

Education in Emergencies: Critical Questions and Challenges¹

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Overview

Time and again, communities devise some sort of schooling for their children as soon as the disruptions of warfare or other humanitarian disasters begin to subside. This initial education response can begin quickly but usually provides only rudimentary educational instruction and structure. National and especially international agencies may arrive soon after this to support and dramatically expand such efforts.

Education in Emergencies can be defined as formal and nonformal education provided to children and youth whose access to education systems has been destroyed by war or other calamities.² This document will focus on war-affected contexts.

The Education in Emergencies field is generally divided into three overlapping phases:

- ▲ The Acute Phase: which features recreation activities and literacy and numeracy programming
- ▲ The Stabilization Phase: when formal education is re-started, especially primary education; and
- ▲ The Reconstruction Phase: when education systems are reestablished following conflicts.

In addition, all three phases tend to include educational modules as programming components. These inclusions are based on the recognition that emergencies change social circumstances and enlarge the realm of educational need. Depending on need and finances, an emergency education program may contain modules that address pressing concerns, such as:³

- ▲ Peace education/human rights/basic skills;
- ▲ HIV/AIDS prevention & reproductive health;
- ▲ Prevention of cholera and other diseases
- ▲ Landmine awareness; and
- ▲ Psychosocial programming

During the transitioning of the provision of education by communities to national and international agencies, significant challenges confront communities, agencies, and governments. Ten important challenges, and a selected list of resources for beginning to address them, are provided on the following pages.

1. Adapted from a presentation at the BEPS office at Creative Associates International, Inc., Washington, DC, on October 29, 2003.

2. Adapted from the definition on page 7 of "The Education Imperative: Supporting Education in Emergencies." Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, and New York: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Available at: <http://www.aed.org/ToolsandPublications/upload/EducationImperative.pdf>.

3. The "Matrix of Activities and Support Needed for Implementing an Emergency Education Program," designed by Margaret Sinclair and Carl Triplehorn provides a sense of immediate, short-term, and long-term emergency education responses. Available at: <http://ineesite.org/core/matrix.asp>.



United States Agency for International Development

Contract No. HNE-I-00-00-00038-00

Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity
CREATIVE ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL²

1

The Predominance of International Agencies and the Evolution of New System Forms

Wars tend to disempower governments and create space for international agencies to fill the vacuum. By providing education services to communities, UN and NGO agencies can assume the functions and responsibilities of Ministries of Education in the areas where they work. This is due to their high operational capacity and ability both to access funding and deliver educational services. By comparison, the government usually has, at best, a limited presence.

2

The Role of Communities

War-affected communities usually start the schools, but what is their role when international agencies arrive? Given the unavoidable differences in power between implementing agencies and affected communities, it is important to be consistently aware of the possibility that "community education" programming might become paternalistic.

3

The Role of National Government

War-affected national governments are often largely ignored by international agencies until student national examination accreditation and teacher certification needs surface as high priorities (perhaps 6-18 mos. after the emergency begins). With weak national governments and their Ministries of Education working with empowered international agencies, government legitimacy, sovereignty, and real control of the education program often are indirectly or overtly challenged. However unintentional, a national government that is effectively marginalized by international agency actions can generate deep resentments and negative responses. Governments may, for example, exercise their power by intentionally slowing down educational processes and the activities of international agencies.

4

A Mammoth Capacity Gap

It is common for the education authorities to have low technical and operational capacities. Nonetheless, international agencies may assign capacity building for education officials a low priority until the postwar period.

International agencies often do not adequately recognize or appreciate their contribution to the affected government's reduced capacity level. With pronounced differences in salaries, benefits, and status between working for the government and international agencies, many of the best qualified educationalists in the war-affected nation abandon the government system to work for international agencies instead. As this can dramatically exacerbate capacity challenges that already confront national governments, it needs to be addressed.

5

The Uneven Access to and Quality of Schools

During and following conflicts, unintended hierarchies of access tend to arise:

- ▲ Children and youth in refugee camps often have the best chance of gaining access to education. The quality of education may be high when compared to other war-affected students in the region.
- ▲ Students in IDP camps may have access to education as well, although it is often of much lower quality than the education provided by international agencies in refugee camps.
- ▲ In general, children and youth who reside in cities and remote rural areas (either in refugee asylum countries or within their war-affected country) tend to have the worst chance of attending school. This is a persistent, worldwide problem.
- ▲ Nonformal education is generally underfunded during and following wars—even while the need rapidly expands. Out-of-school youth in particular are generally overlooked.

In all of these cases, the highest degree of access is to primary education. Access to secondary, tertiary, and nonformal education programs tends to be minimal at best, and is sometimes nonexistent.

