



Child Helplines as an essential mechanism to protect the Right to Education in emergency situations

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The Right to Education in emergency situations
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Introduction

Child helplines around the world provide an invaluable service to children in need of care and protection. Child helplines allow children to reach out and tell their stories and problems to a person they can trust and where necessary child helplines can refer or intervene directly. While a child's reason for calling a child helpline may vary between continents, regions, countries and cities, one factor remains the same: the child contacting the child helpline is taking an important first step towards exercising a number of basic rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and demanding that these rights be met.

Child Helpline International is the global network of child helplines, working to protect the rights of children. Currently, Child Helpline International (CHI) has 91 members in 79 countries around the world, in both developed and developing countries. CHI was founded on the belief that children and young people have rights and that they are the best individuals to identify their problems if they are equipped with the proper information and tools to do so.

In this report CHI will offer examples of the experience that the network has in meeting the Right to Education in emergency situations for children. From the knowledge that has been gained, CHI will provide recommendations to promote the essential role that child helplines can have to fulfil the Right to Education in emergency situations.

The Right to Education in emergency situations

The Right to Education has been outlined in various international treaties and covenants, one of which is the Covenant on the Rights of the Child, in articles 28 and 29. International jurisprudence and declarations have reiterated the right of all children to free primary or elementary education time and again. The right of children to education has been established internationally through this process.

Children's rights are human rights and as such are universal and indivisible. States therefore have the obligation to strive to fulfil human rights at all times, everywhere for every human being. For the right to education to be fulfilled, education should be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable (see Right to Education primer, no. 2 and 3; author the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski). Governments thereby have an obligation accompanying the Right to Education to take all steps necessary to have the physical, social, cultural and economic/financial infrastructures to provide proper quality education to all children,

including the girl child and the marginalised child, that takes into account the needs of different societal or cultural/ethnic groups.

In emergency situations the ability of a government to protect its citizens and fulfil their human rights is particularly difficult. The immediate threat to the life of people and need for humanitarian assistance takes precedence over the fulfilment of human rights. If this direct threat to the lives of people in an area recedes, the obligations of state parties however resume and consequently governments should resume efforts to provide education to all children.

The Right to Education in the aftermath of emergencies is particularly hard to fulfil because of the need for the many infrastructures to fulfil this right. School facilities often have been destroyed or are not sufficiently available, school materials are lacking and teachers not present. The location and number of children is moreover often not known and hard to gauge: children are very vulnerable and in these situations, they are often uprooted and forced to flee or seek refuge elsewhere, sometimes separated from their parents or caretakers. The real demand from children for education thereby is difficult to establish (i.e. education is not available or accessible).

Education is also a means to reach the children on their level and meet their needs, to up-hold their rights not just *through* education but also *in* education. The quality of education in an emergency situation many times is insufficient, especially because of the need for attention from traumatised children that have lived through an emergency. Education in emergency situations should be geared to address these issues, but frequently is not able to incorporate the needs of the children (i.e. education is not acceptable and adaptable).

Education is very important in every situation. In general, it is an important step to let children become self-sufficient and independent human beings and not let them enter into a possible life-long dependency. Education allows children, to grow and prosper. In an emergency situation, education is vital to rebuilding the lives of children and essential to uphold the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Certainties and structures that are central to the well-being of children have been destroyed. The obligation to provide children with education, to reinstate their schooling can often be a first step back to normality for children.

Child helplines in emergency situations

Child helplines are an essential mechanism to help fulfil the Right to Education in emergency situations. Experience has shown that child helplines are able to quickly operate in an area in which an emergency has taken place. Child helplines reach out to children, including those

marginalised, and if necessary link them with allied systems in the child protection and welfare system. Child helplines additionally can provide real information and data about the situation on the ground and voice the concerns and desires of children at the policy and decision making level, thereby allowing those in charge to take informed decisions. Child Helpline International as a network organisation facilitates the child helplines and supports setting up services in affected areas. Via the network, child helplines are able to share experiences and best practices with each other.

Examples of the work of child helplines on the Right to Education in emergency situations

In the aftermath of the Asia Tsunami that took place in the December 2004, child helplines were quickly established in the regions that had been devastated. Local child helplines were linked with other international NGOs, such as Plan International, governmental agencies and with child helplines in other affected countries in the region. **CHILDLINE India** had already gained knowledge of working in an emergency situation, during the Gujarat Earthquake that took place in 2001, where services were established to help survivors.

As local organisations, child helplines are familiar with the local culture and necessities. By establishing quickly within the area affected, child helplines are able to build a relationship of trust with children. Child helplines initially focus on providing immediate relief for victims by partnering with allied systems to offer refuge, shelter and trauma care. When the immediate need for humanitarian assistance subsides, child helplines shifted their focus to ensuring that the rights of children were met. Through their previous activities, they had already established themselves as an organisation that children could trust.

Child helplines used innovative methods to reach the children, because infrastructures in the area had been destroyed. Child helplines used caravans and mobile units to reach and respond to children in different communities. Also happy/sad boxes were used in places that were frequented by the children. Via the use of these innovative methods child helplines were able to reach many children, especially the survivors that were in need of care and attention, but did not have other opportunities to speak out. This is especially important in emergency situations, where many of the social and physical infrastructures that are familiar for the children have been swept away. **CWIN**, the child helpline in Nepal, was active in the 'People's War' that was declared by the CPN-Maoist in 1996. In the ten years of turmoil, thousands of children were affected: many were orphaned or abandoned, others were disabled or landed on the streets. Children were arrested, abducted, sexually abused, forced to work under dangerous

circumstances or enlisted by the armed factions. The Right to Education was hampered severely due to these processes and the fact that many school buildings had been destroyed or were forced to close down due to armed violence. CWIN Nepal provided educational support, logistical support to schools, educational materials and infrastructure reports. Additionally, alternative educational programs were introduced for children who had dropped out of school, in order to continue their schooling and enable them to re-enroll. With the awareness campaign 'Schools are Zones of Peace' CWIN tried to ensure the Right to Education. Through its activities CWIN, in cooperation with allied systems, was able to create a child friendly, safe and protective environment within the schools where children are aware of their rights and are allowed to participate and speak out freely. An environment that strives to protect the rights of children and thereby helping children to get back on their feet and take important steps back towards normality.

In the Philippines, the child helpline **Bantay Bata 163** has regional branches that are situated in disaster-prone areas and these offices are the ones who have been most active in emergency situations. In cooperation with the Regional Network Group of ABS-CBN Broadcasting and Sagip Kapamilya, Bantay Bata 163 initially focuses on relief campaigns to assist children and their families in the crisis areas. Starting in 2004, Bantay Bata 163 cooperated with ABS-CBN Foundation to form "Sagip Kapamilya" (Saving Members of the Family). Sagip Kapamilya implemented a program in partnership with the Philippine Department of Education and nine other agencies and private organisations. Disaster Preparedness through Educational Multi-Media is an initiative that was brought to schools, community centers, businesses, government offices, and the general public over the last year.

Child helplines are an essential mechanism to ensure the Right to Education in emergency situations

The examples above show that child helplines are able to ensure, the Right to Education in emergency situations is met. Child Helpline International therefore provides the following recommendations to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the role of child helplines and the support that should be extended to them:

Recommendation 1: Governments should allocate appropriate resources to child helplines and support them to set up activities in emergency situations.

The activities of CWIN in Nepal and the child helplines in the Asian countries that have been affected by the 2004 Tsunami and 2001 Gujarat Earthquake in India make clear that child

helplines are a very effective mechanism to help ensure the Right to Education in emergency situations. They use innovative methods of communications to reach all children. Child helplines thereby are an essential mechanism to link the target group to actors in the child protection and welfare systems in emergency systems. Cooperation with allied systems in the child protection and welfare system is ingrained into the structures of child helplines, because they are aware that the protection of children's rights requires the efforts of all stakeholders.

Consequently, as an important stakeholder, governments and governmental agencies should cooperate with child helplines and support their efforts to guarantee the Right to Education in emergency situations. This includes logistical support for the activities of child helplines in the affected areas and allocation of appropriate resources of the government to child helplines. For their activities child helplines are dependent on donors. Structural support from governments, allows them to focus their energy and scarce resources on their important work: reaching children and protecting their rights.

Recommendation 2: Governments should look towards child helplines as a source of data that can inform policy and decision making in emergency situations.

The **Jordan River Foundation** runs the Jordanian child helpline. The organisation receives calls regularly from Iraqi children that have resettled in refugee camps in Jordan. Statistical information that the organisation receives is shared with other governmental organisations to inform policy making. The **child helpline in the Palestinian areas** deals with many calls from children that have been denied their education because of the barrier wall that has been constructed by the Israeli government. The Palestinian child helpline provides relevant information to local organisations that can help to ensure the rights of all children are met.

By their active presence and the use of various methods of communication, child helplines are able to reach children that have been caught up in an emergency. Child helplines are thereby able to ascertain what the needs and desires of children in emergency situations are, by listening to the children themselves. Child helplines are thus able to swiftly provide real information on what is taking place in an emergency situation. Information that is readily available is invaluable for policy and decision making in an emergency situation.

Conclusion

The Right to Education, as every human right, is accompanied by obligations. To be able to fulfil the Right to Education, governments and stakeholders should implement comprehensive policies

that address all issues associated with the Right to Education, encompassing availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. In emergency situations, the fulfilment of the Rights is especially difficult, due to the lack of infrastructure and social cohesion, education often is not available, nor is the demand for it accurately known.

Child helplines can play an important role in addressing these issues. Child helplines can link to relevant education resources, raise awareness about the Right to Education and reach those children that have no other means to receive help. Additionally, the contacts that child helplines have with children in the area provide real information about the need for and the measures that should be taken to provide education in an emergency situation to all children.

Due to their working methods and use of innovative means of communication, child helplines are able to build a strong relationship with children and reach those who are in need. Governments should consequently allocate appropriate resources to child helplines, cooperate with child helplines in fulfilling the Right to Education in emergency situations and should view child helplines as those that can relevant provide data on educational needs – as voiced by children themselves. Child Helpline International therefore urges governments to recognise child helplines as an important mechanism to protect children and their rights, especially in emergency situations, and act accordingly.