

Contribution of the International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE), International Catholic Migration Commission, International Organization for the Right of Education and Freedom of Education (OIDEL), International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education and Development (VIDES), International Association of Charities, New Humanity, Bureau of International Solidarity of the Marist brothers, Center for Migration Studies, Association de Volontaires pour le Service International (AVSI), Mouvement International d'Apostolat des Enfants (MIDADE), Réseau Crescendo, Confédération Internationale de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul, Franciscans International¹
to the

**Committee on the Rights of the Child
Day of General Discussion
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**THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD TO EDUCATION IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS:
REFLECTIONS FROM OUR GRASSROOTS EXPERIENCE¹**

1. Justification of the importance of education in emergency situations

Emergencies caused by natural disasters or armed conflicts 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 on people's living conditions: they have to leave their homes, to abandon (or lose) their belongings, to be sent to a camp. They experience a variety of feelings such as confusion, anxiety or fear. When they lose some members of their family, or contact with them, their mind frame can be seriously disturbed unless an adapted psychosocial support is granted to them.

While initial humanitarian actions cover basic needs like shelter, food and first aid, on the other hand, a careful listening, joint prayers, sharing fears and expectations, play an essential role in brightening people up even during the first moments of the tragedy. 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, or between a book and a pencil. Education is a process of learning, a process of integration of knowledge, experiences and beliefs that produce a behavioral change. It happens at any moment and circumstance. Recalling the traditional attitudes of respect and listening to the elders of the community, we recognize the important role that a teacher has in organizing activities in a school or in giving instructions to students and evaluating their achievements. However, 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 affected people, in particular children.

Our organizations have developed skills and a solid working ethic to support victims in situations of emergency: floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, as well as armed conflicts, in many places around the world. We have provided humanitarian support and resources, and participated in reconstruction processes after the first critical moments. We would, therefore, like to share what we have learned helping others to recover from disasters, and to reaffirm the view that "*education lies at the heart of the development of every child*"². Education should be taken into account in emergencies, not only because it is good; but first and foremost because it is a child human right.

¹ This written communication is submitted by NGOs having long-time experience in providing and / or supporting education in emergency situations in cases of natural disasters and/or armed conflicts.

² 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.

2. Guaranteeing the right to education in emergencies

Emergencies and prolonged conflicts pose a serious threat to children who fall behind in their studies and are at risk of future social and economic losses; the impact on school infrastructure and human resources can also be considerable.

When we speak about education or educational activities in situations of emergency, our reference frame is the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Neither a natural disaster nor an armed conflict can set aside the right of children to education. Even in special conditions (i.e. displaced or refugee camps and temporary shelters) children must enjoy their right to education. Despite existing difficulties, our field experience shows that it is possible to create, even with limited resources, sufficient conditions to implement satisfactorily the CRC provisions, particularly in relation to the aims of education, as stated in Article 29.

Education must promote the integral development of every child, including his /her “talents, mental and physical abilities” combined with fundamental values such as respect, peace, tolerance, equality and solidarity. We recognize the spiritual dimension of every human being and its role in children’s development as stipulated in the Convention as well. Education in emergencies must take into account cultural values, religious beliefs and their related forms of expression. Interventions in education must have a holistic approach that supports children, families and communities to improve their present and future well-being.

Regarding the contents of education in emergency programs, common activities represent a positive starting point as they offer to each child the opportunity to participate and feel confident and secure in this new “school”. Initially, groups are separated according to their age, 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, respect of the environment. Through these activities, children realize that several things that are (still) under their control (i.e. their feelings, ability to make choices) and recognize the importance of participation and collaboration for the common wellbeing.

In these particular contexts, it is worthy to mention that erroneous ideas making people believe in natural disasters as “divine punishments” and premonitions of the end of the world are frequently spread. Such ideas are often part of a “*collective conscience*” that is disseminated easily, gets followers and generates more fears, anxiety and even desperation. On the contrary, appropriate explanations of the causes of natural disasters, or armed conflicts would favor a better understanding and the adoption of a more rational attitude before them.

Some of our organizations have developed specific curricula for teachers, administrators and social workers containing general teaching methods, child-focused principles and the description of the educator role in emergency situations³. Training manuals for psychosocial support through education have also been published.

After an evaluation of the specific needs, other groups can be formed according, for instance, to schooling levels, disabilities, etc. We also witnessed that some children want to continue with “formal education”. Depending on each situation, and if resources are available (especially teachers and books), these children have usually the opportunity to cover essential contents and may obtain an official recognition of their studies. This particular situation needs strong support from different actors, namely local authorities.

³ AVSI has collaborated with the Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) since 2004. Two publications issued 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.

We believe that access to quality education and vocational training is crucial to promoting self-sufficiency, thus, diminishing the risk of creating dependency, especially when irregular situations last a long period.

3. Education needs coordination

It is equally important to coordinate our work with those responsible of the displaced/ refugee camps in order to obtain the authorization to develop activities with children. Different actors should be involved in such cooperation: governmental disaster coordinators, local authorities, humanitarian agencies, civil protection agencies and displaced persons.

A special commission on children education should be established and be in charge of:

- coordinating activities with children according to their needs,
- detecting human resources available in the sector (teachers, parents, young people) that can help to carry out different tasks,
- linking with NGOs or other groups willing to collaborate, and
- receiving and taking care of the material for educational activities.

It is also essential to avoid unnecessary multiplication of activities, which is inappropriate and useless. If there are many uncoordinated groups, the greater the risk that some children are excluded. Coordination also facilitates a better distribution of available resources.

4. Creating “educational spaces” in the absence of schools

Schools are not only the place where children learn, but also a place to share life experiences with the guidance of adults (teachers). In many cases, schools are the place where children spend most of their time.

In emergency situations, an adequate educational environment cannot be always ensured due to limited resources, or because schools are often used as shelters for displaced people. Thus, several measures must be adopted in order to provide an “educational environment” for children. If it is not possible to preserve the entire school for the organization of educational activities for children and young people affected by the emergency, an adequate space should be at least dedicated to them: i.e. a church or a tent. We noticed that children promptly recognize this space as “*the school*”, and they soon consider it as a meaningful place where they can learn and have fun at the same time. Some institutions have published checklists that can be used to assess the conditions, facilities, material and human resources needs of these “educational spaces”⁴.

It is also necessary to evaluate the damage to school buildings and to establish people’s educational needs in order to prepare a report to the concerned authorities in view of post-emergency reconstruction. Different stakeholders should participate in the drafting process in order to have a better understanding of what is needed. It is useful to maintain a three-partite dialogue between the Ministry of Education, local communities and organizations (NGOs or others) in view of accelerating the reconstruction of schools.

5. Education and Families

Parents are also an essential component of education in emergencies as they have the main responsibility for their children’s growth and development. Our field experience shows that education can help to strengthen domestic bonds, when children are invited to share their

⁴ Cfr. INEE (2004), Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction. Paris: UNESCO.

experiences with their parents. Such an attitude fosters dialogue and understanding within the family.

It is important to detect parents' educational needs in order to provide them with education if necessary, and according to the particularities of their situation (time availability, responsibilities to fulfill, etc). In general, educational activities can be promoted as a tool to reflect together on issues such as responsible parenting, interpersonal skills, health, etc.

We noted that parents demand support to initiate new jobs. Some of our organizations have helped them to organize small cooperatives, provided training in administrative skills or other vocational training as well as some funds to start alternative jobs. Consequently, the impact on their children's post-emergency education has been positive, prevented child labor and contributed to better living conditions for families during the various reconstruction stages.

6. Protected and protective educational environments

The community should participate in making the environment a "safe place" to live. The particularly difficult conditions require mutual collaboration to build the common good, especially for the educational space (or spaces, if more than one) that have been set in the affected area. Parents, authorities, relief organizations and members of the community should contribute to respect them, and make them safe environments for children.

These educational spaces can provide services for other members of the community, to held meetings, to attend public announcements or instructions and other communitarian activities. It is important to establish good coordination mechanisms between people in charge, 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 to train teachers on psychosocial factors when teaching children in these circumstances.

7. Resilience: Building on children's strengths

Resilience can be defined as "*the capacity of an individual or a social system to grow and develop in face of difficult circumstances*"⁵. 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 lies inside each one of us. This capacity does not replace governments' responsibility to fulfill their international human rights obligations, including the right to education in whatever circumstances. Both dimensions, the personal strength and the social environment conditions, are necessary and mutually support each other.

In emergencies, educational activities, including cultural and leisure activities, cooperative games and sports can promote self-esteem and have an important role in enhancing children's resilience. Education in emergency situations and the presence of meaningful adults can provide children with the space, time and opportunities to understand the events around them and to find ways to overcome difficulties.

8. Conclusions

The right to education cannot be set aside due to a natural disaster or an armed conflict. On the contrary, it must be considered as a key element in reducing the damage suffered especially by children. Education refers to a learning process, including different kinds of activities that make possible the integration of new knowledge, feelings or experiences leading to a behavioral change.

⁵ Vanistendael, S. (2003) Resilience and Spirituality. Geneva, BICE.

Children should enjoy this right in any circumstance, and namely in emergency situations. Thanks to education, they will have the opportunity of continuing developing in an integral manner.

ANNEX

Recommendations

1. **Education in emergencies should adopt a comprehensive approach, taking into account the physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual wellbeing of children**, as stated in Article 27 of the CRC. It should also take into consideration the aims of education as enshrined in Article 29 of the CRC.
2. **At the initial emergency stage, education** should
 - i. promote a better understanding of the situation;
 - ii. help developing personal and social skills;
 - iii. facilitate a better understanding of security procedures;
 - iv. promote self care: hygiene, sanitation and nutrition, and respect of the environment.

Even after the first stage of emergency, States should continue guaranteeing the right to education and education programs followed by children should be officially recognized.
3. **Effective collaboration among the different stakeholders should be encouraged** as a way to ensure a better distribution of resources, and coordination among the different groups providing education.
4. **Parents should be fully involved in the educational process during emergency situations.** Education is not an isolated process. Realizing children's human right to education can favorably influence families' education as well. This process should also lead to a decrease of child labor and encourage a positive parenting behavior.
5. **Education should be used to enhance children's resilience.** Through education, we empower children to be the protagonist of their own life, to give it a sense, and to build, together with their peers and adults, better living conditions.