

Building citizenship and life skills

by Margaret Sinclair

As displaced people are sheltered (some would say 'warehoused') in huge camps, is enough being done to help them acquire the life and survival skills to enable a future based on reconciliation, human rights and democratic governance?

All too often education in emergencies and the early stages of reconstruction has been just talk and chalk. Donors have been happy if children simply sit down in front of a teacher and blackboard, chant lessons by heart or take down notes to prepare for exams. Recently, however, there has been growing awareness of the need for emergency education to convey 'life skills' for survival.

Education is essential to help conflict-affected children and youngsters to live a normal life and to prepare them for adulthood in what will hopefully be a more peaceful environment. Children exposed to violence and aggression from an early age need to be educated in

basic life skills and values so that they can develop a sense of respect towards each other and shed prejudices against other ethnic/religious groups.

Crises carry many health hazards, from displacement into unsanitary and crowded camps to unwanted or unprotected sex with persons infected with HIV/AIDS. There may be dangers from landmines or unexploded ordnance. The environment may be damaged as a result of refugees cutting down all trees within reach of a camp for shelter and fuel. Good practice emergency education programmes must ensure that schools and non-formal education programmes enrich their activities with these elements, which are often

omitted from traditional subject-focused curricula or treated in a formalistic way that does not impact on children's or adults' behaviour.

All emergency-affected children must be educated in conflict resolution, tolerance, human rights and citizenship as well as in health-preserving relationships. As in many aspects of emergency education, these topics are not specific to refugees, IDPs or non-migrants caught up in war: they are just more badly needed than elsewhere, due to the experience of crisis. The time has come for emergency educators to acknowledge their importance and approach them in a coherent and integrated manner.

This requires a change in our priorities. It requires agreement on common educational objectives and finding time for structured learning of active listening, two-way communication, cooperative problem solving, empathy, refusal skills, negotiation and mediation and their application

to life issues such as conflict and health. These objectives are very different from learning knowledge by heart, and entail higher-level cognitive objectives as well as social and emotional development. They require experiential approaches to learning, suited to each age group, in which students undertake simple stimulus activities and then discuss their implications for peace, citizenship or health-preserving behaviours and relationships. The role of the teacher is to be a facilitator for class discussions, not an authority figure delivering the 'right' answer. Game-like activities and problem solving, together with role-plays and practising new behaviours related to the goals concerned, are the most effective approach.

Lessons from life skills-based HIV/AIDS programmes

Particular attention must be given to skills-based education for the protection of young people against HIV/AIDS – a huge threat in many contexts where conflict and displacement have disrupted protective social structures. Teaching about AIDS is not easy. As parents often object to explicit education about sexual matters it is necessary to enter into patient dialogue with community members to find a way of approaching the subject that takes note of local concerns. It is not enough to convey the biological facts, although these should be systematically repeated and erroneous beliefs dispelled.

In order to change behaviours it is necessary to build a repertoire of life skills, from non-violent communication and assertiveness in explaining one's position to negotiation and conflict management. These behaviours must be practised through repeated role-plays incorporating different ways of saying 'no' to unwanted or unprotected sex. Evaluation of HIV/AIDS initiatives has demonstrated that actual behaviours can be changed by providing opportunities to practice assertiveness, negotiation and refusal skills in a sheltered setting.



from HIV/AIDS Stand Up for Human Rights (OHCHR, UNAIDS and EHO) at <http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2003/9241591145.pdf>

HIV/AIDS education in eastern and southern Africa

A UNICEF study found that life skills and HIV/AIDS education had been included in the curricula for different subjects by several countries. However, teachers were mostly not comfortable with experiential teaching and reverted to giving notes.

Sensitive topics such as sex and condoms were avoided for religious reasons or concern over job security. Life skills were unexamined and un-timed, so many lessons were not taught. AIDS education was often presented as one-off lessons, taught as biomedical facts to be learned for a test by teachers who were uncomfortable discussing the topic. The UNAIDS guidelines for students to rehearse assertive statements with different reasons why they did not want to go to the disco and get drunk (leading to sex) or to have sex without condoms were simply not being implemented.

These methods are indeed used in non-formal HIV/AIDS education programmes but on a small scale, along with peer education by trained animators. For

example: 'We have seven very active groups of young animators – even in war-torn Ituri [D R Congo] – who link up with the volunteer youth FM radios who incessantly repeat the messages with music and in youth's own slang, try to meet every adolescent at least once (in small groups) and involve them in knowledge and behaviour change...' (Barry Sesnan, private communication)

Research has shown that skills-based HIV/AIDS education offered as a separate subject taught by separate teachers is more effective in changing the behaviour of adolescent students than incorporating it as a minor component of a 'carrier' subject or implementing a policy of infusion into all subjects.

The same principles apply to peace education and learning to resolve conflicts peacefully, to protect the rights of women and children, to mobilise fellow citizens to solve environmental problems or to learn to make committees effective and to help organise free and fair elections. Similar skills are conveyed in programmes to resist peer pressure to take drugs or engage in other anti-social or risky activities.

Tasks ahead

One very important question is

whether to attempt the integration of these messages into regular curricula or whether to support special programmes. Integration is difficult when teachers are inexperienced and under-educated, especially where education is focused on examinations and the examinations focus on theory rather than on contemporary problems. It is clear that the enrichment of the curriculum with health and peace-oriented messages and life skills practice requires additional resources in the form of additional teaching time, as well as start-up training costs.

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Much needs to be done if peace/HIV-AIDS/human rights/citizenship skills and values development is to be enhanced, either as a separate subject or an earmarked addition to an existing 'carrier' subject. Agencies and organisations concerned with emergency education need to come together to discuss the use of appropriate frameworks and curricula for the different grades of schooling as well as for non-formal education and workshops. While it may not be possible to reach agreement on content or methodology, it will be useful to share materials, experiences and good practice in life skills education.

Citizenship education is an essential requirement in post-conflict states where both children and adults need to understand the peace agreement or constitutional arrangements and

national laws. Education for peace, respect for human rights, active citizenship and health-preserving behaviours is possible but difficult. Educators have to put real will and resources into programme implementation in order to have a tangible and lasting impact on attitudes, values and behaviours.

Life skills education for displaced populations requires:

- identification of human resources for start up, participatory research, feasibility studies and stakeholder consensus building
 - strong policy commitment and vision statement
 - creation of a core team of committed educators with proven skills in experiential education and in-service teacher training
- creation or adaptation of a coherent and progressive age-appropriate unified curriculum framework for building skills, concepts, attitudes and values related to the goals of learning to live together, including preventive health
- provision of a weekly period of experiential lessons specifically focused on these goals
- insertion of supporting course units/lessons into existing subjects
- textbook review to exclude harmful material and introduce positive modelling of learning to live together
- gradual expansion of networks of participating schools and other

education institutions and programmes (pre-school, vocational, non-formal, higher education) in order to achieve universal coverage without diminution of quality

- convening of conflict resolution/life skills/citizenship workshops for practising and trainee teachers
- 'whole school' and 'whole community' approaches, including non-formal workshops for youth and adults, and multiple channels of communication
- research, monitoring, evaluation and sharing of knowledge and lessons learned between agencies.

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The Forced Migration Online team at the RSC has produced a resource page on **Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction** to complement this feature section. See: www.forcedmigration.org/browse/thematic/education.htm

Mines awareness in Angola