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By Naureen Hossain - IPS UN Bureau / Globetrotter
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Education Is a ‘Life-Saving Intervention’ in Emergencies, Says South Sudan’s Education Minister

In times of crisis, education is an essential component of humanitarian intervention packages, South Sudan’s Minister of General Education and Instruction Awut Deng Acuil told IPS in an exclusive interview.

She was speaking to IPS during the UN’s ECOSOC High-Level Political Forum, during which she participated in the side event, “[Ensuring Education Continuity: The Roles of Education in Emergencies, Protracted Crises and Building Peace.](#)”

Years of conflict in South Sudan and the region, combined with recurring disasters, massive population displacement, and the impact of COVID-19, have adversely impacted the government’s efforts in delivering quality education to all. Yet, their interest and commitment to invest in inclusive education remains.

“Every time there is a crisis, there is a rush for humanitarian assistance as a life-saving intervention. But I think education (should be part) of this as well. When people run away from conflict or natural disasters, they are mostly women and children,” Acuil said.

“These children arrive exhausted and traumatized, and what is crucial is that the (humanitarian) intervention is integrated. We must also work at the same time to create a safe environment where these children can continue to go to school. This helps them psychologically to be engaged in learning (rather) than thinking of what they have gone through,” she continued.

“Education is life-saving. They will play, they will get lessons, they will get counseling from those teachers who are well-trained in [trauma] counseling... All these interventions provide them with a crucial sense of normalcy.”

Interestingly, she said, the first thing children in crisis ask is: “Can we go to school?” According to UNHCR, close to [200,000 people](#)—a majority of whom are children and women—have crossed to South Sudan since April to flee the conflict in Sudan. International humanitarian partners work with the government to ensure the new arrivals receive health, nutrition, and schooling.

“South Sudan has an open-door policy. As soon as they are settled, children have to go to school. [We are] building temporary shelters for them to go to school. Supporting teachers, who will be helping these children, is key.”

Acuil said Education Cannot Wait has been at the forefront of assisting with setting up quality, holistic education opportunities for incoming children. She also stressed the importance of integrating refugees into the national system, citing South Sudan’s inclusion policy as a best practice in the region.

“We have refugee teachers who are head teachers in our public schools. We have refugees in our boarding schools and public schools in South Sudan.”

ECW recently extended its [Multi-Year Resilience Programme](#) in the country with a new \$40 million catalytic grant. GPE provided an additional \$10 million for the program.

The three-year program will be delivered by [Save the Children](#), the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#), and [Finn Church Aid](#), in close coordination with the Ministry of General Education and Instruction and other partners. The investment will reach at least 135,000 crisis-affected children and youth—including refugees, returnees, and host-community children—with holistic education supports that improve access to school, ensure quality learning, enhance inclusivity for girls and children with disabilities, and build resilience to future shocks.

Total ECW funding in South Sudan now tops \$72 million. ECW is calling on five donors to step up with \$5 million each to provide an additional \$25 million in funding to the education in emergency response in South Sudan.

The needs are pressing for the world’s youngest nation. South Sudan continues to receive refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan and requires additional support to address the converging challenges of conflict, climate change, forced displacement, and other protracted crises.

“The multi-year program that was launched last month will help a lot in terms of access, infrastructure, and teacher training. We have ‘hard-to-reach areas’ that have never seen a school, never seen a classroom. These are the places we have prioritized and targeted with this \$40 million grant. Along with girls’ education, and children with disabilities, and also

materials for education, especially printing more books.”

Acuil highlighted the importance of girls’ education, in a context where cultural norms and practices, including child marriage, hinder their access to school. She said the country is tackling the issue through a vast campaign championed by the president that targets traditional leaders, civil society, members of parliament, executives, educators, teachers, and students themselves.

“Our president has taken the lead in campaigning for girls’ education. This year he declared free and compulsory education for all to ensure South Sudan makes up for the two lost generations due to conflict in the country. He is encouraging us to [open] boarding schools for girls, especially. In primary school, the disparity is so close, and in some states, we have more girls than boys. But when they transition to the secondary level, only 18 percent complete their 12-years education.”

Acuil called on UN member states to support education in emergencies and invest more resources.

“Education Cannot Wait has shown and demonstrated that when there are crises, they have a prompt response to help children. Whether during disasters or man-made wars, ECW has been able to do that. We need to focus on that, prioritizing education and also investing in education.”

“If you invest in children today, they will be the leaders of tomorrow. We must help facilitate their education and empower them to help their countries and communities. That is why humanitarian assistance and education should go hand-in-hand.”

“I would like to end this with something I heard from a local girl who said: ‘Education cannot wait, but marriage can wait.’ Our humanity’s strength lies in education, and we must continue to remind those who keep forgetting, and ensure to awaken those who have not yet woken up to be part and parcel of education.”