

# Education in emergencies: a critical factor in achieving the Millennium Development Goals

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'Education in emergencies' refers to schooling and other structured activities for those whose lives have been thrown into disorder by extreme and difficult circumstances. Education in emergencies work fits squarely within the priorities set out by the Education Section of the Commonwealth, which defines difficult circumstances as those which include "conflict, acute poverty, the aftermath of natural disaster, special needs for the disabled, geographic remoteness, and the prevalence of diseases such as TB, Malaria and HIV/AIDS". This article argues for a higher priority to be given to education in times of crisis, including funding, and outlines the work of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). A case study is included describing the priority of education in Sierra Leone for Liberian refugees.

**C**ommunities, governments, and national and international humanitarian and educational development organisations can be important actors in the continuation of structured learning in times of acute crisis and long-term instability. It is clear is that education in emergencies work is not only relevant in the short-term response to an acute crisis, but is equally required to address educational needs over the long term, during either chronic instability or post-crisis recovery and reconstruction. In this article, we use the term crisis and post-crisis to encompass the range of contexts in which education in emergencies work is relevant.

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## The importance of education in emergencies

When education is supported in crisis and post-crisis contexts it can save and sustain lives, contribute to meeting global development goals, and support lasting peace and development. The quality of education is an important factor in realising all these benefits. As an inherently political activity, education has the potential to increase social marginalisation and intolerance depending on content of the education (e.g. curriculum), the process through which education takes place (e.g. pedagogy, safety of children in school), and the level of equity in delivering education (e.g. access). In all contexts, including crisis and post-crisis, education which is safe, relevant, equitable and promotes tolerance is the foundation for achieving the benefits associated with education.

### Education saves and sustains lives

Education can play a crucial role in saving and sustaining lives in the wake of crisis by providing physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection for affected communities - particularly children and youth. It sustains life by providing security and a sense of normalcy for children, instilling dignity and a sense of

purpose for the future. Education in these contexts can facilitate the development of academic, vocational and life skills among participants, which strengthens learners' abilities to become educated and productive community members who can make informed decisions about their economic opportunities, personal health and security. It can save lives by creating safe learning environments within the spaces established for formal and non-formal educational activities, which can protect against exploitation and harm, and lessen the chances that children will be recruited into fighting groups or gangs or become victims of sexual violence or exploitation.

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### Education is a right

The countless benefits derived from formal and non-formal education are underpinned by international human rights and humanitarian frameworks that not only enshrine the right to education but also ensure its provision within emergency situations (e.g. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Geneva Conventions). The global development targets outlined in the Education for All (EFA) agenda and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which build upon various human rights and legal frameworks and strive to eliminate existing educational inequities – apply as equally to stable countries as to those experiencing crisis, struggling to stabilise or moving towards reconstruction. Despite these legal, human rights and development frameworks, large percentages of children and youth are denied educational opportunities; and global educational development targets will only be met with attention to education in crisis and post-crisis contexts.

### Education is essential for lasting peace and development

Education is one of the principal losses in emergency situations, and the lack of that education, too often stretching into the post-

conflict phase, endangers the peaceful recovery of any society. Given that the average length of refugee displacement is currently 17 years, not providing education denies an entire generation schooling, literacy and the potential for increased wage-earning. A lack of educational opportunities prevents people from acquiring the needed skills to rebuild their country once peace has been secured, and significantly jeopardises the long-term peace-building process.

### Existing gaps and ongoing challenges

#### Relief vs. development?

Although the provision of education within crisis and post-crisis situations has garnered increasing support within the humanitarian community, figures prominently within international human rights' conventions and has become a priority for several national governments' educational policies (including the Commonwealth), many challenges remain. The primary challenge is illuminated in the traditional relief-or-development debate about when and how to provide education. The lack of consensus about timing, financial support and service delivery often causes education to fall through the cracks. However, the common assumption that education is not life-saving and inherently too long-term an enterprise to support during emergencies is increasingly contested in both relief and development discourses. These challenges will be increasingly resolved as the field of education in emergencies coheres and strengthens. The work on fragile states currently being carried out by various governments will further contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role that education plays in crisis and post-crisis contexts.

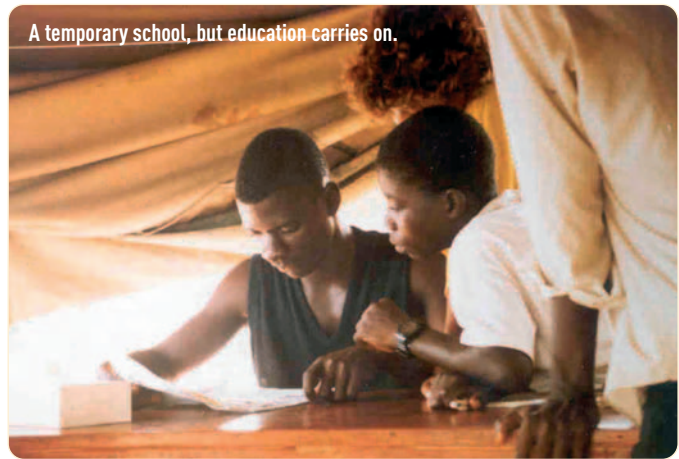
**Despite legal, human rights and development frameworks, large percentages of children and youth are denied educational opportunities.**

#### Progress towards EFA and the MDGs

Worldwide, approximately 120 million children are estimated to be out of school. More than half of these children – two-thirds of them girls – are living in countries engaged in or recovering from conflict. Many of those in areas of conflict are doubly disadvantaged by being refugees or internally displaced. In just 10 countries with conflict-induced displacement in 2002, 27 million children had no access to formal schooling. While these numbers are staggering, they worsen significantly after primary school; of the approximately 1.5 million refugee children worldwide who are beyond primary school age (ages 12 to 17), only three per cent have access to education. In addition to these alarming numbers, the toll exacted by natural disasters further exacerbates the situation. The Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan, and the hurricanes that have devastated Central and North America made this point abundantly clear over the last two years. Global EFA and MDG goals on education will not be achieved unless concerted attention is paid to education in crisis and post-crisis contexts.

#### Funding for education in emergencies: major gaps

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, only 1.5 per cent of the total global humanitarian contributions in 2004 [per sector] went to education. Traditionally, education in emergency situations has not been considered a priority, but rather a long-term development activity as discussed above. Within the United States government, for instance, the US Agency for International Development's Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA),



Credit: International Rescue Committee

which is responsible for providing humanitarian assistance, does not have an education mandate, and thus will neither carry out nor fund education-related activities during humanitarian response. Instead, the education mandate within the US government exists within the Bureau for Economic Growth, Agriculture, and Trade (EGAT), which works in developing and transition countries, not emergency situations.

The scarcity of funding for education-related activities caused by this type of policy inconsistency greatly limits the extent to which education in emergencies can be provided. It also hampers efforts to enhance communication and improve coordination across agencies that work in this field due to competition for limited resources. Fortunately, there are examples of inter-agency collaboration in the planning and delivery of education emergencies that merit attention.

### Progress towards supporting education in emergencies

In order to realise the potential that education in emergencies offers and rejuvenate efforts to achieve the EFA-MDG goals, especially within countries experiencing or recovering from crisis, the various stakeholders at the international, regional, national and local levels must engage in and strengthen collaborative partnerships and share best practices and lessons learned thus far. The following case study carried out under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee purports to contribute to this information-sharing process.

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The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a humanitarian agency dedicated to supporting people uprooted or affected by conflict and oppression. The IRC is a leader in the education in emergencies field and for the past 30 years has supported children and youth living in conflict zones to access quality education. Since 1992, IRC has worked with Sierra Leoneans to support access to quality education for those most affected by violence and war, first with Sierra Leonean refugees living in Guinea and then in 2001 with Sierra Leonean returnee communities in some of the hardest hit regions of the country.

#### Sierra Leone

The West African nation of Sierra Leone joined the Commonwealth in 1961 and is no stranger to crisis and post-





Primary school student learning to read.

crisis situations. Suffering a brutal civil war within its own country between 1991 and 2001, Sierra Leone is currently focused on the recovery and development of its decimated infrastructure and social services, including the education system. In addition to its own challenges, Sierra Leone has over the years also hosted thousands of refugees from neighbouring Liberia. Currently there are approximately 50,000 Liberian refugees living in Sierra Leone (UNHCR, 2006).

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The Sierra Leonean government is working to ensure that Liberian refugee children and youth have access to recognised, formal education opportunities. Instead of treating these Liberian refugee children and youth as burdens on an already overstretched education system, the government is treating education for these refugees as an opportunity to collaboratively work with partner organisations to simultaneously strengthen the Sierra Leonean education system and ensure Liberian children and youth have access to school. One example of this is the refugee education project implemented by the IRC, with the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Dutch Foundation for Refugees – Stichting Vluchteling (SV) and the Sierra Leonean government, especially the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST).

Since late 2001, IRC has been working with communities and local and national government to ensure adequate levels of primary and secondary education for Liberian refugees in eight refugee camps in the Southern and Eastern regions of Sierra Leone. The eight refugee camps all have primary schools and

junior secondary schools but some lack senior secondary schools. In some camps where there were no secondary school facilities, IRC established such facilities with the approval from MEST and are run according to the national education policy and use MEST-approved teaching curricula syllabuses. Those students who would like to continue their studies but only have access to primary school in the camps are allowed to attend Sierra Leonean junior and senior secondary schools located in the towns nearby the camps.

Using the Sierra Leonean curriculum to educate Liberian children and youth is appropriate both in terms of language – both countries' education system is in English – and in terms of official certification – both countries use the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) to certify achievement. It also means that Liberian refugee children and youth learning in

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primary school enables them to easily integrate into Sierra Leonean schools.

IRC works closely with MEST to ensure that supportive government educational policies – such as allowing refugee students to attend Sierra Leonean schools and to sit for WAEC exams – are carried out in communities. It also works with MEST to build the capacity of the local education system – both within the camps and within the nearby communities – through on-going teacher education via both pre-service and in-service training, provision of key educational materials to schools and students, and training and mentoring of School Management Committees (SMC), Community Teachers Association (CTA) and district education officials. IRC and ministry staff utilised the INEE Minimum Standards (see below) as a resource to guide these activities.

Using an integrated approach to support refugee education has helped to increase good will and cooperation between Liberian refugee and Sierra Leonean communities. By working together, both communities are better able to address the common difficulties of supporting schooling for their children and youth; in turn, their appreciation, support and understanding for each other has grown.

### **The forum for global collaboration on education in emergencies**

Along with many others, the staff of IRC Sierra Leone enrich their work by accessing important education programme tools and sharing ideas across regions and organisations through the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). INEE is a global, open network of non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, donors, practitioners, researchers and individuals from affected communities working together to ensure the right to education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction. INEE was created to overcome some of the challenges outlined in this article by improving inter-agency communication and collaboration, reducing duplication of activities and advocating among donors for the inclusion and support of education in humanitarian response. Among INEE's most widely known achievements is the development of the Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction. The INEE Minimum Standards were modelled after the Sphere Project and were developed through the participation of over 2,250 individuals from more than 50 countries. The standards were developed predominantly

for emergency response, but feedback collected to date illustrates their usefulness and relevance for assessment, project planning, programme design, monitoring, evaluation, preparedness and advocacy. INEE is currently building upon these efforts by coordinating regional training of the trainers' workshops on the Minimum Standards, in which ministry

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participation is strongly encouraged, and it continues to be a powerful forum for collaboration and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

### Recommendations

It is evident from the six action areas identified during the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2003 that much thought has been given to the achievement of the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals. These six action areas are equally relevant for education in emergencies and include: achieving universal primary education, eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education, improving quality in education, using distance learning to overcome barriers, supporting education in difficult circumstances and mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems. The following recommendations geared towards the field of education in emergencies and gleaned from the experiences in Sierra Leone should serve to reinforce and complement the Commonwealth's recognition and efforts thus far.

1. Governments in affected countries, donors, and international humanitarian agencies should view education in emergencies as an opportunity to strengthen their own Ministries of Education and should actively support education for those affected by crisis/post-crisis. This includes leveraging the learning and skills refugees have acquired in exile during post-crisis recovery and reconstruction.
2. Governments that are affected by an emergency or crisis should establish flexible policies so that education in emergencies can be implemented in the most appropriate way (e.g. allow refugee students to sit for exams and be integrated into the national school system when possible, certify teachers trained in exile).
3. Governments and donors should commit the necessary financial resources to ensure that education in emergency activities are prioritised and supported over the long-term in their efforts to achieve EFA and the MDGs.
4. Governments and donors should conduct and support research endeavours in this new field of education in emergencies in order to contribute to its development and better inform the policymaking process.

5. Donors should continue to actively support inter-agency collaboration through forums such as the INEE.

In addition to these recommendations, a number of resources are available to assist Commonwealth countries' efforts to enhance and improve education in emergencies. One, INEE's Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction, discussed above, provide a common framework within which ministries, practitioners and community members can develop their plans. Two, UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) will be releasing a new Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction in the coming months which will serve primarily as a capacity-building tool for Ministry of Education staff. Three, the Commonwealth recently released a new publication – Achieving Education for All: Good Practice in Crisis and Post-Conflict Resolution – to assist education policymakers and practitioners in the Commonwealth with their initiatives.

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**Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)** is an open network of UN agencies, NGOs, donors, practitioners, researchers and individuals from affected populations working together to ensure the right to education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction.

**International Rescue Committee (IRC)**, founded in 1933, is a global leader in emergency relief, rehabilitation, protection of human rights, post-conflict development, resettlement services and advocacy for those uprooted or affected by conflict and oppression. The IRC has supported these communities to access education for the past 30 years and currently has education programmes in over 20 countries around the world.

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