

RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS.

Reflections from the experience.

Contribution for the CRC's Day of General Discussion
September 19th, 2008

1. Introduction.

This document has been prepared for a group of faith based organization in Geneva¹, based on the experience of their members in the field², providing humanitarian aid and developing post-emergency projects in access of natural disasters and / or armed conflict.

2. Justification of the importance of education in emergency situations.

Emergencies caused by natural disasters have a strong impact on public infrastructure. There is a need to leave, whether temporally or definitively, the affected area. This situation has a severe impact in people's way of living and routines. Often without notice, from one day to the other, they have to adapt themselves to a different situation. The emergency forces them to leave their houses, to abandon (or lose) their belongings, to be sent to a displaced camp. This new situation makes them to experience a variety of feelings, like confusion, anxiety or fear. When they have lost members of their family, or they have lost contact with them, their frame of mind can be seriously disturbed. And this is true for all people affected: for adults as well as children.

Psycho-social support should be organized and provided to victims of natural disasters or armed conflicts. While initial humanitarian actions that are taken should cover essential needs like shelter, food and first aid; our experience shows that activities like talking to someone, praying together or speaking about their fears and expectations, could strongly help to provide serenity and calm even at the first moments of the tragedy. Such activities could mean a support that can help people to be ready to face the situation. It is possible to learn in a situation of natural disaster. And, if it is possible to learn, we can speak about education.

Education goes beyond the limits of a classroom. It is not only about a teacher and a student, and a book and a pencil between them. Education is a process of learning, a process of integration of knowledge, experiences and beliefs that produce a change in our behavior. It happens at any moment and circumstance. And it is strongly necessary in situations of emergencies, due to the challenge that a new situation presents to everyone in a community. Recalling the experience of the ancient people who had an attitude of respect and listening to the elders of the community, we recognize the importance that the role of a teacher has in organizing activities in a school or in giving instructions to the students and evaluating their achievements. But, in situations that are far from being ordinary ones, that role should be adapted to the "new" circumstances to better respond to the different needs of the people affected, with a special emphasis in children.

¹ AVSI, Edmund Rice International, FMS International, Vides International.

² The organizations that have participated in the redaction of this document have had experience providing and/or supporting education in emergency situations in cases of natural disasters (in Africa, Asia and Latin America) and armed conflict (in Africa)

Faith based organizations have developed a solid work ethic to support victims in situations of emergencies: floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, as well as armed conflicts, in many places around the world. We have provided humanitarian support and means, and we have participated in reconstruction processes after the first critical moments. We want to share what we have learned helping others to recover from disasters, and we want to reaffirm the ideas that “*education lies at the heart of the development of every child*”³. Education should be taken into account in emergency situations, not only because it is good; it is their right.

3. Guaranteeing the right to education in emergencies.

Emergencies and prolonged conflicts pose a serious threat to children that fall behind in their studies with the significant risk of great social and economic future losses of the individual and for the society; the impact on school infrastructure and human resources can also be considerable.

When mentioning education or educational activities in situations of emergency here, we have in mind the framework provided by the Convention of the Right of the Child. Neither a natural disaster nor an armed conflict represents a condition that cancels the right of children to education. Even in special conditions (i.e. displaced or refugee camps and temporary shelters) children must enjoy education. It is understandable that they will not enjoy ordinary conditions, due to the circumstances, but our experience in the field shows that it is possible to create, with limited resources, sufficient conditions to accomplish in a satisfactory way the provisions of the CRC and other international standards, particularly regarding aims of education, as are stated in Art. 29 of the CRC.

Education must promote, first of all, the comprehensive development of every child’s personality. This is based in the understanding of the human person that includes “talents, mental and physical abilities”, as well as values like understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship with all people and with the environment. We find here the affirmation of the spiritual dimension of the person, also included in other articles of the Convention that has a powerful meaning in children’s development. Education in emergency situations must take into account this dimension: cultural values, religious beliefs and other forms of expression of it. Interventions in education must have a holistic approach that support children, families and communities to improve their present and their future well being.

Regarding the contents of education in emergencies, we consider convenient to start with common activities to give opportunity to all children to participate, to feel confident and secure in this new “school”. Groups are separated regarding age in a first stage, and the contents prioritize topics related to the emergency itself, understanding the situation, emergency and evacuation procedures, basic health, sanitation and hygiene, security, personal and social skills, and building relationships among them. It is also important to include respect and positive relationship with natural environment. Through this initial educational activities children realize things that are (still) under their control (i.e. their feelings, ability to make choices), that the emergency is not an irreversible fatality and they can recognize the importance of participation and collaboration among all for the common wellbeing.

³ Mgr. Celestino Migliore, permanent Representative of the Holy See to the UN, addressing the General Assembly on December 17th, 2007, with the occasion of the follow-up of the 2002 Special Session on Children.

In this particular, it is worthy to mention that we have found erroneous ideas that make people believe in natural disasters as “divine punishments” and premonitions of the end of the world. Such ideas are often part of a “*collective conscience*” that is easily spread and get followers, promoting more fears, anxiety and, in some cases, desperation. Appropriate explanations of causes of natural disasters, or armed conflict can bring a better understanding of the phenomena and adopt a more reasonable attitude before it. Religious ideas or positions that promote fear should be avoided.

Some of our organizations have developed specific curricula for teacher’s training, as well as for administrators and social workers containing general teaching methods, child-centered principles and description of the role of the educator in emergency situations⁴. Training manuals for psycho-social support through education have been also developed.

After an evaluation of specific needs, other groups can be formed according to particular situations: schooling levels, disabilities, etc. In our experience, some children want to continue with “formal education”. Depending on specific situations, and if resources are available (especially teachers and books), those children have had the opportunity to cover essential contents and it is possible to get official recognition of those studies. This particular situation needs strong support from different actors, especially local authorities.

We are strongly convinced that access and quality of basic education and vocational training are essential to promoting self-sufficiency that is necessary to diminish the risk of creating dependency, especially when irregular situation last a long period of time.

4. Education needs coordination.

In our experience, it has been important to coordinate with those responsible for the displaced camp, to obtain authorization to develop activities with children. This organization should count on different actors’ participation: government disaster coordinators, local authorities, humanitarian agencies, civil protection agencies and displaced persons. Among the several commissions that should be established for coordination activities, one dedicated to Education for children should be appointed. This commission should be in charge of coordinating activities with children according to the needs, to detect human resources in the sector (teachers, parents, youth people) that can help to carry out different tasks, to establish communication with NGOs or other groups that want to collaborate in this particular area, and to receive and to take care of the material for educational activities.

It is important to avoid unnecessary multiplication of activities, which is inappropriate and useless. If there are many different groups, without coordination, then it is probably that some children could not be included. Organization also helps to create a better distribution of resources available.

⁴ AVSI has collaborated with the network for education in emergencies (INEE) since 2004. Two publications produced by AVSI team in Uganda have been included in their Technical Kit on Learning for Education in Emergencies. The Handbook for Teachers and the Training Manual for Teachers, draw upon the authors’ years of experience working together in Northern Uganda and Rwanda, with displaced communities.

5. To create “educational spaces” if there are no schools.

School is not only the place where children learn things, but also a way to encounter and share life experiences with the guidance of adults (teachers). In many cases, the school is the place where they spent most of their time.

In emergency situations, it could be possible not to fulfill all characteristics necessary to ensure an adequate educational environment, due to the scarce of resources, or because schools are often used as shelter for displaced people. In this case, several measures must be taken in order to have enough conditions to provide an “educational environment” for children. If it not possible to preserve the entire school for the organization of educational activities for children and young people that have been affected by the emergency, an adequate space should be dedicated to this: i.e. a church or a tent. The better the conditions which this “educational space” has, the better will it be able to accomplish its function. We have found that children promptly recognize this space as “*the school*”, and they will soon consider it as a significative place where they can learn, and have fun at the same time. In a situation that they can feel as chaotic, the time they spent at school and being involved in educational activities can give to them a sense of control and normality, having a positive impact in their wellbeing.

It is worthy to mention the existence of useful checklists to asses the needs, and the conditions of those “educational spaces”, regarding facilities, material and human resources, among others⁵.

It is also necessary to asses the damages suffered by school buildings and to establish educational needs of the population in order to prepare a report to concerned authorities for post-emergency reconstruction. This report should be prepared with participation of the different stakeholders, in order to have a better understanding of what is needed. It is convenient to maintain a three-party dialogue between Ministry of Education’s authorities, local community and organizations (NGO or others) that will help to reconstruct the schools.

6. Education and Families

Education in emergencies should also take into account the parents. They are the first responsible for the upbringing of their children. Our experience shows that education can help to strengthen family’s liaisons, when inviting children to share their experiences with their parents. This can promote dialogue and a bigger understanding within the family.

It is important to detect parent’s educational needs, in order to provide education for them if necessary, and according to the particularities of their situation (time availability, responsibilities to fulfill, etc). In general terms, educational activities can be promoted to reflect together about topics such as responsible parenting, interpersonal skills, health, etc.

Our experience shows that parents request support to initiate new jobs. Some of our organizations have help them to organize small cooperatives, providing them training in administrative skills or other training related to work, and some funds to start alternative occupations. This has had a positive impact in the post-emergency education of their children preventing child labour and contributing to better conditions of living for families during reconstruction stages.

⁵ Cfr. INEE (2004), Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction. Paris: UNESCO.

7. Protected and protective educational environments

The entire community should participate in making the environment a “safe place” to live. Being in particularly difficult conditions, mutual collaboration is required to build the common good. This must be especially true for the educational space (or spaces, if more than one) that have been set in the area. Parents, authorities, relief organizations... and all members of the community should contribute to the respect of these educational places, and to make them safe environments for children.

These educational spaces can provide services for other members of the community, as place where meetings can be held, public announcements can be communicated and instructions given. These spaces can also host other community activities. It is important to have a good coordination between people in charge and to avoid unnecessary interruptions of the educational activities where children participate.

The role of educators is particularly important in conflict and emergency settings, and there is a need for teachers to be trained on psycho-social elements of teaching children in those circumstances.

8. Resilience: Accompanying the self strength

Resilience can be defined as “*the capacity of an individual person or a social system to grow and develop in the face of difficult circumstances*”⁶. In situations of emergency, this personal and social capacity should be “turned up” to help children to face the new situation. Resilience is a personal strength that helps to defeat adversity and it lies inside each one. This capacity, by itself, does not substitute for governments’ responsibility to fulfill their international obligations regarding human rights, particularly the right to education in any situation. Both dimensions, the personal strength and the social environment conditions, are necessary and support the one to the other.

In emergency situations, educational activities including cultural and leisure activities, cooperative games and sports can promote self-efficacy and self-esteem and have an important role in enhancing children’s resilience. Education in emergencies can provide the space, the time and the opportunity to make sense of the events that are happening around them and to find ways to overcome difficulties. In addition to this, the presence of significant adults around them can have a positive impact in the process of understanding and overcoming the difficulties they are facing due to the emergency.

9. Conclusions

Right to education can not be cancelled because of a natural disaster or an armed conflict. It must be considered as an essential element in the comprehensive plan to deal with emergencies. Education refers to a learning process, including different activities that make possible the integration of new knowledge, feelings or experiences and makes possible a change in the person. Children should enjoy this right in any circumstance, and especially in emergency situations. With education, and through it, they will have the opportunity of continuing developing up to the maximum of their possibilities, the integrality of their persons, life and communities.

⁶ Vanistendael, S. (2003) Resilience and spirituality. Geneva, BICE.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. **Education in emergencies should have a comprehensive approach, taking into account the physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual wellbeing of children**, as it is stated in art. 27 of the CRC. It also has to take into account the aims of Education (art. 29 of the CRC).
- b. **Education in first stage of emergency**, should
 - i. promote a better understanding of the situation;
 - ii. help to develop personal and social skills;
 - iii. help a better understanding of security procedures.
 - iv. promote self care: hygiene, sanitation and nutrition, and respect for natural environment.
- c. **Organization involving the different stakeholders should be encouraged**. It is fundamental to ensure a better distribution of resources, and to ensure a good coordination among the different groups providing education.
- d. **Parents should be involved and taken into account in the educational process in emergency situations**. Education is not an isolated process only for children, and must involve the parents. Realizing children's right to education it is possible to have positive impact in families promoting processes of education for them, also. This is going to diminish child labour and encourage positive parenting, which represent a benefit for children.
- e. **Education can be an excellent mean to enhance children's resilience**. With education, we are empowering them to be the protagonist of their own life, to give a sense of meaning to them, and to build, together with others, better conditions of living in society.
- f. **In emergency situations, States should guarantee the right to education for children**. If education has been interrupted due to an emergency situation, children should have the opportunity to continue it, during the first stages of the recovery and after it. Special measures, like the official recognition of the education received in a displaced camp or others according to each particular situation, must be implemented to ensure this right to children.