

Passport to a brighter future?

by Rachel Newton

Certification of formal and non-formal educational achievement, in the form of an internationally-recognised education passport, could provide continuity for children whose schooling has been disrupted by conflict.

At the age of two Mardi fled with his family from their ancestral village as Saddam Hussein depopulated rural Kurdistan. Before he could start education his family was again forced to move, this time to one of the collective towns into which Saddam herded displaced Kurds. Mardi started school but in 1991 fled with his family to Iran where they lived in a refugee camp. Returning to Iraq, they stayed in makeshift accommodation close to the border before being offered shelter in an IDP camp. Mardi re-enrolled in school but soon dropped out. He lived in the IDP camp for eleven years. He cannot read or write and works as a daily labourer.

Mardi's story is not unusual. During my five and half years working in northern Iraq I met many children and young adults who had not completed their primary education due to internal displacement. Research among displaced households found that some had moved fourteen times in as many years. Moves rarely coincided with school years and many children had great trouble getting registered for enrolment. Like young people in many other situations of conflict, Kurds found themselves having to repeat school years, becoming discouraged and eventually dropping out. Consequently they enter adulthood handicapped by illiteracy and without certification to show either their achievements or their potential.

An Educational Passport – a book owned by children and young people – could facilitate learning and help towards solving the problem of accreditation. Whether in school or not, whether in a camp or self-settled, displaced children are exposed to a whole range of learning opportu-

nities. Hygiene, health and safety (including land mine awareness), distribution of food and non-food items and the physical layout and infrastructure of a camp all offer learning opportunities. These activities could have a greater child-learning focus. Aid agencies could involve children in their activities and attest to their participation and knowledge gains by means of the passport.

A passport could:

- encourage children to value education and to recognise that even when denied formal schooling their context-related learning has a proven value

- encourage adult family members to take an active role in their child's learning
- facilitate eventual re-entry into school by giving teachers a validated insight into the child's experiences, thus enabling a more accurate assessment of his/her abilities and needs
- place a value on knowledge that will help the child to maintain language and cultural identity
- record vocational skills acquired by young people as they support family livelihoods.

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Returnee girl with school book, Gash Barke region of Western Eritrea

