

Getting education out of the box

by Lyndsay Bird

Education in emergencies still suffers from an emergency response approach despite increasing recognition that education should be considered as a developmental – rather than a relief – activity.

A decade ago, 'School in a box' was a one-size fits all approach with little appreciation of the contextual factors that education provision must address. Since then, what lessons have been learned and implemented from the now significant knowledge bank of experience, practice and literature?

During the Rwandan crisis of 1994-1996 agencies engaged in educational activities were keen to demonstrate rapid results. Agency insistence on immediate implementation regardless of the community context was typified by the 'School in a Box' concept developed by UNESCO in Somalia¹ to provide a basic kit of materials for the first three primary grades. While the kits provided a stop-gap solution in terms of basic materials, the teaching guides proved to be 'an insult' (in the words of one Rwandan teacher) to experienced educators in camps in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It soon became clear that the sturdy blue boxes containing the materials were more useful than their contents.

Although some agencies still prefer the ease and visibility of a 'kit' approach, more recent strategies used by emergency education providers take into account the educational and social context in which the refugees or IDPs originate. Curricula are typically based on original materials used prior to the crisis (with any necessary adaptations) and wherever possible school materials are purchased locally in order to assist the local economy.

However, despite the progress towards more context specific programming, there are a number of critical issues dating from the mid-1990s which are not being sufficiently addressed.

Local populations still suffer:

Although only a small proportion of overall refugee budgets is spent on education, there is even less spent on supporting education for the nearby host populations. Despite more recent willingness by agencies to assist local populations alongside refugees, gross disparity still remains. This is largely due to divisions between humanitarian and development agencies and sometimes between relief and development staff within the same agency.

Formal education is not a panacea:

My research in Congolese and Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania indicates that formal education is not recognised by refugees as being the most effective medium for peace building. Informal mechanisms – such as radio and other forms of oral transmission – were considered much more effective. As this has significant implications for peace building in schools and communities, peace educators need to reconsider the mechanisms by which peace building is promoted.

Should we promote Western pedagogies?

Many agencies promote creative learning approaches and innovative mechanisms some of which have little relevance to the children

they are targeting. These are rarely evaluated for their feasibility, cost-effectiveness, and cultural context. Inclusion of additional subjects – typically HIV/AIDS, life skills and peace education – burdens teachers struggling with an already overloaded curriculum. How these subjects are taught needs to be reconsidered.

Using new technology is possible:

Although UNESCO has promoted the use of electronic and satellite communication for distance learning, the use of the internet during and after conflict situations has not been fully explored. An innovative project conducted in Tanzania highlights the possibilities. Local residents of Kasulu town and Burundian refugees in nearby Mtabila camp access the internet via satellite link using solar-powered computers. Refugees value the chance to maintain links with family and friends in Burundi and receive reliable information about the situation in their country. Their only criticism was that there were too many users and not enough computers!

Improve data collection and analysis:

My research in Rwanda and DRC revealed that while much data and statistical information were collected, once the programme was established little of the data was used for systematic analysis. Rapid assessments conducted at the outset of an emergency programme are often not fully inclusive, disaggregated and rarely use standard formats.

Ghamdan Primary School, Baghdad, Iraq. The writing materials and other supplies are from a UNICEF-supplied school-in-a-box kit.



For many donors and heads of agencies – many of whom have only management backgrounds – education is still not a priority in emergency settings. Some agencies believe that education cannot and should not be established at the onset of the emergency. Provision for survival needs alone remains their priority. The mantra of community partnership is largely ignored as agency priorities still predominate.

The mantra of community partnership is largely ignored

My experience in the Great Lakes, together with a recent evaluation of post-conflict education in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia and Rwanda, suggest that:

- Education must be established as a donor and agency priority in emergency contexts. This implies formulation of binding agreements among donors and

agencies at the highest policy-making level.

- Regional policies should be established at government and agency level to ensure IDP and refugee children's access.
- The curriculum of any education programme delivered should be monitored to ensure that there is no malign influence in either content or pedagogy that would contribute to furthering violence.
- Community creativity should be encouraged: partnerships (and if necessary contracts) between communities and agencies should be developed to ensure genuine community participation.
- There is need to investigate the development of an 'Education Passport' to allow IDPs and refugees to cross boundaries with the confidence that their education will be recognised.²

Only the Norwegian government has made a commitment to education as

one of its four funding priorities for emergencies. Until all humanitarian donors and agencies give it a higher priority, education in emergency situations will continue to receive insufficient funds and remain a relief rather than a development activity.

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1. An evaluation of their use in Somalia by Eric Eversmann is online at http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/mellon/3_somalia.html

2. See p30