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GUIDANCE NOTE¹

Literacy in Conflict and Crisis-Affected Contexts

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is increasingly supporting literacy programs in conflict and crisis-affected contexts, thereby bringing together the objectives of the Education Strategy to improve the reading skills of students in the primary grades, and to increase equitable access to education in conflict and crisis environments. However, not enough attention has been paid to the specific needs of designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating literacy education in these contexts. This Guidance Note offers insights based on a review of available program documentation and interviews with 30 practitioners of literacy programming in conflict and crisis-affected settings.

Literacy

Literacy is the skills and abilities that enable a person to read, write, communicate, and think critically. It includes skills in writing and reading, such as vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Literacy develops across the lifespan—people learn to read and write in new and different ways on the job, in religious settings, and in different subject areas. In each new context, a learner may acquire new vocabulary, writing style, and purpose for communication. An individual's literacy is shaped by social, cultural, and political context.

Conflict and Crisis

Conflict refers to a continuum ranging from a relatively stable environment to increasingly escalating tensions that may lead to change, such as institutionalized forms of social injustice, or direct physical or structural violence. Conflict is experienced differently across identity groups, geographic areas, and time. Crisis can be the result of conflict, violence, and natural disasters. Very often, conflict, violence, and crisis overlap, compounding the effects on populations. For example, during a war, illicit drug and weapons trade can increase, intensifying the violence and insecurity caused by the war. These factors combine to create highly insecure environments, challenging the abilities of schools and communities to provide a safe and effective learning environment for learners.

The Challenge: Literacy in Conflict and Crisis-affected Contexts

Development and humanitarian actors deliver a wide variety of literacy programming in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. In these contexts, literacy may be the primary program focus, or it may be embedded in a program that includes broader goals, such as workforce preparation. Unfortunately, research has found that many of these program designs fail to accurately or adequately conceptualize literacy or conflict/crisis.

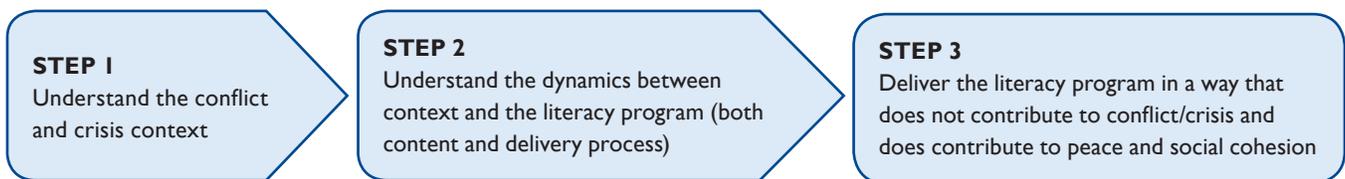
¹ This Guidance Note and the research referenced here are drawn from USAID. (2014). Literacy Education in Conflict and Crisis-Affected Contexts. This document was prepared by Zeena Zakharia and Lesley Bartlett for JBS International, Inc. and USAID. This document was designed and edited by Cynthia Koons, with additional input from Nina Papadopoulos, Yolande Miller-Grandvaux, and Christy Olenik.

Furthermore, experience has shown that ambiguous conceptualization of literacy and conflict/crisis—and the dynamics between the two—causes the following problems:

- Vague program designs and evaluations;
- Implicit rather than measurable explicit program objectives;
- Imprecise assessment of the specific education needs of conflict and crisis-affected populations;
- Unintended consequences such as literacy education contributing to conflict by excluding certain populations;
- Unexpected obstructions to literacy program delivery due to dynamics of conflict or crisis;
- Missed opportunities for literacy programming to contribute to social cohesion, tolerance, and peace; and,
- Missed opportunities to provide relevant programming that contributes to socio-emotional learning, inclusive education particularly for children and youth, and peace education and conflict resolution.

A Conflict-Sensitive Approach to Literacy

Avoiding these problems requires a conflict-sensitive approach to literacy programming in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. This is a three-step process.²



Understanding the conflict and crisis context means defining the terms and examining the actors, dynamics, and conflict/crisis causes. Step two involves defining both literacy and the program design, then examining how the program will interact with specific actors, dynamics and causes of the conflict/crisis. After considering the definitions and dynamics identified, the final step is to deliver the literacy program in a way that does not contribute to tensions or crisis but rather uses a conflict-sensitive approach to promote peace, social cohesion, tolerance and equity.

What is Unique About Delivering Literacy in Contexts Affected by Conflict or Crisis?

Recently, much literature has documented the relationship between education and conflict or crisis. However, little attention has focused specifically on how conflict and crisis affect literacy programming. The following sections discuss some of the core issues that arise when delivering literacy in environments affected by conflict or crisis. Each subsection contains a text box with suggestions about how literacy programs might be modified to incorporate a conflict-sensitive perspective. These conflict-sensitive considerations are drawn from practitioners' experience, good practices and, where it exists, empirical evidence.

2. In 2004, 35 agencies formed the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, which published the 3-step definition of conflict sensitivity: 1) understand the context in which you operate; understand the interaction between your intervention and the context; and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.

Language of Instruction

In any context, the language of instruction privileges speakers of that language over speakers of other languages. This dynamic is worth special attention in environments of conflict and crisis. Conflict and displacement often lead to greater linguistic heterogeneity of learning spaces, which has implications for language of instruction. In conflict or crisis environments language may be an overt identity marker of ethnic or political inclusion or exclusion. Language politics may influence national policies and therefore exacerbate conflict. The dynamics of conflict may create push and pull factors in favor of certain languages, and these may shift with the evolving context. These issues pose a challenging question to education personnel: what is the most conflict-sensitive language policy?

In some contexts, a monolingual national language of instruction may encourage social cohesion. In others, it may exacerbate inequality, exclusion, and ultimately conflict. On the other hand, multi-lingual instruction poses its own challenges. Although research strongly supports teaching literacy³ in students' first language (LI), this may not be possible in a conflict or crisis-affected environment where displacement has created a multi-lingual context. In these heterogeneous language environments teachers often do not speak, read, and write all the languages of their students. Furthermore, there may be few or no teaching and learning materials in those languages. This makes extending LI literacy and language instruction through the elementary school years a particular challenge. In such cases, teachers should support students' second language acquisition by focusing first on oral proficiency in the secondary language, and second on literacy in the second language. This may require training teachers on the principles of second language acquisition and, if needed, in a new language itself. On a cautionary note, multi-lingual language policies that emphasize ethno-linguistic differences may, indeed, inflame ethnic differences.

Conflict-Sensitive Considerations: Language of Instruction

- ✓ The conflict analysis should include language of instruction (LOI) issues, such as: What are the historical dynamics between language of instruction and conflict? How does the current language of instruction practice divide people? How does it connect people? Are certain groups excluded because of the LOI? Who is excluded and how might this relate to conflict? How might LOI policies promote social and community integrity or solidarity?
- ✓ The process of LOI selection has implications for peace/conflict and should therefore be done through inclusive and participatory dialogue.
- ✓ Conflicts and crises are constantly evolving; the relationship between LOI and conflict should be continuously monitored and programs should be adjusted accordingly.
- ✓ More attention needs to be paid to oral language development in any medium of literacy instruction that is not the students' first language. Students must have a strong grasp of any language - including vocabulary and syntax - used for literacy instruction.

Literacy Teachers: Professional Development and Support

Teachers are the key to quality literacy education. However, teachers are often directly affected by conflicts and crises. They may be displaced and have high levels of mobility and absenteeism due to security issues and the immediate needs of their families. Teachers' education or professional development may also be disrupted, mainly in the context of protracted conflict, resulting in low levels of education or training. Educators may be directly targeted during conflict and may require psychosocial support.

3. Literacy is defined in the introduction and used throughout this paper to refer to life-long acquisition of both writing and reading skills, (i.e. beyond early grade reading).

While confronting the direct effects of conflict themselves, teachers may also face new challenges in their classrooms, such as new and diverse learner populations, over-sized classes, over-age students, multi-lingual instruction issues, new social-emotional needs of students, and destroyed infrastructure and materials. In order to provide strong literacy instruction in the evolving conflict and crisis-affected context, teachers may need to fundamentally transform their notions of literacy and their methods of instruction. Depending on the learner population, teachers may need to incorporate life-saving, socio-emotional, and anti-bias materials into literacy curricula. There is evidence that socio-emotional learning can be successfully integrated in a literacy program, resulting in positive academic and psychosocial outcomes.⁴ In-service literacy refresher training should include topics such as literacy pedagogy, multi-lingual instruction, socio-emotional learning, and literacy assessment. This is particularly true if teachers' professional development or education has been disrupted, or if they have not had opportunities for preparation.

Practitioners debate the best method of support to provide to teachers in these complex contexts. Scripted lessons provide essential support, which may be particularly important for under-trained teachers, but some question the sustainability and cost-efficiency of this strategy, as well as the extent to which teachers will transfer that model of planning to other subject areas. Scripting for youth has been associated with rote teaching and learning techniques, but it is also associated with higher levels of literacy learning in the early grades. Radio delivered scripted lessons can deliver literacy instruction to conflict-affected areas where children would otherwise miss out. Likewise, coaching and mentoring are evidence-based strategies that are helpful for under-skilled teachers, but can be costly. Efforts to reduce costs include hiring coaches or mentors who live close to or work in the school, developing models of peer support and "mutual coaching" through teacher learning circles, and using video demonstrations of classroom practice. Finally, in order to advance equitable access and learning opportunities for young people, teacher policy needs to explicitly address: (a) salary, (b) placement, (c) mobility, and (d) absenteeism in ways that enable teachers to do their work.

Curriculum and Literacy Materials

Curriculum development, materials production, and distribution are impacted by conflict and crisis. Conflict is often reflected in the curriculum, particularly in the form of bias, including invisibility, stereotyping, imbalance, selectivity, physical or visual isolation, gender exclusion, and the use of offensive language toward certain groups. It can also entail language bias or bias in the representation of historical narratives. Literacy programs need to engage in a formal review of bias (gender, ethnic, religious, linguistic etc.) in the curriculum as part of the initial conflict assessment, which may require delicate diplomacy with the government or governments involved. This can be particularly difficult when there is no ministry to work with, or conflicting ministries. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) may be caught between different curricular materials and expectations: there may be conflicting Ministries of Education, conflicting curricula, and conflicting medium of instruction policies. Specifically, the curricula may have contradictory literacy components or may have a watered-down course of study that does not include all of the core components. Furthermore, delivery of materials is more difficult in conflict settings.

Implementing partners must determine whether and how to fit the core components of literacy into existing curricular categories. If curricula are minimal, programs should develop a literacy scope and sequence based on existing materials and learning needs, while planning explicitly which supplemental materials will be required and how they will be produced. In developing literacy materials, programs should contemplate potential trade-offs between leveled texts that are professionally produced and more contextually relevant texts produced locally, which may have greater teacher investment, but will require adaptation to different reading levels. Reading curricula at all levels and materials across the curriculum should do more to incorporate life-saving, socio-emotional, and

4. Jones, S. M., Brown, J. L., Hoglund, W. L. G., & Aber, J. L. (2010). Impacts of an integrated school-based social-emotional learning and literacy intervention on third-grade social-emotional and academic outcomes. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 78*, 829–842.

anti-bias information⁵, such as contextualized forms of peace education, conflict resolution, and life skills, where appropriate. Finally, due to security and infrastructure issues in fragile environments, the distribution of teaching and learning materials requires careful planning in terms of time, cost, and logistics.

Conflict-Sensitive Considerations: Curriculum and Literacy Materials

- ✓ The conflict analysis should include issues of curriculum and literacy materials, including questions such as: Where are the points of bias (e.g. ethnic, religious, and gender) in the current curriculum and literacy materials? Against which identity group is the bias? How can the curriculum and literacy materials be edited to avoid bias and instead promote tolerance and inclusion?
- ✓ When few literacy materials survive the crisis or conflict, review what exists and establish a plan to fill the gaps in order to have a core material package: teacher guide, student lesson book, fiction and non-fiction reading material, leveled and decodable texts. Draw on support from local educators and community members. Involve them in the choice to purchase external materials or produce them locally.
- ✓ Conflict or crisis may present an opportunity to build better curricula. An anti-bias curriculum will: nurture self-concept and group identity; promote awareness of different social interactions; spark critical thinking about bias, stereotypes, and discrimination; and develop students' capacities to rebuff bias. From the program's inception, consider inclusion of the core components of reading instruction: vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.
- ✓ In newly heterogeneous classes, where feasible, develop language-specific curricular objectives, scope and sequence of instruction.
- ✓ The teaching of reading at all levels should be relevant and meaningful for learners in a conflict or crisis-affected environment. This may mean involving learners in lesson themes related to recent events. Where appropriate, include socio-emotional learning, peace education, conflict resolution, and or life skills.
- ✓ Where delivery of materials is difficult due to disruption from conflict or crisis, consider ways to break down the literacy curriculum into meaningful segments. Identify inexpensive, simple materials that local teams can design, produce and deliver.

Communities' and Families' Support for Literacy

Social capital and social cohesion are often threatened by conflicts and crises. Family relationships and structures may be altered as populations are displaced and members spend more time and effort trying to fulfill their basic survival needs. Community support for literacy programs may be harder to achieve in these situations. Nonetheless, communities have an important role to play in literacy development and inclusion, and may serve as important sources of psychosocial support for education actors, including teachers and students.

Successful literacy programs engage the support of communities and families. Literacy programs should develop unambiguous plans for obtaining community support and developing opportunities to practice literacy outside of school; this expansion of opportunities to learn has demonstrated significant literacy gains. Given the common challenge of large classes, community members, family members, and peers can make excellent para-teachers and tutors.

Targeted social messaging can build support. Cultural and religious values should be considered and, where feasible, integrated. More substantively, communities should be engaged from the beginning of a project via needs and conflict assessments; their engagement should be inclusive, participatory and sustained throughout.

5. Derman-Sparks, L. (2001). *The anti-bias curriculum book: Tools for empowering young children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Parental, and especially maternal, literacy has a significant impact on the literacy acquisition of children. In contexts of sustained conflict and crisis, interrupted education and impediments to equitable opportunities for early learning mean that adults are likely to have low literacy rates, which affects their families. As part of a comprehensive and conflict-sensitive approach to literacy, donors should consider funding adult and/or family literacy programs or linking to donor agencies and programs that do so.

Conflict-Sensitive Considerations: Communities' and Families' Support for Literacy

- ✓ The conflict analysis should include issues of community and family perceptions of literacy, including questions such as: How does literacy relate to the political and economic dynamics of the conflict or crisis? Who has power because they are literate and who does not?
- ✓ Community investment should be inclusive, participatory, and sustained throughout. Building support may include targeted social messaging and integrating community cultural and religious values into literacy materials to promote buy-in.
- ✓ Explicit plans should be made for developing opportunities to practice literacy skills outside of literacy programs and schools. This may include adult literacy programs for parents to support their children's reading at home.
- ✓ Engaging family and community members as para-teachers and tutors is one way to gain support from these groups. By drawing on community assets, the potential for sustainability is increased, especially in locations where there are few qualified teachers and/or class sizes are large.

Youth and Adults

Youth and adults require distinct consideration when it comes to literacy in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. Conflict affects them differently than it does children. Youth may have been placed in the position of head of household at an early age due to loss in the family. Their education may have been interrupted and, thus, is often associated with a sense of missed opportunity. Shame and stigma are sometimes associated with an inability to read, and may discourage over-age learners from returning to school in the absence of programs that attend to these dynamics. Even when youth and adults need beginning literacy instruction, instructional approaches and materials must be tailored to fit the interests and cultural expectations of older students. There is a need to consider how literacy programs might facilitate transfer of older learners into formal schooling, where possible, and to further integrate a conflict or crisis perspective that includes the dynamics of shame into literacy program design and implementation.

Youth and adult literacy programs are more likely to embrace a view of literacy linked to economic, political, and social arenas—such as livelihoods, life skills, health, conflict resolution, and civic engagement. This broader definition is quite appropriate and ideally allows for a more relevant and motivational program. Accelerated learning programs are a recognized strategy to reintegrate youth into the education system. These programs are opportunities to provide youth with a broader package of literacy skills. Planners and implementers must seriously examine the linkages between components of their programs and specific literacy practices they aim to teach.

Conflict-Sensitive Considerations: Youth and Adults

- ✓ Consider ways to make literacy flexible in terms of time and space, and relevant for youth and adults by linking curriculum and literacy materials to livelihoods, health, life skills, and peace-promoting themes such as conflict resolution and civic engagement.
- ✓ Establish a literacy learning environment that is safe and respectful so over-age youth learners may overcome feelings of shame and feel encouraged to participate.
- ✓ Teachers and programmers should examine their own assumptions about the relationship between youth and violence, including radicalization, recruitment into armed groups and gangs, and other concerns. Then, consider how literacy pedagogy and materials can promote positive perceptions of youth in society.
- ✓ Literacy programs for over-age students need to consider how transfer into formal schooling can be facilitated in a way that causes the least tension and promotes social cohesion.

Literacy Assessment

The task of assessing student learning outcomes is difficult in the context of conflict and crisis. Mobility and student turnover complicate sampling and measurement of student learning. Disruption to schooling and non-formal educational programs, teacher absenteeism, and changing governments that delay programming contribute to difficulties in measuring outcomes when student learning time is not continuous. Assessments can be expensive and time-intensive in a resource-scarce environment; they are often postponed or cancelled in rapidly evolving situations with escalated insecurity. Teachers are often not trained to conduct meaningful assessments that could inform instruction. Further, assessments may be compromised by corruption, violence, and lack of transparency in contexts of protracted conflict, in turn affecting the value and trust placed in measures of student learning. Simplified tools may offer a way forward. Simple and low-cost tools that test phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency are available.

Conflict-Sensitive Considerations: Literacy Assessment

- ✓ In conflict and crisis settings experience shows that simplified, context-specific, and transparent assessment tools are needed early and often.
- ✓ Literacy assessment tools in these contexts should be short, inexpensive, easy to use, adaptable, and yield valid skill-level results.
- ✓ Conduct the literacy assessment in a way that is transparent. If changes are necessary due to evolving conflict or crisis dynamics, ensure open and frequent communication with stakeholders.
- ✓ Assessments should focus on comprehension, but may also gauge conflict or crisis-specific content or socio-emotional learning.

What More Do We Need To Know About Literacy in Contexts of Conflict and Crisis?

The core issues and considerations presented above provide the first steps in developing a framework for literacy education in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. Yet, there is still more to learn.

If certain research questions were included into program design the results could improve literacy programs in contexts of conflict and crisis. Examples include: How do children in contexts of conflict or crisis learn how to read? Does the inclusion of peace education, conflict resolution, and/or life skills in literacy curricula improve reading outcomes? How does time-on-task relate to basic acquisition of literacy in environments affected by conflict and/or crisis?

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