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A dire need

By Mohammad Ali

It is because of the continuous human crises due to natural and human-made disasters that the notion of emergency education has increasingly attracted the attention of the academia and the international community since the last two decades.

Emergency education takes place in situations where children lack access to their national and community education systems due to occurrence of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, land slides or of human-made crises such as war or conflicts. The developed countries, with their sophisticated education system, are prepared to face any challenge in an emergency situation. However, in developing countries such as Pakistan this concept of education has got the least attention given the fact that Pakistan is still struggling to provide basic education to its population.

Pakistan has been frequently witnessing natural and human-made disasters in the recent decade. The destructive earthquake in Azad Kashmir and northern Pakistan in 2005, conflict and military operation in Malakand and tribal areas in 2009, massive land slides in Hunza in January 2010 and the recent country-wide gigantic floods have forced hundreds of thousands of people to live in camps as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Among this displaced population, children are considered at a high risk of health and educational issues. Besides other suffering, children remain deprived from their basic right of education during the complex emergency situations. The frequent happenings of disasters demands to think seriously about the importance of emergency education and to make conscious effort to provide education to the thousands of children living in the camps as IDPs.

Emergency education is considered important for various reasons. Firstly, due to the disastrous conditions and being displaced from their home, children have to live in a traumatic state. It is in such situations that emergency education is considered helpful to normalise their life and to rehabilitate them.

Second, while children come to camps, they feel bored due to lack of any constructive activity. This idleness sometimes forces them towards harmful things and even child abuse. Emergency education can provide them with an opportunity to become engaged in constructive activities.

Third, education being the basic right of children, they remain deprived of it in the camps during the disasters. This discontinuation of their schooling hurts their educational process. Emergency education supports the children to continue with the process of education.

Fourth, being cut off from their usual environment, the children face challenges to socialise in the new environment and context. Emergency education offers them with an opportunity to socialise with each other.

Finally, it has been highlighted that sometimes the youth are involved in destructive activities by joining gangs and taking part in violence in the absence of constructive activities while living in the camps. In this situation emergency education provides ways to the youth to use their potential in a positive and constructive activity such as games, social activity and voluntary services to displaced persons.

Emergency education requires well-researched and well-planned activities. For this purpose trained and skilled human resource is unavoidable. An educator/worker working with the emergency situation needs to know how to deal with traumatized people. They should also be aware of how to mobilise the people in a crisis situation. They need to be aware of how to teach without the curriculum in the first emergency and transition periods. It is also important for the educators or people involved in emergency education to be sensitive to the cultural aspects of the IDPs. Additionally, the curriculum of such emergency education needs to be related to the context and environment of the students.

A serious and conscious effort is required at multiple levels to develop a workable emergency educational system in our country. For example, the government needs to workout a clear policy regarding emergency education and to implement it mindfully. The universities and institutions which work for education require conducting researches on emergency education keeping the diverse contexts of Pakistan in view. The curriculum of teacher education institutions can encompass a component of emergency education. All the teachers should be given an awareness of emergency education so that they can utilise this skill during emergency situations.

In short, emergency education has become a dire need of our society as in our country natural and man-made disasters frequently compel our people to live as IDPs. Thousands of children suffer educationally in this critical situation. They are in need of emergency education. Providing emergency education to the children can minimise their suffering. For this purpose, serious and conscious efforts are required at various levels such as government, public and private educational institutions, and civil society organisations.