



Arigatou International

## Committee on the Rights of the Child

Day of General Discussion - 19 September 2008

“The Right of the Child to Education in Emergency Situations”

### Content and quality of education provided for children in emergency situations’

#### Introduction

**Arigatou International** welcomes the theme of this Day of General Discussion: The Right of the Child to Education in Emergency Situations and acknowledges especially the emphasis it gives to quality education. It is a unique opportunity to share experiences in the field and offer recommendations for further actions towards providing children with an education that is not only accessible but appropriate to the needs and challenges they face in emergency situations.

Arigatou International is a faith based NGO working for the rights and wellbeing of children, through its work contributing to the implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and poverty eradication. Through its **Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)**, Arigatou International is promoting and facilitating cooperation and advocacy for children’s rights in networking with individuals and organizations working for children, including government agencies, international organizations and NGOs. Arigatou International facilitates concrete initiatives for children on a grassroots level in seven regions of the world as well as on a global scale.

Arigatou International has recently developed and published an educational manual, ***Learning to Live Together***, promoting intercultural and inter-religious learning as a contribution to the implementation of the CRC to realize the right of the child to full and healthy physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development and to quality education as set in Article 29 of the CRC.

The new ethics education programme has been developed in close cooperation with UNESCO and UNICEF. It seeks to help children and youth to respect themselves and others, empathize with others, encouraging greater individual and collective responsibility and fostering a spirit of reconciliation. It provides a vehicle for children and youth to encounter and examine values with peers from different religious, cultural, and social backgrounds, and to develop skills to deal with situations that affect them and apply what they learn to the real challenges of daily life.

*Learning to Live Together* has been field-tested in a variety of contexts, of which some can be categorized as emergency situations. This is especially true for the programmes run by GNRC in South Asia in the aftermath of the Tsunami, both in Sri Lanka and in India. The material has been used as preventive measures in conflict ridden areas like Zanzibar and Somalia. In Latin America, the focus has been on using ethics and quality education to address violence against children and the issue of poverty, in itself a root cause for many conflict situations.

The manual *Learning to Live Together* is intended to be used in formal, informal and non-formal educational settings. The intercultural and inter-religious dimension of the ethics and quality education programme is important in situations where cultural and religious identities can be used to intensify conflicts and fuel violence as a solution.

Though we could share many examples from instances where the educational manual has been used, we have chosen to focus this paper on the need to **complement, redesign and adapt educational curricula in schools, where many of the children have a refugee experience. It is here that we want to** promote learning that is relevant and adequate for children. Drawing from our experience using *Learning to Live Together* in refugee areas, we want to make recommendations on the **content and methodologies** needed to provide quality education in emergency situations.

We also want to emphasise the inclusion of ethics and quality education to help refugee children adapt to a new environment, understand the situation they are going through and develop skills to deal with difficulties and challenges. This paper argues **the need to prepare schools, teachers and children to cope with diversity** in situations informed by emergency situations.

#### - **Challenges implementing quality education in emergency situations**

According to UNESCO, education of high quality refers to the development of tools for life enabling learners to feel confident and motivated to use the skills they have acquired. It also refers to the development of our behaviour based on positive values and understanding, the respect for people, and their rights, the environment, the past and the future.

The following case study pertaining to the implementation of an ethics education programme in a refugee area in Ecuador highlights the difficulties refugee children face adapting to the new environment and the type of education that is needed for them to enhance their capacity to overcome the situation they have gone through.

This case study shows how, through the ethics education programmes, children are empowered to fully participate in society, learning to respect themselves and others and to get to know about their rights, also when violated. Ethics and quality education can contribute to the integration and adaptation of children in new situations.

### ***Ecuadorian case study***

An intercultural and interfaith programme for ethics education was initiated by GNRC in February 2007 in San Lorenzo, Ecuador. The place is close to the volatile border to Colombia. The objective of the programme was to create a dialogue process between Ecuadorian and Colombian refugee children and to provide space for learning about one another, mitigating the negative images of the “other”. The programme aims at nurturing in children their capacity to empathize with others and to develop skills to resolve problems in non-violent ways.

In 2007, as many as 500,000 Colombians in Ecuador and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 250,000 were in need of international protection. More than 14,700 were recognized as refugees and more than 7,600 were asylum seekers with pending claims. In San Lorenzo, in the northern coastal area of Ecuador, the situation is critical with hundreds of refugees arriving every month due to the confrontations between guerrilla groups and army forces in the department of Nariño in Colombia. It is estimated that around 35% of the refugees in San Lorenzo are children.

The situation of the refugees in the bordering areas is deteriorating by the lack of job opportunities, access to social services and poor infrastructure. Refugees are afraid to formally register in Ecuador fearing deportation if their status as refugees or asylum seekers is neglected, or to be tracked by guerrilla groups. This creates difficulties for children to access schools, where legal papers are required to get admission. According to the US Committee for Refugees and Children, the Ecuadorian education laws allowed refugee children to attend public schools, but also required school diplomas from the country of birth. In 2002, the Ministry of Education agreed to exempt primary school refugee children from any fees or requirements of documentation from previous schools the children had attended. While well intended, schools nevertheless often ignored the ministerial agreements and made refugee children pay extra fees or right out denied them admission.

This situation places children under siege and make their access to education difficult and sometimes impossible. The availability of schools is also a problem, whenever the number of refugee children exceeds the capacity of the schools and the willingness of the host country to accept them in the education system. Few resources have been allocated to schools in areas where Colombian refugees have settled in order to meet the demands of a higher number of students and the needs of this new population.

In schools, discrimination against Colombian children is present on a daily basis due to the stereotypes Ecuadorian children have from their parents and the society itself. Colombian refugee children are the victims of violence and have not had a peaceful childhood. Fleeing violence from one place to another can cause traumatic memories and psychological problems that affect the learning process and adaptation of children into the new environment.

Children who have been exposed to violent conflicts and fled their countries of origin need **learning space to reflect about the own reality** and learn how they can overcome fear, hatred, resentment and become included in the community.

The program on ethics education in San Lorenzo involved displaced Colombian parents and children now living in the area, local teachers and Ecuadorian children. Through **interactive methodologies** and following the modules of *Learning to Live Together* participants discussed differences and commonalities, mapped out the issues that affect them and reflected on their root causes. They proposed possible ways to deal with differences and work together to reduce violence and inequalities in the region.

During the programme, children shared their experiences and fears, revealing many issues that affect them and sometimes make them resentful and intolerant to others: discriminatory attitudes of Colombian children towards Afro descendants living in San Lorenzo, violent behaviours, hatred of guerrilla members and paramilitaries, problems of acceptance of Colombian refugee children and physical and psychological violence perpetuated by parents to the children.

Several activities with children in San Lorenzo were carried out during 2007 in order to complement the inexistent curriculum in peace education and the lack of educational resources. Parents were also invited to the workshops and received training on non-violent alternatives, reconciliation and how to deal with differences.

Additional **trainings for teachers** were organized to provide them with tools on how to deal with diversity in schools, how to analyze together with the children the conflicts and situations that affect them, how to develop skills in children to transform violent situations and how to nurture self esteem and knowledge about their rights and responsibilities.

The programme on ethics education has contributed to empower children to take initiatives in their town and participate fully in community life. The programme has also resulted in the commitment of schools and teachers to include more ethics education programmes and the willingness of the parents to continue participating.

- **Appropriate methods of learning and teaching in emergency situations**

In refugee settlements located in areas with scarce resources and economic deprivation, there is a **demand to train educators** on how to deal with refugee children and how to create safe environments in the schools for the interaction among students. Many teachers lack the skills to deal with minorities, especially when the interaction with those minorities is forced by an emergency situation and challenges their *status quo*.

Children's education in emergency situations requires **learning methodologies that encourage critical thinking and the development of meta-cognitive skills**. It also requires **turning from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach**, where knowledge is constructed and shared. This approach demands new teaching skills from educators and changes in the educational curricula that sometimes schools fail to provide and facilitate.

*Learning to Live Together* incorporates both traditional and modern methodologies that provide space for exchange, interaction, encounter, discovery, critical thinking, reflection and action. The methodologies place the individual in a self-driven learning process, conducted in relation to others. It also helps develop skills, enhance participants' knowledge, and to nurture attitudes that empower them to learn to live and act in a plural society.

If schools are available in the area where the refugees are settled, the main requirement is to **complement, redesign or adapt the curricula to include subjects dealing with the new reality of the society**. Children need to learn about the problems that affect their daily lives, understand migration issues that shape their country and region, and get equipped to deal with diversity in order to respond peacefully to the conflicts that may arise from the new interactions.

**Ethics education** in emergency situations is a *sine qua non* for creating inclusive societies that are welcoming and accepting, and for nurturing the capacity in children to be empathetic to others in need. It is also important for children who have experienced violence and whose rights have been violated equipping them to develop resilience, coping with fears and distress and to develop their ability to reconcile with others. The use of introspective methods are needed to help children in emergency situations enhance or recover their self-esteem and their sense of pride in their families, communities, cultures and religions, which in many cases has been lost.

The use of real case studies, discussions about social issues, debates, open dialogues, role-playing, simulations, appreciative inquiry or problem solving exercises are conducive methodologies for education of children in emergency situations. **Interactive techniques** that allow them to express themselves, learn about their rights and responsibilities and open up to the new environment, are adequate for preparing the space for their adaptation and full involvement in society.

In the case of unavailability of schools or inability to receive refugee children, non-formal education plays a significant role in creating learning spaces for children and in helping them to adapt to the new environment. NGOs can facilitate training for teachers and provide space for learning, without the requirements that sometimes can be constraining.

Partnerships between public schools and NGOs are needed to facilitate the implementation of quality education based on ethics and peace educational programmes.

## - **The role of non-formal education**

Learning space outside the formal school system that provide education and skills development to out-of-school children and young people, and others who are marginalized and vulnerable (such as refugees, migrants and orphans), can catalyse new ways of acquiring knowledge, positive attitudes, tolerance and understanding, as well as promote behavioural change.

Faith-based organisations, youth groups, peace clubs and other similar types of educational settings are important in promoting ethics through interfaith and intercultural learning. Young people often attend these groups voluntarily to raise and discuss social issues in an open environment. These factors make these groups an ideal place in which to activate young people's ability to respond to the needs of their societies.

Debates, open discussions, round tables and joint initiatives may take place more easily in non-formal settings, providing opportunities to promote critical thinking and dialogue.

## - **Role of faith-based organisations and NGOs**

Faith-based NGOs and organisations need to be aware of a particular complexity: the dynamic of the encounter of faiths present in emergency situations. The support provided and services rendered must not in any way be used for proselytisation or propagation of a specific conviction. The vulnerability of those in need must not be used for ulterior motives or to create dependencies. This is especially important when it comes to working with children or being involved in educational programmes, whether it is formal education in schools or non-formal education in various settings.

Arigatou International is an international faith-based NGO that applies an intercultural and inter-religious approach to all its work. Even though the initiative comes out of one particular religious tradition, Arigatou International has made it a principle to work together with people of different cultural and religious traditions in all its work. The same applies to the ethics education manual, which has been developed by a group of scholars, pedagogues and educators from different religious and secular traditions to provide tools for educators to:

- strengthen the capacity of children and young people to make well-grounded ethical decisions based on values that promote respect for other cultures and beliefs.
- empower children and young people to engage in dialogue – to listen and to talk – as a means of developing greater sensitivity to differences and an understanding of others.
- nurture children's and young people's ability to respond to the needs of their societies with an attitude of reconciliation and respect for diversity and to contribute, in this manner, to a culture of peace.

This is the Arigatou International contribution to quality education.

## **ANNEX 1**

### **- Recommendations to the Committee**

#### **Arigatou International recommends**

1. A revision of school curricula in areas affected by emergency situations to include ethics and peace education
2. Pre-service and in-service training for teachers to assure the use of methodologies needed to provide quality education in emergency situations
3. Partnerships with NGOs and faith-based organizations to provide non-formal intercultural and inter-religious education and to prepare schools, teachers and children to cope with diversity