Foreword: Education – a humanitarian and development imperative

Manuel Bessler

For far too long, donors and the international community have neglected education in humanitarian response. Switzerland was no exception. Food, water, health and shelter were the usual priorities during emergencies, while education was considered more of a long-term objective to be tackled by national governments and development agencies once a crisis was over.

However, we were wrong. We simply ignored the families’ tendencies to see their children’s education – often interrupted or absent – as a priority need in displacement. We were not sufficiently aware of education’s life-sustaining and protective role during conflict and crisis. We underestimated the impact education can have on peaceful coexistence and misjudged the social and economic consequences of the lack of education during displacement for both host and home countries.

Luckily, we have come a long way. Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, there has been growing awareness of the humanitarian imperative to ensure access to education during crises. Fifty-two per cent of the 69 million people displaced globally are under the age of 18. Displacement crises are increasingly protracted and often affect a significant proportion of the time a child takes to grow, develop and prepare for adult life. The right to quality education does not stop because of conflict and displacement. National governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), parties to the conflict and we as donor agencies have an obligation to protect the right to education, regardless of the circumstances. Children must be able to go to school and learn in a safe environment. They must be given the chance to develop their potential to the full, whether they live in a refugee camp, a makeshift settlement or a town, or are still on the move. Education – a right enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – is a collective responsibility.

Switzerland regards education as the essential foundation for individual, social and economic development and as a pillar for values such as equality, respect, tolerance and dignity. Accordingly, basic education and vocational skills development are priority areas of our international cooperation. Hence for the 2017–20 period, we have doubled our financial support in these areas. In 2017, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) published its first education strategy to guide Switzerland’s bilateral and multilateral engagement in this sector. Increasing education support in fragile and crisis-affected contexts is a strategic priority for Switzerland as this is where inequalities and vulnerabilities are greatest and where education can help bring about more inclusive, just and peaceful societies. Protecting the right to education during emergencies, protracted crises and displacement is part of Switzerland’s humanitarian mandate and an indispensable aspect of protecting children and giving them hope for the future.

This edition of Forced Migration Review is timely and necessary. In a time of unprecedented displacement, rising hostilities and an increase in protracted conflicts, it is important to recall what is at stake if displaced girls and boys are prevented from going to school. Education is the most powerful means of breaking cycles of vulnerability and poverty, and without education there can be no sustainable development. The young displaced generation has enormous potential for contributing to society. However, greater international commitment is needed to support countries dealing with rising population movements. Eighty-five per cent of refugees live in developing countries that already struggle with over-stretched education systems. We
Feeling safe enough to learn in a conflict zone
Bethan McEvoy

Building an internal sense of safety, while also teaching coping skills and how to remain alert to the very real risks outside, is essential if psychosocial programming in Afghanistan is to provide a ‘safe space’ for children to learn in a context of high insecurity.

Frequently, traditional psychosocial programming focuses on incidents that have taken place in the past and is implemented in spaces that are now physically safe. However, in protracted crises such as in Afghanistan, children are coping not only with past trauma but also with ongoing stress and fear. In these contexts, psychosocial programming must take a different approach. Building a sense of safety must focus on strengthening children’s awareness of risk and stress, teaching them individual coping skills and creating a feeling of safety through play, creative expression and trust exercises.

In Afghanistan, there are approximately 767,600 children who have been internally displaced by conflict. Ensuring continuity of education during a crisis is vital to providing routine and structure, enabling children to pursue longer-term goals and reducing lifelong dropouts from education. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides education for thousands of displaced children across Afghanistan but has found that, with increased exposure to horrific violence over recent years, it is now even more challenging for children to integrate into their new environment and stay motivated in their education.

In response, since December 2017, NRC Afghanistan has been implementing a supplementary classroom-based programme within schools across the country in order to address the acute psychosocial needs of children affected by conflict-induced trauma. This programme – the Better Learning Programme (BLP) – was developed by NRC and the University of Tromsø in 2007 and piloted first in Uganda and then in Palestine. The programme helps students to identify their reactions to stress, learn techniques to calm themselves and feel safe, be active in their own recovery, and be able to talk to teachers and family about their problems. It also aims to build resilience in the school community by strengthening collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting students’ well-being.

Identifying stress and feeling safe
Our sense of safety is often distorted following a life-threatening event, and survivors can feel terrified at the slightest noise or sensory reminder. Trauma models...