

USAID, education and conflict in Asia and the Near East

by Vijitha Eyango

Over the past five years USAID has learned lessons from critical education programmes in response to conflict and natural disasters in the Asia and Near East Region.

USAID emergency education programmes have ranged from rebuilding education systems in Afghanistan to supporting the tsunami-affected countries and post-earthquake Pakistan with education programmes that quickly begin to restore order, create stability and regenerate public sector capacities. The challenge has been to develop a twinned approach for education programming which balances practical needs with longer-term strategic programmes, thus responding to the key immediate and longer-term needs of the population and country at large.

USAID's experience in conflict situations has shown that it is critical to design country-specific interventions that take into consideration basic security concerns, government capacity (both institutional and absorptive), areas

of greatest need and how best to coordinate with other donor and local efforts on the ground. The challenge is to look at the agency's comparative advantage as a donor agency and work out appropriate scenarios for action that enable us to respond swiftly in conflict situations to ensure an education response that is both broad and flexible.

In countries such as Iraq, USAID's immediate programmatic response included school construction and rehabilitation and provision of book-bags, coupled with accelerated learning programmes aimed at reintegrating out-of-school children into age-appropriate grades. In addition to formal school-based interventions, we employ a variety of non-formal education and training approaches ranging from programmes for marginalised populations, such as skills training

for IDPs and out-of-school youth in Aceh, to functional literacy programmes for adults in Pakistan.

These immediate practical responses run simultaneously with longer-term strategic programmes aimed at improving access to quality education. Getting children back into school re-establishes order for children and their parents. Stable conditions keep children safe and allow schools to be repaired and re-supplied and basic services restored. In Afghanistan, for example, USAID's immediate post-9/11 education response focused on rebuilding schools and distributing textbooks and book-bags to get children back into schools. This approach is complemented with longer-term programmes to provide radio-based training, literacy and skills training to enable illiterate women to become community health workers and support to upgrade teacher training at Afghanistan's universities.

While the focus of USAID's education response is on basic

education, supporting higher education's capacity to contribute to development is critical in the more strategic phase of education development programming in conflict contexts. USAID has provided substantial support for higher education programmes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, including, scholarships for graduate study and exchanges, university partnerships and also places an emphasis on strengthening overall capacity of host-country institutions.

One of the most difficult challenges is to design an expanded humanitarian response that builds the capacity of local government and mitigates the impact of conflict. Designing and implementing a programme that takes into consideration all these parameters is very complex and includes trade-offs as programme options are weighed within the context of USAID's comparative advantage in the country at large. Nepal, for example, has poor basic education indicators, ranging from 70.5% net enrolment rate in primary school to a female illiteracy rate of 35%. Access to the education system is further constrained along caste and gender lines, and by the return of uneducated youth after working in the Gulf countries. Given the context of the Maoist insurgency coupled with the lack of viable jobs, USAID's comparative advantage in this arena is to structure a programme that provides training and functional literacy to out-of-school youth as opposed to a basic education programme that focuses solely on improving access to education.

In positioning programmes, it is critical to balance resource and capacity limitations of the government with a flexible and systematic plan for improving government capacity and ensuring long-term sustainability. For example, in 2004 USAID committed to rehabilitating Kabul women's dormitory that enables 1,400 girls and



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women from rural Afghanistan to attend higher education institutions in Kabul. With public sector capacities so limited both in terms of capacity and resources, USAID's approach was to go beyond the bricks and mortar of building this dormitory and work out a phased sustainability plan. This plan includes USAID support for furniture and operating costs, while slowly phasing out responsibility as the Ministry takes over responsibility and ownership of the process.

While designing a viable education programme is highly dependent on reliable education statistics, donors should be flexible enough to design immediate programme responses in the absence of valid statistics. For example, following the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, it took months to get an accurate picture of the extent of the damage to schools and the community. In order to immediately respond to the crisis at hand, USAID had to design interventions based on limited sampling, and sometimes anecdotal evidence, and to shift to more evidence-based programming once the extent of the damage became clearer. The immediate response – to provide tent schools and schooling supplies – has now been expanded to provide skills training

and education system support for the earthquake-affected region at large. It is equally critical to design rigorous monitoring and evaluation guidelines and steps to ensure that both practical and strategic indicators (qualitative and quantitative) measure the on-going progress of our education programmes.

USAID's education programmes in conflict-affected countries in Asia and the Near East are driven by country-specific priorities aimed at balancing immediate with longer-term systemic and strategic goals. Programmes need to aim to build the foundation for sound government management and accountability of the education sector and overall system strengthening, while providing immediate programmes that restore order, create stability and regenerate public sector capacity.

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This primary school in Baghdad, Iraq, is still littered with leftover live ammunition.