



Education sustainability in the relief-development transition: Challenges for international organizations working in countries affected by conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the challenges that affect sustainability of educational support provided by international organizations during the relief-development transition in post-conflict countries. Given the growing consensus within the international community about the role that education can play in humanitarian response and the long-term development perspective that is expected to accompany educational support provided in these contexts, this qualitative study draws on structured interviews with practitioner-experts working in different types of international organizations to present the key challenges for the sustainability of educational support in the relief-development transition.

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1. Introduction

Education is a right protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), but over 28 million children around the world are currently out of school and are denied an education as a result of civil conflict (UNESCO, 2011). Traditionally, international organizations responding to humanitarian crises ignited by conflict addressed issues related directly to nutrition, healthcare and shelter, relegating education to the developmental sphere once a country stabilized. During the 1990s, however, many United Nations' agencies and international non-governmental organizations began to prioritize education as an essential component of humanitarian response due to the recognition that education can play a critical role in facilitating stability, imparting life-saving messages, establishing a sense of normalcy and inspiring hope for the future. As a result, there is growing consensus across both humanitarian and development agencies that "education reconstruction begins at the earliest stages of a crisis...[and should be] undertaken concurrently with humanitarian relief" (World Bank, 2005, p. 32).

The consensus about the role of education has developed amidst the changing nature of conflicts from inter-state warring factions between two (or more) countries' military branches to intra-state complex political emergencies that increasingly affect civilian populations. Within this changing landscape, a "relief-development gap" has been identified as the time after which "...humanitarian agencies leave an area [once a] crisis has

subsided but before incoming development agencies have established programmes" (Emmott, 2002, p. 2). When governments of the conflict-affected countries are unable or unwilling to assume responsibility for the delivery and continuity of education, the relief-development gap widens and threatens the sustainability of educational programs implemented by international organizations during the humanitarian phase of a crisis (Sinclair, 2002; Munslow and Brown, 1999). This article examines the challenges that affect the sustainability of educational support provided by international organizations in the transition from humanitarian relief to development in post-conflict countries.

1.1. Relief-development transition

The concept of a "relief-development continuum," which implies a smooth linear transition between humanitarian relief and development assistance, surfaced within the traditional decision-making processes about reconstruction following inter-state wars and natural disasters in which a central government continued to function and assume responsibility for its citizens (Sinclair, 2002; Munslow and Brown, 1999). The changing nature of conflict that erupted in the post-Cold War era, which increasingly entailed violent clashes between groups, factions and political parties within a nation's borders, challenged those assumptions. Hence, the concept of a "relief-development gap" emerged not only to account for the shifting dynamics of conflict, but also to address the failure of humanitarian and development agencies to adjust to the new reality. As such, the "gap" referred to the uncoordinated time and space that existed as humanitarian agencies were withdrawing from a particular country but development agencies had yet to arrive (Emmott, 2002; Suveiu, 2006).

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This so-called gap between relief and development, which is better conceptualized as a transition, is bedeviled by several challenges, including but not limited to: a “chaotic multiplicity of needs” and competition for limited resources (Moore, 1999, p. 2); “poor coordination, cumbersome donor procedures and unstable governments” (Emmott, 2002, p. 2); and international humanitarian personnel “ill-equipped to deal with development” issues (Demusz, 1998, p. 241). There is a clear need to sustain efforts initiated during the relief period and to resolve the “unrealized symbiosis” (Moore, 1999, p. 1) that continues to hamper the transition from humanitarian relief to development.

1.2. Sustainability

Sustainability and sustainable development aim to “[meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 24). Within education, the concept of sustainability rarely has been applied beyond issues directly concerning the environment. However, the concept of sustainability is intimated in discussions about “scaling up” educational reforms (Healey and DeStefano, 1997; Elmore, 1996; Uvin et al., 2000, p. 1409).

The importance of education sustainability was made evident in the work conducted by Grace Akukwe Nkansa, from the (formerly known) Academy for Educational Development, and David Chapman, from the University of Minnesota. They developed a “synthesis model of sustainability” that consolidates perspectives about sustainability from the following: economic models, which focus primarily upon the long-term economic benefits and self-sufficiency of a project once external funding ends; socio-political models, which look at the transfer of knowledge and skills from project implementers to those who will oversee the activity over the long-term; ecological models, which entail the preservation of resources to ensure “survival of individuals and cultures” in the future; and finally, innovation-diffusion models, which highlight the importance of local ownership and acceptance (Chapman and Nkansa, 2006, p. 512). The synthesis model highlights several key components that need to be taken into consideration when discussing sustainability within the education sector; however, the model’s perspective is limited in that it only addresses the management and socio-cultural dimensions taking place at the community level. Its development based upon the example of a politically stable country in Africa also limits its applicability to post-conflict environments in which a country has experienced a protracted crisis and is undergoing the transition from relief to development. Given the dearth of literature and research on education sustainability beyond the important focus on the environment, this article identifies the challenges confronted by international organizations in their efforts to sustain education programs during the relief-development transition.

1.3. Methods

This article draws on a qualitative study that sought to create a global perspective on the challenges that affect sustainability within the field of education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction. The primary methodological technique employed for the study was in-depth, structured interviews with 12 practitioner-experts from a range of organizations, including NGOs, UN agencies and donors from Canada, Europe and the United States working actively in the field of education in emergencies. This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of organizations, and particularly individuals, who possessed information and educational expertise that could not have been obtained through the use of randomized strategies (Maxwell, 1996). The NGOs were chosen due to the size of their education in emergencies’ portfolios in comparison to other organizations (e.g. type and range of educational programs, and number of countries in which the organization was involved). The UN agencies were selected due to the prominent role that education in emergencies and reconstruction played in their humanitarian and/or developmental mandates. The bi- and multi-lateral donors were selected contingent upon the level of financial support provided for education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction work compared to others. Table 1 includes the list of organizations represented in this study.

The criteria used to select the individual practitioner-experts from each of these organizations required that their professional positions reside within the education departments of their organizations and that, when possible, they assumed the greatest degree of responsibility in regard to their organizations’ education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction portfolios. The participants were also selected for their longevity in the field (average of 15 years of professional experience) and their abilities to offer comparative perspectives through their experiences either working for other organizations during their careers or in partnership with other organizations that were responsible for the direct implementation of particular educational interventions. To elucidate a global perspective, all of the participants were based in the headquarters’ offices of their respective organizations. The length of the individual interviews ranged from 45 min to 2 h.

The identification and analysis of challenges were sought at the global level for three reasons in particular: (1) to ensure that the perspectives of the primary organizational actors in the field of education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction were accounted for; (2) to explore the ways in which the challenges identified by these individuals may have varied by type of organization (e.g. United Nations versus non-governmental organizations versus donor agencies); and (3) to determine the degree to which sustainability was considered a priority for the educational work their organizations provided in conflict-affected

Table 1
International organizations represented by practitioner-experts.

Name of organization	Type of organization
CARE	International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)
International Rescue Committee	
Save the Children	United Nations’ Agencies
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)	
United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)	
United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)	
Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)	Bi-lateral Donor Agencies
Department for International Development (Dfid)—United Kingdom	
Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Multi-lateral Donor Agency
Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD)	
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	
World Bank	

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