weaknesses of the school or temporary learning space (TLS) in relation to the QLF. The fourth step is to share these simply presented, colour-coded results with communities in the form of school findings cards, where the school is scored on each of the QLF's five foundations. The fifth and final step includes electing a school improvement team comprising adults and children from the community to design a school improvement plan based on the assessment results, and to follow up on the implementation of the plan with the assistance of a small grant.

The toolkit was piloted between 2017 and 2018 in ten schools and TLS, five each in Adjumani district in Uganda and in north-west Syria, attended by – respectively – Ugandan and South Sudanese refugee children, and local and internally displaced Syrian children. Lessons learned throughout the process of implementing the pilots were used to inform the development of the ILET project and to transfer knowledge between the two countries.

Other interesting conclusions also emerged from the pilots, including the following:

Accountability: Implementing the same process in Uganda and Syria illustrated some surprising commonalities. For example, when programme staff returned to school communities to share results, it was clear that people in both Uganda and Syria had not believed they would come back. This is indicative of a broader trend in the aid sector, where the results of assessments are seldom fed back. Part of what contributed to successful results sharing in this case was the programme staff's enthusiasm about the data management platform's efficient production of automated and easy-to-understand findings cards. The feedback sessions also served as an important venue to validate the findings. In addition, owing to the diverse set of informants, the findings could not be attributed to just one group of

respondents. Finally, although data analysis is run by programme staff, the feedback session and framing of the results around the comprehensive QLF have fostered accountability as the school community takes an active role in holding Save the Children, alongside other education providers, to high standards, ensuring they provide a comprehensive quality learning environment.

Mobilising local solutions: Teachers and parents commonly voiced that what they often saw as the priority was to improve the school by building more infrastructure, providing fuel and increasing teachers' salaries. While acknowledging the importance of these needs, ILET aims to expand the discussion on quality learning environments to include 'soft' components – that is, activities which, within a limited budget, can improve children's and teacher's well-being and skills, or increase parents' engagement. As a result, participants went on to identify local, low-cost solutions that needed minimal or no support from Save the Children. In Uganda these included parents volunteering to clean the school compound



A teacher with teaching supplies for her primary school, Bidibidi refugee settlement, northern Uganda.

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and improving playground facilities to open up recreational activities to children.

Investment of time: Some questioned the suitability of ILET to emergency settings given the length of time it takes to implement the project in full – it can take at least two months until visible improvements start to emerge. That being said, the real-time analysis offered by the data management platform enables programme staff to immediately feed back the results to communities – a quick turnaround in comparison with the average time taken by other assessments, which can be up to a couple of weeks. However, others recognised that the delivery of quality education with community participation requires resources and time. One teacher in Uganda said: “This is not wasting time. This is engaging people in planning.”

Sustainability: Teachers in Uganda felt that the impact of ILET would last beyond the end of the project as it was grounded in community mobilisation and had introduced the QLF as a helpful theoretical framework, and having knowledge of this framework

was felt to be empowering. When asked how they would react if Save the Children were no longer able to provide support, teachers' responses repeatedly emphasised their strong sense of ownership and willingness to mobilise parents and advocate with other actors. Their ability to organise themselves and advocate for children's rights was already clear from the examples they gave of presenting demands to the district education office and improvising in times of scarcity.

Broader dilemmas

The implementation of the two pilots also gave rise to several broader dilemmas inherent in the processes of aid and development that are certainly not unique to this project:

Local to global: ILET's overarching focus is on local ownership and locally grounded solutions. Alongside that comes the implicit assumption that the QLF (on which the project is based) is applicable to every learning environment. The contradiction inherent in this becomes apparent when local solutions are at odds with the global framework and values upheld by Save the Children. This tension reflects common dilemmas that are recognised in literature on participatory development. Driven by operational and pragmatic considerations, humanitarian organisations often cooperate with actors whose values do not entirely align with theirs. Grappling with competing local and global identities,³ international non-governmental organisations risk perpetuating discriminatory practices under the pretext of ‘cultural sensitivity’. Acknowledging that the organisation's assumptions, own value systems and normative frameworks are neither neutral nor universal is the first step to addressing these potential local–global tensions.

Managing expectations: One of the cornerstones of ILET is the conviction that communities need to have access to open and easily understood information – real-time, reliable data – in order to be able to demand their rights, work collectively



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towards improving the learning environment and hold service providers accountable. However, participants point out areas in which knowledge can have disempowering effects. For example, one teacher reported that although increased knowledge had had a positive effect on his teaching practices, it had also left him feeling anxious: "I wonder if children should not enter the classroom because it is in a poor state. I will have failed if it is not improved. I have been made aware that there are a lot of things to do." It is crucial to manage expectations and to emphasise that the learning environment can be improved gradually in small steps.

Child participation: Findings from Uganda indicate that ILET programmes need to use more child-friendly language and information mechanisms to enhance child participation. For those children who did participate, there was a risk their participation might be co-opted to voice adults' or other children's

needs, reinforcing already existing unequal power and privilege structures. For example, when asked directly what they wanted to change in their school, several students in different schools mentioned the need to build a bigger, better-equipped room for teachers.

ILET aims to revive the potential that participatory development has to be transformative, providing support and evidence to local communities to enable them to assert their rights, to hold those in power – including Save the Children – to account, and to trigger wider social change, starting at school.

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1. bit.ly/ILETpackage
2. For more information, see Save the Children's EiE framing document bit.ly/SavetheChildren-EiE-Framing-2017
3. See Kloster M O (2018) 'Why it Hurts – Save the Children Norway and the Dilemmas of 'Going Global'', *Forum for Development Studies* Vol 46:1: 1–22 bit.ly/Kloster-SCF-Going-Global-2018