



The Right to Choose, the Right to Learn

*Writings about education by youth
affected by crisis*

INEE

Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
Réseau Inter-Agences pour l'Éducation en Situations d'Urgence
La Red Interagencial para la Educación en Situaciones de Emergencia
Rede Inter-Institucional para a Educação em Situação de Emergência
الشبكة المشتركة لوكالات التعليم في حالات الطوارئ



AN ENABLING RIGHT:
**EDUCATION
FOR YOUTH
AFFECTED BY CRISIS**

2010 INEE POLICY
ROUNDTABLE

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This collection of writings was collated by INEE in preparation for the 2010 Policy Roundtable – *An Enabling Right: Education for Youth Affected by Crisis*. Jamie Vinson, INEE consultant, coordinated the event and edited these texts. The articles will be shared and incorporated into the discussions on the day, and will also feature on the INEE blog, where you can comment and read feedback from others: www.ineesite.org/youthblog.

INEE would like to thank all the youth who were involved in the preparations for the event, and particularly the authors featured here, who so clearly articulate the importance of education for themselves, and for their peers.

Chernor Bah

A False Choice

Last week I attended the world youth conference in Mexico, a global event organized by the Mexican government in collaboration with the UN to continue to draw attention to the need for partnership with, and investment in, youth as needed ingredients for the attainment of the MDGs (as you may know, the UN has declared this year as the “Year of Youth”). It brought together government representatives, NGOs and young people from around the world.

I was invited to speak at one of the plenary sessions on the issue of education. Thankfully the details of what I was supposed to speak on were rather vague. After I reviewed the summaries of what the other speakers were going to present and the draft declaration of the forum, I noticed that one issue was spectacularly absent – education in emergencies. As an advocate on this issue, I am used to attending meetings, with well-intentioned people, where very little or no attention is paid to this very important issue at all.

As a former displaced person and refugee, this issue is personal and close to my heart. So I decided to make education in emergencies the centerpiece of my fifteen minute presentation. I spoke about the often -cited “youth bulge” as a potential for conflict or chaos and argued that such a theory only holds when you have an uneducated youthful population or fail to sufficiently invest in them. In all of my numerous discussions with young people around the world, in and out of conflict zones, one issue trumps all as the number one priority – quality education. My first point was the importance of education as a conflict prevention and/or disaster preparation mechanism.

My second point was on the key ingredients for education in emergency contexts. From my personal experience, emergencies have a profound psychological effect on all in the population, including students and teachers. An education package should therefore include appropriate means to address these issues of trauma and the psychological wellbeing of teachers and students alike.

One approach, and this is a bigger point on its own, is to create a safe and conducive space for young people in these contexts to express themselves and develop their potentials. I am convinced that crisis affected young people need that safe space to be creative and develop unique means of learning beyond the traditional one dimensional, teacher- knows-all style that we are often used to. Over the summer, as a Fellow of Litworld, I worked with young people in New York City who are often from conflict affected societies, have migrated (mostly unregistered) to the US and now have other issues with the law. They are housed at the Children’s Village until their cases are resolved. While most of them have development problems as well, I was stunned at the response our project generated, when we adopted innovative ways of creating a safe space and getting them to express themselves, while learning new things. At the end of just over a month of this project, we had created an atmosphere that some said they never had in any of their schools before and that they were improving on their reading and other literacy skills. Flexibility and innovation in these contexts are key ingredients.

A former refugee from Sierra Leone, Chernor Bah is a youth advocate and activist who has worked as a youth advisor and fellow with the UNFPA, the Women’s Refugee Commission and Litworld Inc. He is currently doing field work in the Philippines for his Master’s degree at the University of Notre Dame. You can contact Chernor at bah.chernor@gmail.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ceebah.





Chernor Bah

One final point that I stressed at this meeting is the need for education to be linked to livelihood. Especially in crisis-affected situations, people are looking for skills to survive and while young people value learning and want a good education, we are not excited by education that does not prepare us for the job market.

At the end of my talk, someone asked that question that keeps coming up whenever we raise these issues in meetings like these. How can you focus on education, when people are dying in emergencies? My response is that this is a false choice. Education is a fundamental right, just as much as food, water and clothing. Rights are indivisible and should not be necessarily presented as a choice just because of the context. Besides, there is only one of those rights that addresses the current crisis' need of healing and helps to prevent a recurrence of the current situation, while also empowering people to be able to take care of themselves in the long run: education. Nothing could be more important in an emergency context.

Helen Samuels

The Right to Choose, the Right to Learn

I grew up seeing young people who have to choose between working and schooling. I think that this isn't right – youth need both to grow up. In my life, I have been faced with many situations; sometimes my parents could not pay the loans for my school, and sometimes I had more than enough. But most of the people in my life had no choice except to start working and to leave education behind.

In Thailand, where I am from, I have seen so many children lift trays of vegetables on their heads to sell around the city with no time left for play or for study. I strongly believe that young people, no matter where they are from and who are they, all have the right to both work and learn.

In the city where I am from, many youth crossed the border from Burma to find jobs in Thailand's factories. I met a couple of the girls from Burma at the Baptist Church and they told me that religion had kept them away from danger and the dark side of the city. One of the girls, who was 17-years-old, said she was happy with her work and her basic education at the religious school because she made enough money to send back to her family in Burma. I was confused at how their families could allow such young teenage girls to cross the border by themselves in order to live in a new place and work in factories.

In reality, life held very little choice for them as the 17-year-old girl was sent illegally to Bangkok by an agency. I was scared for her as she headed to Bangkok. For a couple of months, I waited until she contacted me to tell me about life as an illegally employed youth in the big city. All of the money she made was sent to her family and it made me think, "couldn't we support hard-working, illegal young people around the world instead of just naming them "illegal"?"

This has to do with one particular country's policies, but wouldn't it make a big difference if we could offer illegal youth a lawful career along with education? Perhaps, this support could be volunteering at school in exchange for free education or free meals. What if the youth around the world no longer had to face discrimination and trafficking? Would they have more time to study and play? Would they have more time to become the world's leaders? And would my friends have to be sent away to live with strangers and work from 6 a.m. until 1 a.m. the next day?

Helen Samuels is from Thailand and currently resides in New York City, where she attends Brooklyn International High School.



Godson Daniel Gaylor

Godson Daniel Gaylor works in Liberia as a Training Officer and HIV/AIDS Counselor at the Youth Drop in Center, a local child protection network.



Making Education a Priority for Young Mothers

My country, Liberia, is gradually recovering from fourteen years of devastating civil conflicts. With the damaging effects of the wars on families, many adolescents are vulnerable to risky sexual behaviors, leading to sexual exploitation and abuse, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), HIV/ AIDS, and early motherhood. In fact, Liberia has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Africa.

Adolescent mothers are often prone to live under difficult situations such as lack of adequate financial support, limited access to education, and poor health. Poor early child healthcare, coupled with the mother's lack of knowledge to prevent repeated pregnancies, pose a higher risk to the survival of their children under age five. The promotion of family planning and seeking early child healthcare can increase the rate of child survival.

Over the last three years and a half years, I have been working as a trainer with the Children Assistance Program Inc. (CAP) Merlin-Liberia sponsored Youth Drop in Center (YDIC), Sexual Reproductive Health project. Its objective is to reduce the prevalence of STIs, HIV and teenage pregnancy among young people in Monrovia and to increase their access to quality, youth-friendly sexual reproductive health services.

Among the many projects we have successfully implemented thus far, the Adolescent Mothers Birth Spacing and Early Child Health Care Seeking Practices project stands out to me. The goal of the project was to enable adolescent mothers to be able to explain the causes and preventions of malaria and diarrhea, to discuss the importance of seeking early childhood health care, and to identify signs and symptoms that indicate illnesses of their children – allowing them to seek early medical care.

The most important findings noted in this project showed that 57 (76%) out of the 75 adolescent mothers were sent away from home by their parents and were living with their grandparents or other relatives and friends. The highest education level attained was 9th grade and over 50% of the mothers had little or no opportunity of returning to school. These mothers stand greater risk of repeated pregnancy as about 95% of them have no, or misleading, information on family planning (contraceptives). We also found there was delay in early child healthcare practices greatly due to poverty, as many of the adolescent mothers depend on petty trade for survival.

Childbearing often leads to difficult experiences for adolescent mothers and their children as young mothers take on responsibility, for which they are unprepared. In addition to training in health practices, skills training can empower young mothers financially and provide them with sustainable life skills.

Bhuwan

Technical and Vocational Training in Nepal

In Nepal, where the literacy rate is 57% and the percentage of the educated population is even lower, vocational trainings play a vital role in creating skilled manpower among youth and in generating employment opportunities.

Many students drop out of school after completing their primary schooling. The main reason for this is their increased role as breadwinner of their respective families after they enter the youth age group. This trend has created a huge gap in the skilled manpower creation process because all of these young people get engaged in the informal sector, where working conditions are risky and the dignity of labor is comparatively less.

The Nepalese government, with the support of various agencies, has started an employment fund through which young people acquire various vocational skills to enhance their livelihood opportunities. Realizing the importance of vocational trainings, The Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) was constituted by the government in 1989. CTEVT's have contacts in all of the districts of Nepal and offer different types of vocational trainings and support systems. I am interested in the provisions of these livelihood training opportunities and in finding where the gaps are within this system. society?

Bhuwan represents the youth of Nepal as a member of the UNFPA's Global Youth Advisory Panel (GYAP) and the Women's Refugee Commission's Youth Advisory Group (YAG)



Border Crossings: The Importance of Education for Burma

I was educated on the border of Thailand and Myanmar. I used to study there by entering illegally into my neighbor country. I had to live with many challenges for the two years that I studied there, but I got a higher education.

When I first arrived to the school on the border, my level of English was just elementary. It was so clear that my general knowledge and mind were very narrow. I didn't even know the current situation of my beloved country. How then could it be possible to have information about all over the world?

After attending the school on the border, I have learned many things – not only understanding about my country, Burma, but also about some of the conflicts from many countries in the world such as N. Korea, Palestine and so on. This knowledge I gained from my higher education with the support of my teachers, who are from Australia. I have now won a scholarship in Liberal Arts Studies from Asian University for Women in Bangladesh.

In my experience, although the education fees are very expensive in Burma, many people want effective and affordable education because we face the lack of higher education in my beloved country. Without education, we cannot become a developed country, politically, economically and socially. Education not only helps one's own family, but also can improve the entire community.



Yadanar is from Myanmar and now studies at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh.

Lindiwe Sibanda

Lindiwe Sibanda is from Zimbabwe and is currently studying in South Africa.



Cutting the Cycle of Poverty through Quality Post-primary Education

I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, a country where education is a big priority – and not just education, but quality education. However, because of conflict, I eventually found myself in a situation I had never before imagined.

In 2007, I had just finished my GCSE Advanced level, and my next level had to be university; I was 17 years of age. I found myself in a foreign country bearing the name “refugee.” I then started to work as a domestic worker for a Jewish family that my mother also worked for. As my studies had been put on hold, every single day I would think about my education.

I decided to get admission at the university, even though I did not know how I would afford it. I told myself I would work different jobs and study at the same time. The first semester was not easy with all the financial problems as well as time management challenges. Fortunately for me, I was lucky enough to learn of the DAFI Initiative, which to my knowledge is the one of the only organizations that fund refugee university education in South Africa (many of the other organizations prefer to focus on primary education because it is cheaper). At that time, I also had colleagues who were pursuing funding for university education. Unfortunately, because of the influx of applicants, only a few applicants were lucky. They tried to work and study, but the pressure was too much and many had to drop out of university. Now they are working as domestic workers without an education.

Post-primary education can shape an individual’s livelihood and cut the cycle of poverty. When we promote post-primary education, it helps individuals, and it helps to address larger problems like unemployment and poor economic and social structures. When these youth are educated, they will be able to take up careers, to give back to their communities, and to contribute to economic growth by working professionally in their specific fields. We need to also realize that the right to education promotes understanding, tolerance and friendship among ethnic, racial, social and religious groups.

Post-primary Education Can Give Us a Voice

What does post-primary education offer a young person? This question means a lot in my life because I know the difference it can make. In most countries in the ‘developing world’, a life is more than a life. It is linked to an extended family and, ultimately, a community of people. Where states fail, these are the support networks people rely on. So why does a young person need to know more than how to read or write? A basic understanding of algebra should be enough, right? To the contrary, this only offers a person with what they need to interact in a very limited way in the social, political and economic life of their respective countries. How does a young person acquire the skills to develop informed opinions or views on the hardship that refugees and IDPs face daily? How does the community find its voice? Education gives a person a voice. Young people want education so that their voices can be heard. Education lays the basis for social and economic freedom to be achieved. As a young person this only means, we want to be free!

Almost every day, I meet a young woman or man who has the drive and potential to pursue higher education. Sadly, as the cost of tertiary education rises annually, more young people lose their access to education at the tertiary level. It’s even more complicated when refugees deal with this general state of crisis. I have had the opportunity to pursue higher education. But this has not been without struggle.

For example, when I gained admission into the University of Ghana, I was mistakenly identified as a foreign student. Compared with the fees ‘local’ students were to pay, my fees were enormous. Most of the refugees I knew could not afford to cover the payment for the application form. This means that even if they were admitted as ‘local’ students, they would not be able to afford to pay the fees. At that time, I was bewildered by my large tuition bill. Confounded, I was in despair. But by a stroke of luck and the initiative of the then program officer of the Albert Einstein German Academic Fund for Refugees Initiative (DAFI), I applied for a scholarship. I was awarded a full scholarship and was given an opportunity I have been appreciative of ever since.

Hibist Kassa

Hibist Kassa is an Ethiopian refugee residing in Ghana and studying development financing through a DAFI scholarship.





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