

The UNHCR Peace Education Programme: skills for life

by Pamela Baxter

Although refugees are often the victims of ethnic, religious or political intolerance, they carry their own prejudices with them into exile.

This in itself often causes conflicts within the refugee setting. As a result, conflict within a refugee community is often driven by the politics back home and yet, when refugees are finally able to return home, they are expected to contribute directly to peace and reconciliation. It is against this background that UNHCR recently launched a unique project aimed at introducing peace education in refugee schools and communities alike.

What is peace education?

In the UNHCR Peace Education programme in Africa, 'peace' has been defined as a comprehensive 'proactive' or 'positive' peace. It is much more than an absence of war or violent conflict. It is a process of developing knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that lead to behaviour that promotes peace and encourages conflict prevention and minimisation.

Many NGOs and agencies, including UNHCR, have developed some sort of programme to reinforce the concepts of peace in developing countries. Most of these are in resource book form, where the teacher is given ideas and activities to incorporate into the curriculum. However, in developing countries, education systems generally offer a very formal examination-oriented syllabus; teaching and learning are reduced to memorisation and rote learning. While this may provide academic knowledge, it is less likely

"What started as the trading of insults between two groups of Sudanese refugees soon threatened to turn into a violent confrontation. Egged on by their leaders, more and more bystanders were drawn into the argument and the atmosphere became increasingly hostile. Yet there was a small group which stood aside and refused to be drawn into the conflict. The same happened on the other side: just a few followers who did not wish to take part. These two groups had the same approach, for they both had recently graduated from the peace education programme. They called themselves 'peacemakers'. Although small in numbers, it was their determination that prevented the argument from becoming violent and, soon after, everyone left to go home."

(Desalegn Adamu, Peace Education Assistant Counterpart)

to develop constructive attitudes or to modify behaviours. The elements of peace education — communication, cooperation, empathy, understanding emotions, problem solving, negotiation, etc — are not usually practised in any integral way. Students learn how to compete rather than how to cooperate. The agenda that refugee students (in particular) learn from home and from their previous experience in a violent society is to solve problems through violence. Moreover, there tends to be a strong cultural bias towards responsibility belonging

primarily to the elders or leaders; within a refugee setting, however, traditional problem-solving approaches break down. There is nothing to take the place of traditional methods except peace education.

Introducing peace education programmes

Following participatory assessments involving all segments of the refugee community in Kenyan refugee camps in late 1997 and 1998, the initial idea of introducing peace education into primary schools was soon extended — at their request — to include communities at large. The programme has since been replicated in seven other African countries with enthusiastic response from both the refugee and returnee populations.

The school component was first developed as a resource book but this was felt to be ineffective, as the teachers are often under-trained and the rigid syllabus makes it more difficult for them to effectively integrate a special topic into their normal teaching load. As a result, the school component was re-designed as a series of activities covering 14 concept areas in a format that allows it to be used as a separate subject within the curriculum. It develops the concepts in the same way that more traditional subjects are developed with a gradual increase in the complexity of the concept to match the child's development.



The philosophy of the community programme strongly emphasises outreach to the entire community to avoid the traditional (and often very limiting) idea of 'trickle down' where only community leaders are trained, on the assumption that they will then pass on to the communities what they have learned. Indeed practical experience shows that a) community leaders do not always pass on what they have learned; b) the same small group of people have access to all types of training offered to the refugee communities with very little perceived outcome or change in behaviour; and c) fragmentation of the communities in many refugee situations means that leaders do not have the same power and authority that they may have had traditionally, especially when these leaders are 'chosen' by UNHCR or the implementing partners.

In order then to reach a cross-section of the community, it was decided to use the 1:10 ratio for impact. This is based on the assumption that every person who graduates from the community programme has a contact circle of ten people and can, through their behaviour, affect the attitudes of these people. However, not all graduates change their behaviour. If it is assumed that only 50% of graduates will change their behaviour and talk to people about the skills they have acquired, then it will take 20,000 graduates to change the views of a refugee population of 100,000.

Both the school and community programmes are interactive and activity-oriented so that participants have a chance to internalise the necessary attitudes; a change in behaviour is then more likely. The school programme comprises a series of activities to develop the concepts necessary for peaceful and constructive behaviour, with almost no theory or academic approach. The community programme is discussion and activity oriented as adults usually have the concepts associated with peace but their skills are not generally refined. This programme consists of a 10 or 12 day workshop with follow-up meetings to deal with issues raised by the participants or with current problems in the camps.

This same philosophy has been used in the training of the teachers (for the school programme) and the facilitators (for the community programme). There are several 'phases' of training

to help the trainees develop the concepts themselves as well as developing the required teaching skills. Both teachers and facilitators are perceived as role models in the refugee situation and it is therefore important that they have adequate training and time to develop the concepts themselves.

Review of the programme

In Kenya, the current programme reaches 42,000 children each week in the refugee camps, with structured lessons on aspects of peace. In addition, more than 9,000 youth and adults have graduated from the community programme since its inception. However, constant movements (resettlement and repatriation) mean that the 1:10 principle has not yet had the desired effect.

In Uganda, Guinea, Ethiopia, NW Somalia and Democratic Republic of Congo, initial training workshops have been implemented and materials distributed to those implementing the programme. More than 680 staff and opinion makers in the refugee communities have undertaken these workshops in these countries. All of these programmes have been started between 2000 and 2001. In Liberia, more than 200,000 children have access to Peace Education programmes and almost 100 staff of implementing partners and refugee leaders have undertaken facilitator training so that the programme can be integrated into ongoing programmes.

There is a full range of materials now available for countries to implement the programme, available in English, French and Somali¹.

Programmes such as peace education do need constant monitoring and careful planning. Before development of the programme there were two levels of research undertaken. The first was to conduct a baseline survey so that there would be something to measure against in terms of attitude change after implementation. The second was to work very closely with a wide range of refugees to determine what should be in the programme. At initial meetings in countries where there has been no pilot approach, it has not been necessary to conduct the research as it is accepted that the programme has been developed with and for the refugee communities in East Africa. (Interestingly, it is totally accepted in West Africa with no

modifications culturally, although some were anticipated.)

Lesson 1

Community work has to start from within: it cannot be imposed from the outside. One of the reasons for the success of this programme with the refugee communities is that they 'own' the programme because they were involved in its design. (This is true not only for the refugees in Kenya where the pilot programme was developed but in all the places of implementation because the initial workshops require the refugees' discussion and involvement.) It is essential that the workshops are facilitated in a collaborative way, utilising the skills and wisdom of the participants and building trust. In one workshop series, where the facilitator, though very committed, tended to 'preach' Peace Education, an evaluation comment was made that people needed time to think and discuss for themselves rather than be told.

What could we have done differently? Both teachers and facilitators are trained in the philosophy, methodology and content of the Peace Education programme. Those working in the programme, supervising and administering, should have the same skills, behaviours and attitudes that the programme is trying to instil. However, we cannot build capacity as quickly as the programme is being implemented. There are really only two choices: either a slower implementation to enable staff involved to internalise the philosophy and apply it in all aspects of their life (for most of us, a very long-term prospect); or the route we followed of allowing people to grow with the programme (reinforced by frequent training workshops and support monitoring).

Lesson 2

The programme as a pilot in Kenya was open to a range of problems common to pilot initiatives. Pilot programmes traditionally have access to funding not open to mainstream programmes so that it is always an additional project and therefore often marginalised. If attempts are made to integrate it, it is often seen as 'taking over' an on-going programme. In some situations, it may even become invisible and can be neither monitored nor evaluated. A separate pilot programme is very difficult to

transfer from pilot phase to mainstream. An extended pilot phase means that everybody concerned — refugees and staff — assume that the ‘special’ situation will always exist and they will resist the changes necessary for mainstreaming. The Peace Education programme suffered from marginalisation and, because components were created in response to demand, there was insufficient integration with existing programmes (eg teacher training or on-going community programmes).

What could we have done differently? Even though implementing partner staff and UNHCR staff were invited to workshops and trainings, this was only partially successful as there was no responsibility or ownership with these staff members. One of the great successes of this programme is the ownership expressed by the refugees themselves but perhaps that came at the cost of ownership by those responsible for implementing the programmes. In countries where the programme is simply being implemented rather than piloted, these problems do not exist as UNHCR simply offers the materials, training (if required) and support to establish the programme.

Lesson 3

There is a philosophical bias in the materials that is sometimes at odds with attitudes of implementation in the field. The UNHCR Peace Education programme is about sharing knowledge and taking responsibility — the essence being that peace belongs to every person and every person has the responsibility to be peaceful. The reality in the field however is that some people working with refugees (and some refugees themselves) do not view peace in this way. Some consider obedience to be all important and that a clear hierarchy is more important than increasing a knowledge base.

The problem with this is that it depends on honourable leadership and a stable social situation: things that are often not available in a refugee situation.

What could we have done differently? Given that the refugees who have completed the course (including most community leaders) prefer the approach in the course and in fact have claimed that it is closer to their traditional methods of problem solving (a consensus approach), perhaps there is nothing different to be done. This is a broader problem than the implementation of Peace Education. The main focus of all humanitarian workers is to implement life-sustaining activities. When there is an extended refugee situation, it becomes important to nurture the people in more ways than providing food and shelter. But this is not well understood and we have a tendency to think for the refugees and so we do not listen effectively, we do not communicate clearly and we ‘pass’ on the problem rather than working through to a solution. In fact we do many of the things that Peace Education teaches people not to do! Perhaps if more work had been undertaken with the staff of both UNHCR and the implementing partners, this would have helped. But staff are reluctant to give the amount of time necessary to work through the programme and so staff workshops have tended to be about implementation of the programme rather than working through the concept areas in the programme.

For the future (and this is happening in new countries of implementation), staff of both UNHCR, the concerned implementing partners and government officials (where appropriate) undertake a Community Workshop as the introduction to the programme. This, combined with the offer to train facilitators and teachers of the imple-

menting partners, will use the lessons learned to good effect.

Lesson 4

Ideally, peace education should not be a ‘stand alone’ programme. Most of the concept areas in peace education are concepts associated with Life Skills² training and an integrated Life Skills programme would work on how to transfer skills and knowledge from the learning situation to real life. Given the context of refugee and returnee situations, however, it was felt that the Peace Education programme needed to focus specifically on the promotion of peace rather than the wider range of concepts of Life Skills. Although links have been made to some areas of Life Skills programmes, the Peace Education programme is currently still separate but makes extensive use of role plays and discussions of real situations to try to teach the transfer of peace education skills to real life.

What could we have done differently? Given that this was started as a pilot to answer a specific set of needs, it is probable that we could not have done any differently. While the ideal would be to have an integrated Life Skills programme, the refugee communities see peace as their greatest need. The future of the programme, as skills and behaviours are internalised, should be an integrated approach encompassing all the life skills. Peace Education is not a short-term or occasional programme. It requires a consistent programme to build and reinforce skills that will serve people all their lives.

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1. For details of materials, or to obtain them, please contact Pamela Baxter at UNHCR, PO Box 43801, Nairobi, Kenya. Email as above. Tel: +254 2 442052 ext 2743.

2. The term ‘life skills’ has been used by agencies to cover skills associated with functioning at a practical level in society. Sometimes it is attitudes and behaviours that are taught, rather than skills. Again, the attitudes and behaviours are to help the individual function better in a complex and changing society. The confusion with the term is that it refers to both these extremes, the common link being the functioning of the individual in society. If the second definition is used then the UNHCR Peace Education programme fits neatly as a life skills approach but with the rider that the refugees themselves felt the need to concentrate on Peace Education.

Peace education workshop on the topic of cooperation. Ifo camp, Dadaab, Kenya

