Learning to deliver education in fragile states

The Fragile States Group within the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is working to advise donors on provision of education (and other) services in ‘fragile states’.

The Fragile States Group brings together experts on governance, conflict prevention and reconstruction from bilateral and multilateral development agencies to facilitate coordination and share good practice to enhance development effectiveness in ‘fragile states’.

The DAC characterises fragile states as those countries where there is a lack of political commitment or weak capacity to develop and implement pro-poor policies. Such countries tend to be characterised by poor governance and are prone to violent conflict. They are home to a seventh of the world’s population, a third of those who live on less than $1/day and half the children who die before the age of five. More than half of the approximately 115 million children not enrolled in primary school live in fragile states.

DAC identifies four types of fragile states: deteriorating; arrested development; early recovery; and post-conflict. Such a typology is useful in thinking of different strategic responses. For example, in deteriorating conditions it may be neither feasible nor appropriate to work with the state, even though it may be possible to work with communities with the intention of planning for longer-term, sustainable support to the education system as state willingness develops. During early recovery donors can work alongside government partners with a gradual transition to the state playing a greater role in education service delivery. However, there is recognition of the need to take account of local realities in planning responses in particular contexts.

Education has only recently been included as the fourth pillar of humanitarian support. Even so, it is not necessarily included within international agency humanitarian responses. This is despite the fact that education is an acknowledged human right with likely lifecycle and intergenerational benefits for growth, security and development. Education plays a key role in national identity formation and can be both a weapon and a promoter of peace. Fortunately, there is now growing acknowledgement among educationalists that the relief-development dichotomy is artificial and that education must be planned as a long-term endeavour. This recognition needs to extend beyond educationalists, however, if it is to be addressed within the humanitarian-development nexus.

If interventions in fragile states are not developed in a holistic, sector-wide approach problems are likely to arise. Prospects for sustainable development can be set back by absence of post-primary education opportunities. It is also essential to focus on teacher training – particularly training of female teachers – even in deteriorating or arrested development conditions, as teaching can play a key role in supporting post-conflict transition. If vocational training is not provided to out-of-school youth their frustrations can trigger a move back into deteriorating conditions. It should be noted, however, that vocational training has a mixed record, especially when job opportunities are not subsequently available.

It is important to build on spontaneous community-based initiatives which often precede externally-supported education provision. However, there is a need for caution. Reliance on communities can intensify inequality, particularly where communities are fractured as a result of conflict. School management committees can be captured by local elites, and can themselves give rise to conflict. Moving from voluntary community initiatives to a state-supported system-wide approach requires large expenditures for teachers’ salaries which may not be initially available. Attention to external support, for example through a transitional trust fund to ensure that teachers can be paid, is likely to be key in ensuring a smooth transition.

Innovative forms of coordination must be found in order to ensure education sector strategy plans are consistent with country-level multiple-donor cross-sectoral support. Involving NGOs with experience of service delivery in early phases in the planning, as well as UN agencies with prior coordination experience, provides an opportunity to ensure that the system is developed in a sustainable way that addresses local concerns and which can help to develop sector-wide approaches. Intra-agency coordination is also essential – for humanitarian and development wings of donor agencies still often fail to liaise.

It is important to:

- endeavour to pool donor funds and ensure timely, predictable and...
Education, reconstruction and state building in Afghanistan

by Jeaniene Spink

Since the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan has adopted a new constitution, held democratic elections and established a national army. Education, however, has been treated as merely an ‘add on’ to the process of nation building.

Education systems are complex and shaped by a country’s economic, social and political history. The various education curricula and textbooks employed in Afghanistan mirror the country’s turbulent political development.

In the 1970s the Daoud government promoted its claim to annex Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province by teaching children the geographic boundaries of ‘Pashtunistan’. Following the communist coup in 1978 and Soviet invasion in 1979 students began to learn a new vocabulary – ‘revolution’, ‘people’s democracy’ and ‘rights of the workers’ – and came home from school singing socialist songs and telling their parents that religion was no longer important. The reaction was often extreme. Schools were burnt and teachers killed as many argued that education itself was a threat to the very existence of Afghan and Islamic values. As Afghanistan became a Cold War frontline, fundamentalist militant groups started receiving international assistance. Various political groups had their own schools inside Afghanistan and in refugee camps. Textbooks developed for the alliance of seven Sunni parties based in Peshawar eventually became official textbooks and were widely used in schools in Afghanistan and in refugee camps for many years. Some Mujahideen groups developed maths exercises with examples of how to divide ammunition to maximise Soviet fatalities. Inflammatory textbooks perverted history by describing the Prophet Muhammad’s struggle against non-Sunni Muslims, infidels and communists. Afghan Shi’a refugees in the Pakistani city Quetta also developed their own books with support from Iran.

By the time the Taliban were overthrown in November 2001 Afghanistan had witnessed a period of 23 years during which there had been little or no investment in a quality education system that valued scholastic achievement and social responsibility.

Over 80% of the population were illiterate and a third of the country’s 8,000 schools had been destroyed. The extraordinary return to school in 2002 – a 400% increase in enrolment – exceeded all national and international expectations and gave the war-torn country a sense of hope and stability. However, this unprecedented demand for education – particularly for girls – has again given way to doubts. Parents no longer have whole-hearted trust in education. Simply returning to school has not been enough.

Ninety per cent of international assistance to education is in the primary sector in an effort to achieve Education for All (EFA) goals by 2015. There is proportionately little or no support for pre-primary, secondary or tertiary education. Frustrated in their educational ambitions, many children are forced to leave school after primary completion. Lack of opportunities to train as doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers or engineers means that many Afghans are now choosing to return to Pakistan where there are better educational prospects.