

**Emergency Education and Psychosocial Support Programming for Eritrean
Refugees in Ethiopia****Abstract:**

This case study examines an Emergency Education Program implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Exposure to armed conflict contributes to a child's internalization of a culture of violence. Education, with the necessary psychosocial care, can help break the cycle of conflict. Started as a pilot project between June and December 2001, IRC's education program provided education services and psychosocial support to refugee children and youth who were badly affected by the Ethiopian/Eritrean conflict in order to engage them in constructive activities and build the skills and capacities needed for rebuilding their community in the long-term.¹ In addition, IRC aimed to address the lack of education that the Kunama youth had received during the conflict. The program attained its overall goal of helping children cope with the trauma and loss associated with conflict and displacement and created some stability and sense of normality. While not specifically the focus of IRC's program, emergency education also provided a means to engage youth who would otherwise be vulnerable and susceptible to recruitment by combatants.

1. Background

In the two years of cross-border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998-2000), it is estimated that up to 80,000 people were killed and more than half a million people displaced.² Most of the displacement took place within the borders of the countries, however 4,000 or so Eritrean nationals from the Kunama ethnic group sought refuge in northern Ethiopia because they were persecuted, witnessed or fell victim to killings, were forcibly conscripted into armies or were forced from their homes.

Prior to the conflict, a significant need existed for education among the young generation of the Kunama community as a whole. The disruption of services and infrastructure caused by two years of war exacerbated the situation. A negligible number of the children and youth had received any formal education causing dissatisfaction and anxiety

¹ For a more detailed report on the this program, refer to: *Emergency Education and Psychosocial Support Programming for Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia*, IRC (July 2002). Email Rebecca Winthrop at rebeccaw@theirc.org for further information.

² The Ethiopia/Eritrea war came as a surprise to many. While a number of economic, ideological and long-unresolved issues/factors interplayed to create the conflict, a border-dispute in the area of Bademe was the main catalyst that triggered the conflict. After two years of U.S.-led negotiations, a cessation of hostilities agreement was signed in June 2000, eventually followed by a peace agreement in December 2001. A provision was made for the deployment of UN peacekeepers along the disputed border areas establishing a Temporary Security Zone (TSZ). An independent commission was set up in the Hague in April 2002 investigate and arbitrate the border delineation.

among the Kunama community who felt politically marginalized and neglected by the central government, and who also felt uncertain as to the future of their children.

IRC's Emergency Education program for Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia started in June 2001 at the request of the Ethiopian government and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

2. Emergency Education

Poverty, marginalization and disaffected populations are all socio-economic phenomena that can make a community vulnerable and susceptible to conflict. Providing education during crisis situations and protracted refugee contexts is one way to mitigate these phenomena in the long-term and give marginalized and exiled populations the tools needed to better support themselves.

IRC's intervention was based on the premise that emergency education – including normalizing activities such as sports and recreation – helps children “to begin the trauma healing process, and to learn skills and values needed for a more peaceful future and better governance at local and national levels.”³ The disruption and insecurity inherent in refugee situations can harm children's physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural and social development which can in turn lay the foundations for another generation to engage in revenge, conflict and displacement.⁴ Emergency education also plays an important role in caring for particularly vulnerable groups such as girls or the disabled.

In addition, the IRC program aimed to address the Kunama refugee dilemma. If they return home, they will risk being persecuted and denied services by their government. Yet while they have been afforded exile in Ethiopia, there are no opportunities for betterment of their community.”⁵ As well as providing psychological and social support for the immediate needs of the Kunama refugee children and youth, the program also prepared them for eventual reintegration into a formal educational system.

3. Program Design

The Emergency Education program was designed to “immediately engage the community in activities that directly assisted children and indirectly their parents by providing supervision, education and socializing activities”. The program also sought to increase the organizational ability of the refugee community to ensure its ownership and eventual sustainability.

The main programs through which these objectives were achieved were:

- Provision of non-formal education⁶ activities. Subjects offered included: Tigrigna, English, Amharic, math, environmental science, social studies, science, arts, physical education and music.

³ Margaret Sinclair, *Refugee Education in Developing Countries: Policy and Practice*, March 2001.

⁴ UNHCR Guidelines on Protection and Care: <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home?page=PROTECT&id=3b8373992>

⁵ *Emergency Education and Psychosocial Support Programming for Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia*, IRC (July 2002).

⁶ IRC defines non-formal education with the following characteristics: flexible curriculum/location; rapidly organised in emergencies; teacher training component; strong adolescent participation; adapted to learner's needs and linked to

- Provision of youth recreational activities: handicraft, sports, games, cultural clubs.
- Training of community teachers and youth leaders with a focus on child protection and psychosocial care.
- Building and/or strengthening community awareness and advocacy for children and adolescents through formation, maintenance and training of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and Community Committees charged with identifying and working with vulnerable groups.
- Provision of material support, i.e. educational supplies.

Program Coordination

An IRC Project Manager (national recruit) and Project Coordinator (expatriate), undertook the primary assessment of needs, determining the appropriate grade levels of students, organizing teachers training curriculum and identifying youth recreational and cultural activities. Refugee community members and representatives were active participants in the program either on an individual level or by organizing themselves into functional grouping so as to provide different levels and types of support. These included, teachers, PTAs, School Committees, youth-leaders and school administrators. On an operational level, the groups worked closely with project officers and consultants who had technical expertise and specialized functions.

All services provided by the IRC to refugees were closely coordinated with UNHCR who negotiated with the Ethiopian government on issues pertaining to the welfare of refugees as well as on the physical location of the refugee camps.

Close collaboration was sought with the government's Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and the Ministry of Education in information sharing, coordination and technical expertise. Collaboration with the ARRA mainly dealt with the physical settlement of refugees and their legal status while engagement with the latter related to technical issues such as curriculum development and teacher training support.

Partnership with government agencies was at first slow as regulations that governed NGO interventions in the country restricted IRC's mandate. The NGO started operating in Ethiopia in April 2000 under a humanitarian emergency relief mandate, with the aim of assisting drought affected populations in the eastern part of the country. From the government's point of view, this mandate was distinctly different from rehabilitation and development mandates under which education falls. An altogether different mandate would have been needed to work with refugees. These issues were eventually resolved as the government realized IRC was well positioned to assist the refugees.

3.1. Implementation Process

Identification, selection and training of Teachers and Youth Leaders

The inclusion of community members from a wide spectrum of backgrounds (parents, teachers, adolescents and elders) helped to facilitate the task of community mobilization and organization. For example, camp leaders (refugees themselves) were responsible for

permanent schooling when possible. *Emergency Education and Psychosocial Support Programming for Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia*, IRC (July 2002).

identifying teachers, mobilizing the community, translating and assisting with overall logistical matters in their jurisdiction. This resulted in the selection and training of 25 teachers, 17 youth-leaders, a 100-member PTA, a 13-member school committee and 6 psychosocial research assistants, drawn from among the refugee group itself. This broad participation helped ensure the program's ownership by and sustainability for the community.

The identification and selection of teachers and youth leaders was thus primarily conducted by camp leaders. This was followed by a screening process for training and recruitment after the initial training. As minimum criteria for selection, teachers were required to have passed at least grade 6 themselves. Only 4 out of the 25 teachers had prior teaching experience therefore an additional series of intensive workshops were held to overcome any deficiencies.

Training programs for teachers and youth-leaders were aimed at providing the necessary skills and knowledge for immediate deployment as well as to address the need for long-term capacity building among the community. Training activities thus ranged from technical topics such as curriculum development to specific and general management skills (e.g.: classroom management, lesson planning). Youth leadership training topics included skills/crafts development, sports/recreation activities, student clubs/associations management and peer support activities. In addition, youth leaders received "life skills" training which included active listening, understanding emotions, cooperation, problem solving, prejudice reduction, negotiation and mediation promoting conflict resolution, tolerance and peace. Parts of the training also included identification of appropriate and culturally sensitive youth activities. Training was conducted by the IRC Education Program Manager and IRC Education Program Coordinator. Additionally, government certified teacher trainers were brought in to conduct portions of the teacher training on a short consultancy basis.

To deal with the low-level of education among teacher candidates in the camp, training and task assignment was differentiated by levels of competence of each teacher. Those who had a low level of formal education (which were the majority) were assigned to teach lower grade classes. This did not necessarily pose a big problem at the start as the majority of the children and youth had not received any education at all.

Curriculum Development

An IRC Teacher Training Manual was used as the overall framework for training.⁷ It was, however, adjusted to fit the local context through interactive dialogue and feedback from trainees and technical consultants. The youth leadership training manual on the other hand was developed from scratch.

The curriculum development was a central feature of the teacher-training program. A major dilemma was deciding what curriculum to use, and how. Not knowing where the refugees would eventually resettle, and hoping it would be back home, it appeared logical

⁷ Education material can be found at: www.theirc.org or else contact Rebecca Winthrop at rebeccaw@theirc.org

to use the Eritrean curriculum. This, however, proved problematic as there were virtually no relevant educational resources (text books, teacher guides etc), and trying to import them was difficult. On the other hand, using the Ethiopian curriculum meant that substantial work had to be undertaken in a short time to translate textbooks into the Kunama language. This would not have proved a practical solution if the refugees were to return back home soon. The problem was largely dealt with by providing the necessary skills to teacher trainees to enable them to develop a hybrid curriculum using the available resources of Ethiopian and Eritrean origin. While the final curriculum was not certified by either the Ethiopian or Eritrean governments, the Ethiopian local government education office has worked with the IRC and refugee teachers on promotion policies, student requirements per grade and teacher training.

Determining the language of instruction was difficult at first. Shortage or absence of text books in the Kunama native language necessitated creative solutions from teachers and project staff. Those who were fluent in the languages of the available textbooks (e.g. Tigrigna, Amharic or English) manually translated the contents to Kunaminyä. This avoided having to use a medium of instruction that was not readily understood by the students. Those teachers skilled in drawing supported the others by providing visual teaching aids for various subjects.

Awareness raising and Community Mobilization

With the aim of increasing the community's ownership and participation, the IRC organized awareness raising, advocacy and community mobilization activities in both formal (general meetings, training workshops and teacher training sessions) and informal settings such as individual contacts, social gatherings with influential individuals such as camp leaders. In terms of mobilization, the community was actively involved in the selection of the school's location, in the construction of the building as well as the youth centre, (provision of building material and guarding the premises).

Monitoring and Evaluation

Activities were regularly monitored by the IRC through monthly reports, regular meetings with relevant government offices and field visits. Monitoring reports were predominantly based on qualitative assessment of the program's progress rather than on quantitative analysis. This was mainly because the original proposal, which was done in some haste due to time and resource constraint, did not include indicators and provided description of planned activities in general terms. It was also hard to assess the impact of the activities in any qualitative way, given the short term nature of the pilot project.

The project's evaluation has been completed through joint research with Harvard's Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR).⁸ HPCR's pre-intervention assessment on impact of emergency education on the psychosocial adjustment of refugee children (August 2001) and IRC's exploratory assessment on children and psychosocial functioning (October 2002) are expected to serve as a baseline

⁸ For further information on the program visit <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hpcr/>.

against which the program can be evaluated.⁹ A follow-up assessment is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the link between education and level of adjustment as well as the overall impact of the program.¹⁰

Camp and class set-up

Classes were conducted in morning and afternoon shifts, five days a week following the Ethiopian holiday calendar. Each shift lasted five hours and was broken into 11 sessions by class. Each class had at least a 30:1 student teacher ratio. The school was located in a central location of the camp and the classrooms were built with corrugated iron roofs, plastic sheeting stretched over wood poles for the walls and corrugated iron doors with locks. Basic classroom supplies such as desks, chairs and blackboards were provided by the IRC.

4. Constraints and challenges

The language issue proved to be a challenge in providing a uniform teaching methodology. This was eventually overcome thanks to the creative solutions adopted by teachers and project staff. In addition, during teacher training and other meetings with the community, camp leaders acted as translators.

Student enrollment in the program was lower than initially anticipated. Out of 2000 (of which 1200 were under 18) children and youth in the camp, only 727 registered for school and only 551 remained enrolled for the entire period of the pilot project. Also, while gender considerations were at the top of the program's agenda, the results were not as satisfactory as the IRC had hoped. Particular efforts to recruit female teachers and youth leaders had limited success¹¹ and the rate of retention of students was much lower for girls than it was for boys.¹² Some of the reasons for such low rates of enrollment and retention were attributed to domestic responsibilities expected of both girls and boys.

The low level of education among teacher candidates will have to be addressed as students are promoted to higher classes. The program might similarly face the issue of retaining teachers as some teachers with a relatively higher education have leave the camp in search of other jobs or to continue their own education. Notwithstanding the low level of education, the intensive and interactive teacher training workshops, combined with on-going in-service training proved a strong base for inexperienced teachers to gain self-confidence and interest in teaching as a profession.

The camp in which the refugees were initially settled, was deemed "temporary" by the Ethiopian government because of its proximity to the Eritrean border. This meant that a

⁹ For further information on this study contact either Theresa Stichick at HPCR or Rebecca Winthrop at IRC, rebeccaw@theirc.org.

¹⁰ A total of 253 children and 245 caregivers, comprising a control group (non-refugee Kunamas) and refugee group, were selected for the study. The intent of the study is to compare youth adjustment in the refugee population to a sample of non-refugee Kunama children at baseline.

¹¹ Of the total 24 teachers, 5 were female while of 12 youth leaders, 5 were female.

¹² While the proportion of girl students to boys at registration did not appear to be significantly different, at the end of the pilot project in December 2001, the large majority of girls enrolled in the program were at the lowest three class levels (kindergarten, preparatory and grade 1).

permanent school structure could not be built until the camp was relocated to a new site. Although a move to a new site was scheduled for February 2002, the plan was not executed and has been postponed indefinitely.

5. Conclusion: Achievements and Implications

The most important achievement of the program, and also the hardest to measure, was its impact in helping children cope with the trauma and loss resulting from conflict and displacement. This was inferred from the stability and sense of normality that resulted from structured activities in the educational setup. During the pre-intervention assessment, boredom was cited as one of the major frustrations faced by children and the youth. The education and youth program provided structured activities that kept children active and engaged. When school was closed for a one month break, a group of concerned parents wrote a letter to camp leaders requesting the immediate resumption of classes, pointing out that their children were becoming involved in disruptive activities. The positive attitude of students in school was also evident from the kind of drawings children were producing in classroom and learning the local language of the host community (Tigrinya) has helped children cope with the cultural differences they initially experienced.

An important outcome was the ability to influence government regulation and policy given the right channels of negotiation, professional conduct and close coordination. The government of Ethiopia does not typically allow education programs to be implemented by international relief organizations. Given the unique situation of the Kunama refugees, however, it was perhaps in its best interest to allow IRC to implement the program. IRC's intervention therefore provided multiple benefits to the recipients as well as other related actors.

Involving the refugee community at every stage of the program (program, design, implementation, and day to day management) increased their capacity and capability to take on responsibility for the project. Training benefited all those involved, (teachers, youth leaders, as well as members of the parent-teacher association and school committees) and the national education program manager has now assumed management of the program with support from IRC.

The relationship between refugees and the host community was, and continues to be positive, encouraging some parents to send their children to the refugee school, or participate in youth activities organized in the camp. Children are learning the skills necessary to rebuild a peaceful community both in Ethiopia and in the event of their return home.

The uncertain status of the refugees' future raises the question of sustainability. The IRC has expressed the desire to continue the program until refugees are relocated or repatriated and expand and improve the program in the areas of access, quality and diversity (i.e. provision of vocational training and business education opportunities).

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