



IMPROVING CHILDREN'S WELLBEING: AN EVALUATION OF NRC'S BETTER LEARNING PROGRAMME IN PALESTINE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Better Learning Programme* (BLP) aims to improve learning conditions for children and adolescents exposed to war and conflict in Palestine. The Better Learning Programme consists of two components: BLP 1 reaches out to all pupils and provides psycho-education and coping skills, while BLP 2 is a specialised intervention for those with chronic symptoms of traumatic stress. Both components combine a psychosocial and trauma-focussed approach.

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BLP focuses on improving pupils' learning capacity by empowering the school community, integrating coping techniques into daily teaching and learning, and encouraging pupils' natural recovery. The psychosocial support offered in both components aims: (1) to establish a sense of stability and safety; (2) to promote calming and a capacity for self-regulation; (3) to increase community and self-efficacy, including where to find support and how to give and receive support; and (4) to promote mastery and hope. Additionally, BLP works to strengthen collaboration between teachers, counsellors, and parents on supporting students' wellbeing and building resilience in the school community.

NRC Palestine introduced BLP as a pilot project in 2011 to address the acute psycho-educational needs of children affected by conflict-induced trauma in the Gaza Strip, but has since evolved significantly. It is now an approach that spans both acute emergency and more protracted crises situations across Palestine, with the expansion of BLP in 2014 to the West Bank. This evaluation:

- 1 **RETROSPECTIVELY** examines what NRC has been able to accomplish to date in supporting and sustaining protective, inclusive, enabling learning environments through BLP's focus on psycho-educational support to learners affected by a combination of protracted and acute crises in Palestine; and
- 2 **PROSPECTIVELY** help NRC strategize on how it can leverage on the successes and shortcomings of BLP's approach to date to ensure that institutional duty bearers in Palestine and other emergency settings can better support student wellbeing and learning outcomes through school-based psycho-educational support.

The evaluation was carried out in late 2016 by Dr. Ritesh Shah from the University of Auckland, using a range of methodologies, including secondary quantitative analysis of programme monitoring data, an extensive review of programme documentation, the collection of Most Significant Change (MSC) stories from beneficiaries, interviews with key stakeholders within and outside of NRC Palestine, and a series



of validation workshops and discussions at the conclusion of the field work. Based on this, the evaluation reaches several key conclusions listed below:

- ➔ BLP has clear and demonstrable impacts when it comes to improving the wellbeing of participating children, by equipping them with skills for coping with the fear, stress, and anxiety of living in a context of continual conflict.
- ➔ BLP supports conditions for children to better succeed in school, by improving their ability to focus/concentrate in class, strengthen connections between them/their parents and school actors, improve their ability to complete homework, and increase their overall enjoyment of school. That stated, the actual contribution it makes to learning outcomes – as measured by academic achievement or attendance – is difficult to measure, and existing data does not support such linkages.
- ➔ BLP also strengthens the home and school environment for students by improving the capacity of these duty bearers to acknowledge, respond to and address the symptoms of traumatic stress. That stated, BLP on its own, may not fully address the critical need for children to be protected at and on their way to/from school.
- ➔ Importantly, BLP also equips these duty bearers with skills of self-care, healing and support, which are vitally important in the context of Palestine.
- ➔ BLP appears to fill an important niche in the realm of PSS activities in Gaza and West Bank and several aspects of BLP are well aligned with international best practice.
- ➔ NRC has a clear and consistent approach for identifying target schools for BLP, based on prioritising the most vulnerable schools and communities.
- ➔ While there is a clear rationale and process for the targeting of beneficiaries within BLP 2 in participating schools, the degree to which this process is followed systematically varies.

- There remains a significant unmet need within the existing schools that NRC has targeted to date, suggesting a clear impetus for NRC to remain engaged in each of its schools for longer than it currently does within BLP.
- While BLP's period of implementation is typically one solar year (12 months), this timeframe does not fully meet the needs of project beneficiaries, due to its misalignment with the academic year in Palestine, which spans August until June.
- To date, BLP is only partially institutionalised with its key partners (UNRWA and MoEHE) and it is unlikely that the programme in its full extent would be sustained at present independent of NRC's continued engagement/involvement with BLP.

Out of these conclusions come several key recommendations for NRC to consider:

- 1 The Theory of Change for BLP needs to be revisited and should inform the subsequent revision of BLP related M&E tools and approach, to ensure appropriate alignment and to maintain a clear and consistent evidence-base on both quality of implementation and outcomes observed.
- 2 NRC needs to refocus attention and priority on BLP 1 as its primary intervention and impact focus.
- 3 NRC should continue to strengthen BLP's complementary links to other initiatives (such as Improved Education and ICLA initiatives) aimed at improving the protection of children and educational institutions/actors in line with the INEE Minimum Standards.
- 4 NRC should consider planning for and obtaining funding support for a longer minimum period of implementation (18 months versus 12 months), dedicating more of its own staff time to follow up monitoring and support, particularly for BLP 1, and more broadly reconsidering its focus on maximising reach and scale over depth.

- 5 To improve the efficiency and management of NRC's own staff engaged in BLP, existing M&E processes and tools need to be both reconsidered and streamlined, to ensure that attention is given to both components of the programme, and process-driven, immediate, intermediate and long-term outcomes.
- 6 NRC needs to more firmly locate BLP as an inclusive education strategy within UNRWA and MoEHE, and ensure that it does not become perceived as solely a specialised form of PSS provision for severe individual cases.
- 7 Within the planned research into BLP in 2017, NRC should consider assessing the sustainability of impacts on one or more cohort of former beneficiaries, and exploring how context of implementation (i.e. Gaza/ West Bank) and gender shapes beneficiary needs, experiences, and outcomes.

For NRC globally, there are important lessons from the implementation experiences of BLP in Palestine regarding the critical compromises that are made between achieving scale and programme quality, broad-based versus specialised PSS support programme delivery, and the challenges that come about in measuring the educational outcomes of an intervention which straddles the child protection/education border. These are further discussed in the full report.



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