

INEE Minimum Standards Case Study: Community Engagement to Ensure School Enrollment for Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Name: | Adane Abebaw Miheretu |
| Position: | Former IRC Education Manager |
| Phone: | n/a |
| Email: | n/a |
| Organization: | International Rescue Committee (IRC) |
| Location: | Shimelba Eritrean Refugee Camp, Ethiopia |

Background and Context

Eritrea gained its independence on 24 May 1993 from Ethiopia. Five years after independence, a border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea erupted and caused the loss of thousands of lives on both sides. A two-and-a-half-year border war between the two countries ended under UN auspices in December 2000. Following that, thousands of Eritreans fled to Ethiopia. Most displaced persons fled to avoid military service or political persecution. In response to people relocating to Ethiopia, the first Eritrean refugee camp, Walanhiby, was established in 2001. However, due to the fear of border tensions and other security-related factors, the refugees hosted in Walanhiby were relocated to the relatively safe area of Shimelba refugee camp in May 2004. Shimelba, a refugee camp established in response to displaced Eritreans, is situated 33 kilometers southwest of Shiraro, the district administrative center of Western Tigray and about 1,300 kilometers from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital.

The Ethiopian government, with UNHCR oversight, manages Shimelba camp. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) supplies clean drinking water, sanitation, education, support for the disabled and youth, assistance to women who have suffered sexual or domestic violence, as well as life skills training for camp residents.

IRC's education program provides access to quality education for camp residents through three components: Pre-schooling (Early Childhood Development), Formal schooling (Primary and Secondary level) and Adult Functional Literacy.

The provision of quality education for the children, youth and adult refugees requires making sure that all individuals in the camp have access to quality and relevant education. In Shimelba refugee camp, one IRC pre-school serves approximately 330 students with 12 classroom teachers. The IRC-managed primary and secondary school is located next to the local primary school that serves 1,339 students with 45 classroom teachers. The Adult Functional Literacy program operates at two locations in the camp, serving 620 students with 13 classroom teachers.

Application

IRC utilized the Foundational Standard on Community Participation to guide efforts to increase enrollment and minimize students' dropout rate in Shimelba refugee camp. IRC readily uses community participation approaches to encourage refugees to participate in planning and implementation of education activities in the camp. Different segments of the refugee community, including teachers, parents, refugee central committee and associations of various types take part in discussing their views and opinions amongst themselves and with IRC staff.

Occasionally, the community comes forward to assist during enrollment and later in tracking dropout students and ensuring their return to school. IRC's engagement with the community is directly influenced by IRC's determination to follow good practices in inclusive community participation and is guided by the Community Participation Standard 1, which states, "Community members participate actively, transparently and without discrimination in analysis, planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education response" (INEE Minimum Standards Handbook, 2010, p. 22).

IRC used the "Community Education Committees" guidance note under Community Participation Standard 1 to guide IRC staff as they facilitated teachers and parents to establish a Parent Teachers Association (PTA). The association and its members were crucial for improved community involvement in school development. Once the PTA started functioning, the community started taking part in the school. Enrolling school-age children, tracking dropout students and getting the students back to school became easier. The PTA served as an agent to mobilize the refugee community as actors who get involved in the process.

While building on a positive working relationship with the community, INEE Minimum Standards key actions and guidance notes included under the "Community Participation Standard 1" regarding "Inclusive Community Participation" and "Community Education Committees" were valuable tools to improve community participation in schools (INEE Minimum Standards Handbook, 2010, p. 22 & 23).

Challenges

Even though communities set high priorities for education while living in refugee camps, the number of students (both boys and girls) enrolled at the beginning of the academic year or a learning cycle often starts low. However, by implementing different innovative and creative strategies, including involving the PTA and other IRC sectors and implementing partners, the number at the beginning of the school year at Shimelba is often higher. Nevertheless, the real challenge was students' dropout rate, especially for girls. The dropout rate often hits the highest point following the announcement of a group resettlement to the United States. The reasons for the increase in dropout rates are complex, but one main reason is that refugees assume that what happens in the camp is not important for resettlement in the United States. IRC overcame this challenge and was able to retain students in schools by implementing different strategies including using mini-media and awareness-raising campaigns that informed the community that education was important no matter where they lived. IRC also used case studies from Women's Refugee Commission and letters and e-mails from refugees who were already resettled to stress the importance of education for resettlement. Retaining students and enabling them to utilize the education services IRC provided was crucial to realizing Access and Learning Environment Standard 1: "all individuals have access to quality and relevant education opportunities" (INEE Minimum Standards Handbook, 2010, p.55).

At the beginning, a major challenge was how to effectively engage the community to address student dropout. The IRC education team in the camp and at the head office worked tirelessly to understand the main causes of dropout and strategize ways to reverse the trend. Staff held a number of discussions with students, PTA members and the Refugee Central Committee. In dealing with this issue IRC used the Community Participation Standard 1: Participation (INEE Minimum Standards Handbook, 2010, p. 22).

After regular meetings with the PTA members, focused group discussion with students of various age groups and house-to-house visits with families of the students, it became evident that there was one internal critical problem. Initially, the school did not have a strong follow-up system for enrollment and attendance that involved parents, students and the community as a whole. In order to design a system of follow-up that

involved the community, the IRC education team in the camp utilized Analysis Standard 2 Response Strategies: “Inclusive education response strategies include a clear description of the context, barriers to the right to education and strategies to overcome those barriers” (INEE Minimum Standard Handbook, 2010, p. 41). In the end, PTA members, student representatives and teachers, in collaboration with IRC education team in the field, decided to conduct a house- to- house visit to students who are absent for more than three days. When the reasons for not attending were identified, the team used different strategies to bring them back to school. Some students needed to be referred to other IRC programs for help and other students needed more guidance from their parents to encourage school attendance, such as parents accompanying students on the walk to school.

Outcomes

IRC Education Program in Shimelba refugee camp utilized the various tools and guidance notes presented in the INEE Minimum Standards Handbook. The Handbook helped us to have better community participation to ensure that all students have access to quality and relevant education opportunities while in the refugee camp.

IRC’s open door policy encouraged the refugee community to come to us and discuss any concerns regarding our interventions. Their opinions are valuable information in improving the service IRC provides. For example, an association named Ikra Kunama Association had a concern about the low number of Kunama children, an ethnic minority in the camp, attending school. PTA members served as a bridge and discussed the issue with IRC education staff. After a number of meetings, the association took the lead to mobilize the community to send their children to school. As a result, the number of Kunama children enrolled that year doubled from the previous year.

Community participation is one of the five programming principles within IRC globally. In the Shimelba refugee camp, IRC was able to work with the refugee community to become more engaged in school development and, as a result, children, youth and adult refugees gained greater access to quality education in the camp. This created a strong working relationship between the school and the community, which adds an enormous value to the impact we set out to achieve through education.

Despite the challenges that affected the education program, IRC’s education activities run smoothly and adequately. In an effort to achieve better results, IRC education programs work hand-in-hand with all stakeholders. IRC aims to promote inter-sectoral linkages between the various sectors as well. Currently, IRC’s education program is moving forward in addressing the education needs of the refugees in Shimelba refugee camp.

Would you like to share your Minimum Standards experience?

Please contact the INEE Coordinator for Minimum Standards at minimumstandards@ineesite.org and visit www.ineesite.org/MScasestudies for more information, including case study templates in [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#) and [Arabic](#).