Global Education Cluster

Making Education a Priority in Emergencies

Of the estimated 70 million children out of school in 2008, 40 million live in conflict affected fragile states. Millions more are out of school as a result of natural disasters. At a minimum, these children have their lives disrupted as they and their families try to cope with the continued dangers and rapidly changing situations the emergency brings. At worst they are exposed to more extreme suffering - physical injury, bereavement, separation from their families, and displacement. In the midst of the crisis and in its aftermath they need protection, a sense of security and everyday routine to help them overcome the psychological trauma they may have experienced. Education can offer this and more; it has a vital role in supporting children throughout and beyond an emergency and must be included in all humanitarian responses.

In addition to the immediate trauma, emergencies situations also bring increased risk of exposure to grave human rights violations – trafficking and forced recruitment into armed groups – and increased risks of injury or illness, through unexploded ordnance or disease. Education must be a priority from the very beginning of any and all humanitarian responses because it provides both physical protection and psychological support.

Despite this eductaion is has historically been considered secondary during humanitarian crisis and - eductaion services disrupted in the crisis – neglected as the international humanitarian communty move in. Although there is a slow change, as witnessed by the formation of the education cluster in 2006, the right to edcuation is often overlooked. A false hierachy of rights emerges where eductaion is a lower priority, despite its proven beneifits. When this happens children can find their schooling disruppted for weeks, months or in volitile conflict situations, even years.

At all times children's enjoyment of their right to education brings multitude benefits, in terms of personal, social and cognitive development. In times of emergency education can help minimize disruption to children's ongoing emotional and social development by giving them a secure environment in which to interact with their peers and adults; an environment in which children can be children, provided with psychological support and a sense of normality in an otherwise chaotic world. Education is, in the words of the late Katarina Tomasevski ". . . a multiplier, enhancing the enjoyment of all individual rights and freedoms where education is effectively guaranteed . . ."[1] and in emergency situations education can literally be a lifeline.

Education Protects:
The protection of children during an emergency must be paramount and education can play a vital role in the physical and psychological protection of children throughout and after a crisis.

- it protects children immediately from death or bodily harm, for example, through awareness of landmines and the dangers of unexploded ordnance, HIV and AIDS information, and health and hygiene promotion
- safe areas for children's play and temporary learning centres can provide an effective way to identify and reunite separated children with their families
- children who attend school are less vulnerable to being recruited into armed groups, to abusive work and to being trafficked.

A core component and initial education response during an emergency is the formation of child friendly spaces where children can enjoy increased physical protection and psycho-social support. These spaces provide an opportunity for children to be taught life-saving knowledge and skills, from simple hand-washing techniques to prevent the spreading of disease to learning about landmines or unexploded ordnance – knowledge that gets disseminated to the children's families and wider

1 Annual report of the Special Rapportuer on the right to education, Katerina Tomasevski, UN Doc: e/CN.4/2001/52, 9 January 2001, para 11.

community. Furthermore they act as a central point where separated children can be reunited with their families or a place where affected parents are able to safely leave their children to attend distribution points, find relatives and begin to rebuild their lives.

Bringing children together to play and learn allows them to regain a sense of normality as quickly as possible, through play and child-to-child or child-to-adult interaction. Through play and creative activity in a safe environment, children can process what has happened to them and their families and have an opportunity to express their worries and concerns to peers or trusted adults, an outlet for their emotions. In them quite areas are set aside where children can talk with others or get specialist support.

Child friendly spaces are supervised spaces exclusively for children's play, recreation, non-formal learning and interaction with one another and adult carers. Days are structured so that children of different ages can use particular resources and spaces at specific times, over time play and non-formal learning activities are gradually replaced by more structured ones and formal learning.

Physical protection:

- Provides a safe, structured places for learn and play
- Reaches out to all children, without discrimination
- Offers means to identify children with special needs, such as experience of trauma or family separation
- Engages children in positive alternatives to military recruitment, gangs and drugs
- Care and supervision can be provided by teachers, in consultation with the parent or guardian
- Offers children basic knowledge of health and hygiene
- Can improve children's nutrition by the provision of nutritious daily meals as part of school feeding;
- Prepares children for appropriate work which is not harmful or threatening their health or security

Psychosocial protection:

- Gives children an identity as students, averts inadequacy felt by children out of school
- Provides a venue for expression through play and cultural activities such as sports, music, drama, and art
- Facilitates social integration of vulnerable children such as separated children and former combatants
- Supports social networks and community interaction for children and their families
- Provides a daily routine and offers a sense of the future beyond the immediacy of war or conflict

The protection and support that education offers during an emergency belies the traditional argument that education is less important that than other sectors such as food, sanitation, water and shelter. In fact in the last few years, humanitarian relief has become more sophisticated. It is intended, and expected, to promote human dignity and recovery. It looks at the long-term economic impact of disasters, conflict and displacement on individuals and communities, for example, by addressing problems such as disruption to livelihoods, lack of access to markets and food insecurity. This more sophisticated approach should include access to education. Children's opportunities should not be limited to the traditional emergency response services. Even in the most acute crisis, children should be able to access opportunities that directly support their learning and development. Re-establishing education services as quickly as possible is vital to support children's recovery during or in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

Yet for years the development community has neglected the importance of education for children caught up in emergencies. At best it is seen as of secondary concern in most humanitarian responses. Only a handful of donors explicitly refer to education as part of their humanitarian policy.[2] However, in December 2006, the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) established a cluster for education, thereby endorsing its centrality in all humanitarian responses[3]. This demonstrates a growing international recognition that early investment in education protects children from the most damaging aspects of emergencies.

[2] Canada, Denmark, Japan, Norway and Sweden.
[3] For more information, please go to: http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=115

Education: a right at all times
Not only is the evidence of benefits of education affords a child compelling, education is also their fundament right - universal and indivisible from other rights – no matter what the context and governments and donors have an obligation to fulfil this right.

In 2008 the Special Rapportuer on the Right to Education's chose to focus his annual report the right to education in emergencies[4] highlighting in the reports introduction the "urgent need to redouble efforts to safeguard educational opportunities for those people - especially children, adolescents and young people - who lose any possibility of going to school because their community has been hit by an emergency situation."

The Special Rapportuer's report is a reminder to governments, donors and the international community that rights, including the right to education, are legally binding, universal, inalienable and indivisible. Children have a right to go to school no matter what the context or challenges. We cannot deny these children their right simply because delivery of education in emergency setting is complex; equally we cannot say that other rights are more important and the right to education can wait.

Overcoming misconceptions
Although more are understanding what education in emergencies looks like, it is still often confused with schooling as we traditionally see it in a stable situation. The many facets of emergency education are not as widely known as other sectors – such as emergency shelter, water and sanitation etc. Hence, when disasters occur, it can be regarded as inappropriate and the wrong time. Overcoming misconceptions of what education in emergencies is important, child friendly spaces not the reconstruction of formal classrooms are the priority.

Education is sometimes perceived as 'difficult to do' in an emergency situation – given that by definition it is a set of linked activities that are often more than distribution of supplies but rather may involve a variety of programme components including capacity building (perhaps through training), setting up of learning facilities that require considered engagement with communities and other education stakeholders. It may take longer to be able to see and of course measure the benefits or impacts – compared to the distribution of food, house hold items or health supplies.

Education is not always recognised as a key priority in the earlier days of an emergency and for this reason; it is not always included in the very first assessments of the situation and initial proposals that call for funding to address issues arising.

A relevant, quality response requires a good assessment, careful analysis and programme design – sometimes undertaken when other sectors that are more immediately visible and tangible in delivery.

What it looks like
Although no two responses are likely to be the same, there are some components of an education response that are commonly seen. Recreation is often valued by children in the in and after an emergency situation and hence provision of culturally relevant emergency supplies and supporting children's play and recreation can be a key activity. Establishing the space for education to take part is also often key – this may be in the form of a temporary shelter made from local materials, a tent or other form of shelter. Individuals are needed to teach, care and supervise children – they may need rapid emergency training, support and supervision themselves. Often, key teaching and learning supplies are needed in order to get classes up and running, children purposefully engaged in their learning and teachers teaching with minimum stress. Children and teachers must have access to water and sanitation facilities, and as a minimum standard these should be provided for all. Sometimes education officials require support in order for them to provide quality support and guidance to teachers and to restore and maintain their administrative systems that in turn facilitate effective school operations.

[4] A/HRC/8/10 20 May 2008

Beneficiaries count

If all of the above is not sufficient to ensure education is included in humanitarian responses then the humanitarian community must listen to the voices of affected populations themselves. A core value of international humanitarian policy is responding to the demands of affected populations and time and time again children and their parents prioritise education.

In most communities, especially in smaller rural communities, school represents a focal point. Schools are at the heart of the community and symbolise opportunity for future generation and hope for a better life. Parents and children have aspirations and education is the key to increasing a children ability to participate fully in the life of their society – economically, socially and politically – and in times of crisis evidence shows they prioritise education extremely highly.

Conclusion - from crisis to stability

The benefits of delivering education during a humanitarian crisis are indisputable and importantly it is possible and can support and aid recovery during the crisis and in its aftermath. Delivering education in emergencies is not about building schools it is about providing children with continued opportunities for formal and non-formal learning and development. Disruption to education service can last anywhere from months to years, especially in complex emergencies. According to statistics, the average length for refugee displacement is 17 years.[i] Not providing education can deny an entire generation schooling, literacy and the potential to contribute to the post-conflict reconstruction of their country. Long-term peace-building and economic development requires an educated population.

If education is restored in the initial phase of an emergency, and is part of a continuum from crisis to stability, overall numbers of out of school children will fall worldwide. In countries wracked by long term humanitarian crisis, conflict-affected fragile states, there are almost 40 million children out of school, supporting education from the outset of any emergency can prevent whole generations of missing out the benefits education brings and can help break the cycle of humanitarian crisis.

Education must form part of all humanitarian responses from day one if children are to be protected, have their rights upheld and have an opportunity for a brighter future.

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[i] UNHCR, "56th Session of the Executive Committee: Report on the annual consultations with non-governmental organizations". (2005) Geneva.