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Reimagining education in emergencies: a conversation between practitioners and scholars

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Introduction

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The education in development community has paid increasing attention to the colonial, imperialist, racialised, and capitalist logics which have underpinned research and practice since the field's inception (see for instance Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020; Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017; S. Walker et al. 2023). Education in emergencies (EiE), which emerged as a distinct sub-field of this wider community, has only recently begun to wrestle with similar questions. In 2020, for instance, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) – a global network comprised of EiE stakeholders across the world – acknowledged the ways its own systems and structures were perpetuating what it described as a 'white supremacy culture' and 'institutional racism' (INEE 2020b). Similar to many other organisations at that time, it made a commitment to change.¹

Since 2020, however, we have observed little substantive change in how the EiE community is working and functioning to redress and repair the damage done by centuries of capitalism, colonialism, and racism. We recognise the EiE sector's many significant accomplishments, serving to support the education of those experiencing crises across the world for decades. Yet, in this introductory essay, we argue that the EiE community needs to respond to its historical and current entanglements with structures of race, empire, and capitalism. We then ask the other contributors to this forum, who represent a range of interests and perspectives within the EiE community, what this response might look like.

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Interrogating the roots of education in emergencies in western humanitarianism

EiE as we know it today is very much imbued within the western humanitarian model (Akkari and Radhouane 2023). As charted by Lopes Cardozo and Novelli (2018), the confluence of UN-backed peacekeeping/humanitarian efforts in the post-cold war era, securitisation concerns which arose in the aftermath of 9/11, and the global mandate and push for universal access to education for all under the MDGs and SDGs together form the current global architecture around EiE. This has produced an ontology grounded in western norms and ideals which includes, according to Brun and Shuayb (2023): (1) belief in education as an unmitigated good; (2) short-term solutions driven by access considerations; and (3) action driven by efficiency and scale. EiE has thereby been integrated into the ‘power dynamics of western humanitarianism’ and driven by ‘the interests and funding from governments of the global north’ (9). Such embeddedness makes EiE prone to several critiques which are currently levelled at western humanitarianism.

Firstly, the humanitarian sector hides behind a cloak of impartiality and doing no harm, which as Slim (2021) has argued is ‘ethically simplistic and routinely falls victim to bias’. Western humanitarianism is intricately tied to the geopolitical and economic interests of the donors which support this work. This is observable within EiE responses, where funding remains grossly uneven, and does not match with actual need. A recent analysis by INEE (2020a, 26–7) highlights how populations most in need of funding for education programmes are being left behind, due to high profile crises crowding out space and monies for more acute, protracted situations which do not hold the attention of the international community. INEE, however, fails to attribute this to the politicised nature of humanitarianism and global aid to education, despite strong evidence demonstrating how external engagement and funding in the sector has long been driven by geopolitical aims and interests rather than need (Novelli 2023). Beyond funding, education has also been actively used as a tool for winning ‘hearts and minds’ and to indoctrinate young people with loyalties and interests towards specific political regimes – as has been the case over successive periods of US-based engagement in Afghanistan (Novelli 2010). Education has long played a role in subjugating or dispossessing peoples through acts of symbolic or direct violence – take for instance education in settler-colonial states (see Sriprakash, Gerrard, and Rudolph 2022). And in many conflict-affected societies this is still the case, with education reproducing or perpetuating such violence (Shah and Cardozo 2015). Yet, in mainstream EiE discourse, values of neutrality, impartiality and independence are often used to obfuscate the varied interests and agendas at play.

Secondly, western humanitarianism has a long-standing relationship to imperialism and colonisation. Its genesis was based on a moral imperative and need to save the souls of ‘uncivilised’ peoples under the guise of white saviourism. Such saviourism justified acts of regulation, surveillance, incarceration, and dispossession under the veil of protection and benevolence of the morally superior European peoples (Edmonds and Johnston 2016). Current approaches in EiE have been critiqued for reproducing these logics. For example, educational initiatives funded by international organisations are often designed in the Global North with little or no input from

people affected by crisis. When implemented, these poorly contextualised EiE interventions promote western educational norms and knowledges and result in little long-term impact on learners or their communities (see for example Dalrymple 2023; Flemming et al. 2021). Additionally, many EiE interventions portray young people and their communities in crisis-affected settings as traumatised and unable to cope without external support/assistance.² This perpetuates a culture of white saviourism and helps to legitimate the presence and profiteering of international organisations from such ‘trauma’ (Morris 2023).

Thirdly, western humanitarianism has contributed to racial capitalism by firstly categorising many who are dispossessed as refugee and asylum seekers, and then allowing their stateless status to be used as a mechanism for exploitation or expropriation of labour and livelihoods (Dadusc and Mudu 2022). One example of how the EiE community both contributes to and benefits from humanitarianism’s embeddedness within this system is in regard to refugee teachers. In many instances, refugee teachers work as ‘volunteers’. If compensated, they receive small stipends or incentive payments and are paid significantly lower amounts than national teachers and staff. Rates of pay and conditions of work often vary, are time-limited, and often, are irregularly paid out – heightening the precarity of refugee teachers’ labours. Such precarity, and the lack of employment opportunities elsewhere allows implementing partners to garner excess value from these teachers’ work, and garner efficiency and scalability of their services (Shah 2023).

Fourthly, there has been a failure to redress the power asymmetries in western humanitarianism. Activists have argued that northern actors drive humanitarian policy and practice, wielding influence over those in the Global South, including implementing partners and those most acutely affected by conflict and crisis (DA Global 2021; Peace Direct 2021). A racialised logic drives these power inequities, which posits that the ‘west knows best’ and that those in the global south lack the means or capacity to resolve their own problems (Bian 2022; Pailey 2020; Shanks and Paulson 2022). Yet, such racialised power asymmetries are rarely acknowledged or discussed in EiE research, practice, or policymaking (Oddy 2020; S. Walker et al. 2023). The silencing of such racism in EiE is perpetuated by the very power asymmetries that characterise EiE decision-making, where racialised people, particularly those from the global south, hold limited influence to voice their concerns about racism and the ways it manifests at individual, organisational, and structural levels (Menashy and Zakharia 2022a; Shah et al. 2023). Additionally, such power erases and obscures endogenous efforts by crisis-affected individuals to extend protection and learning opportunities to others in their community (see Aloudat and Khan 2021; Oddy 2023). We see this as a reflection of global white ignorance, whereby the perceived benevolence of the global EiE architecture sanitises racial inequalities and silences conversations on race (Menashy and Zakharia 2022b).

In respect to our own roles, we recognise that, as academics, and members of the EiE community, we too are implicated in the dynamics we critique above. We have long benefited from the ways in which our expertise is privileged over those with lived experience, and as a result, our careers and institutions have reaped benefits from flows of power and resources. This epistemic injustice is itself a product of colonialism and racism – and we see it continuing to play out in the settler-colonial institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Turtle Island/Canada which we inhabit.

This leaves us with the question: What then is required to reimagine an education in emergencies where those historically excluded from meaningful engagement with EiE systems, structures and institutions sit at its centre? Must we actively dismantle the current apparatus and rebuild it anew, taking seriously Audre Lorde's pronouncement that 'the masters' tools will never dismantle the masters' house' (1984)? Or do we recognise that despite its flaws, the EiE sector as it exists today holds inherent value, and that particular reforms to policies and approaches might allow for more just and equitable practices? And what might this reimagining mean for our own roles in perpetuating, challenging, dismantling, or reforming a set of structures that are fundamentally oppressive? We turn to the invited contributors to respond and begin a much-needed conversation.

Dismantling EiE?

Julie Chinnery has worked as an EiE practitioner and researcher in humanitarian contexts across the globe for the past 15 years, currently on the Ukraine response.

Merriam-Webster selected the word 'authentic' as its word of the year in 2023 (BBC 2023). In times where the trustworthiness of information sources, political rhetoric and social media are questionable, it seems that people are searching for a more authentic – more 'real' and 'true to one's own spirit' – experience. The recent rise of global social movements mentioned in the introduction highlight an increasing push to move beyond superficial 'lip service' towards experience which is more profound and transformative. This could arguably apply to current global guidance on 'western humanitarianism'. The Grand Bargain (2016), for example, offers suggestions of what we could be doing to support positive transformation of the humanitarian aid sector – including addressing equity deficiencies within the system and the imperative for more localised action – but, in actuality, the Grand Bargain's guidance seldom leads to that.

Shah and Menashy ask whether 'the EiE sector needs to be dismantled'. A complete dismantling? No, as some authentic steps towards systemic change have already been taken, albeit suffering delay in uptake, dissemination and application across the broader sector. But, 'significant disruption of mindsets and reformation of policy and practice'? Yes, please. And now, thanks. It is not logical for the EiE sector to continue working the way we currently are when evidence exists for the imperative to change. And the longer we continue to defer authentic change, the more this outdated model will continue to grow (Peter Nissen 2024).

INEE's updated *Minimum Standards* (2024e) and their *Strategic Framework 2024–2030* (2024d) also reflect recognition of the need for transformation. Both reference the INEE (2020b) *Statement on Anti-Racism and Racial Equity*, with the *Minimum Standards* stressing the imperative for EiE actors to 'engage critically with these concepts, to work for locally led humanitarian action, and [to] take action to dismantle unbalanced power structures and inequality' (INEE 2024e, 27). The language within both the *Strategic Framework* and *Minimum Standards* is more nuanced towards localisation, equity and decoloniality than earlier versions, and both link to new resources towards this, for example Menashy and Zakharia's (2022a) *Guiding Principles for Partnerships in Education in Emergencies*. However, potential for these documents to catalyse actual

mindset and systemic change is impeded by then failing to acknowledge and address inequities within the sector. These documents unpack in detail *what* we do in terms of technical actions and programming, while only superficially referencing *how* we do – or *should* do – it, in terms of acknowledging and navigating existing power dynamics within the sector for shared ownership of the actions.

I write this response as a current INGO advisor on education and youth programming in the regional response to the 2022 escalation of war in Ukraine. Various factors have seen this crisis response – both within Ukraine and in neighbouring countries – characterised by the imperative for the international humanitarian community to work in partnership with local actors. However, despite the many enablers in this region, we have seen several opportunities to foster *authentic* localised approaches ignored by international responders (see for example, Alexander 2022; Moallin, Hargrave, and Saez 2023). A Humanitarian Leadership Academy and Save the Children UK report (October 2022–March 2023) on the humanitarian response in Poland concludes that there has thus far been a general ‘lack of transparency and accountability in the relationship, with international actors operating with a false assumption that their ways of working are universal’ (18).

The lost opportunity to promote localised approaches inside Ukraine prompted local humanitarian actors, early in the response, to draft an open letter demanding that international donors and NGOs ‘cut the bureaucracy’, invest in local priorities, ways of knowing and evidence, and to ‘start to learn from us’ (National Network of Local Philanthropy and Development 2023). The system wasn’t – and still isn’t – adapting to local ways but is instead attempting to transform local ways into western humanitarian ones. The recent INEE documents reflect this assumption, including only limited acknowledgement of different ways of knowing, collaborating and generating evidence. Two years after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, international humanitarian structures are still being imposed upon the region rather than being built on structures that already existed.

Tangible application of localisation practices continues to also present a challenge for those who drafted it. One of EiE’s biggest donors – ECHO – recently published its guidance note on promoting equitable partnerships with local responders in humanitarian settings, promoting a ‘targeted approach to the strengthening of education systems’ (DG ECHO 2023, 9). However, as noted by Loy (2023), despite the rhetoric of this document, it fails in one of ‘several core issues: giving funding directly to local groups . . . the European Union’s humanitarian funds can only go to EU-based groups and UN agencies’.

In the Ukraine EiE response, some locally-led funding mechanisms and financing models are available which actively acknowledge power dynamics between stakeholders. The concept of the ‘mini grant’ (Di Vicenz and Hallinan 2023) – small, flexible grants, the concept of which is not new within development response globally, but is uncommon in the humanitarian space – has found some popularity. With this model, small grants are supplied by flexible donors and administered by INGOs for local groups, for which financial reporting is minimised with accountability focused on project impact instead. I have seen this method used effectively in Ukraine to fund the communities of war-damaged schools to lead their own infrastructure rehabilitation efforts, and for youth education projects (NRC and Youth Platform 2023) to leverage this additional funding.

These mechanisms take a strengths-based approach where trust is built between the funder and the affected populations to lead their own responses. These approaches are embedded within the communities themselves, contributing to sustainability, more democratic relationships with communities, and ‘even, at a more emotional level, [to] restoring hope’ (Vishwanathan 2023). However, without more donor appetite for new funding models, these approaches have thus far remained limited.

Finally, as reminded in the *Anti-Racism and Decolonising Toolkit* (Bond 2023), INGOs have a key role to play in reimagining EiE, not just in adhering to the Grand Bargain and the ‘localisation agenda’, but to actually *evolving* our processes to allow for action which is led by local actors. As an accountable part of the EiE ecosystem myself, for me this means more intentionally fostering and resourcing space and time to capture and learn about – together with our partners – the impacts of locally-led EiE action and sharing it, not only with EiE colleagues, but also with our donors, leadership and networks. It means better leveraging – and ceding where possible – my position of power to promote more contextually relevant voices and experiences to inform decision-making and action. It means holding myself, my leadership, our donors and global EiE platforms more accountable to consistent review of the narratives we share, the language we use and the types of evidence and knowledge we promote (Oxfam 2023). It means working with more authenticity.

A personal reflection: the myth of neutrality

Lisa Chung Bender is a non-profit executive committed to protecting and advancing women’s and children’s rights globally. She holds an MPP from Vanderbilt University.

Fresh out of graduate school, I travelled to Liberia to begin a new job. I was humbled to meet my team, an incredible group of professionals who had survived a brutal civil war and were committed to restoring an educational system that had been dismantled in the conflict. Upon being hired, I’d been informed that this office had the most investigations into misconduct and human resources violations within the organisation. The recent conflict had left deep mistrust and sometimes open animosities, particularly between the ‘Americo-Liberians’ and indigenous groups. Yet, there I was, an American, funded by USAID, to ‘supervise’ them.

Hired as the new manager of the team, I was there to re-establish teacher training institutes, yet I had never been a teacher trainer. I had never run an institute. I did not speak the local languages. In fact, I had never been to the country before, and knew little of its politics or pressures. My colleagues, having lived through the conflict, had immeasurable insight into needs, constraints, and the current state of education. They came primarily from teaching and administrative backgrounds and were all more experienced and more qualified than I to hold the position.

I believed in the objectives of the project, and I believed in my ability to make a meaningful contribution. However, I was taken aback by the neo-colonial, and sometimes outright colonial, undertones of the systems and relationships. I was unexpectedly thrust from the working class to a protected elite, complete with chauffeurs, housekeepers, and economically segregated social spaces. In my own country, as a woman, a racial minority, and a first-generation immigrant, this type of privilege was a new and

troubling experience. Instead of being a target of structural barriers to equity and insidious discrimination, I was suddenly a perpetrator.

As a graduate-school educated professional from a Western country, with some experience in a different West African nation, I was hired by an international NGO for the position. Could the position have been filled by a national team member? Yes, and so began my year of cognitive dissonance. I was feeling the extreme discomfort that arose from holding conflicting beliefs and values. The idea of segregation disgusted me, and yet I was living and working in a segregated system. I came to humanitarian work because I wanted to protect and promote human rights and believed in the agency that education could provide to realise those rights, yet was participating in an oppressive system that undermined the dignity of my colleagues.

One of the core principles of humanitarian work is ‘do no harm’, which encompasses neutrality. Neutrality is often operationalised as not taking sides, though this has been challenged in spaces for humanitarian practitioners for over 20 years (Humanitarian Practice Network 2003). It has more recently been characterised as having ‘effectively served to reinforce power discrepancies between authoritarian regimes, opposition forces, and civilians in civil wars’ (Abeytia et al. 2023), which make up the greatest proportion of humanitarian action. Internalising a more expansive application of neutrality drove my discomfort and self-reflection, a feeling that my presence was contributing to inequality. This broader understanding of neutrality would be productive in critiquing how humanitarian action relates to power. Every humanitarian action should be examined – does it advance our core principles and values, or contradict them? Often humanitarian action is automatically assigned a positive value, or at least considered neutral. However, I am not alone in believing that neutrality can be harmful.

In a collection of reflections from curators on how art institutions can ‘be better’ Laura Raicovich emphasises how ‘institutions are committed to the myth of neutrality. Power relies on the myth of neutrality in order to have its way. Neutrality reflects the needs, desires, and values of the dominant culture . . . but until we dismantle this fictional neutrality, change will only be made on the surface’ (as quoted in Petrovich and White 2018, 79).

Tools and lessons exist. Our sector and others aim to advance gender equity and have analytical approaches to assess where interventions fall on a range of exploitive to transformational. In EiE specifically, we have many tools born from the Learning for Peace initiative (INEE 2016) and Conflict Sensitive Education (INEE 2013) that instruct us to never assume neutrality and critically engage with how education may contribute to conflict.

I believe the EiE system can be reformed because we are the system. We need more cognitive dissonance, individually and collectively, and to use this discomfort to drive change. We must come to terms with the reality that our personal actions and those of our institutions are rarely neutral, and can cascade into many harms, large and small. As we reflect on how EiE’s institutions can ‘be better’, challenging this neutrality in ourselves and our systems is essential and urgent.

Can the EiE community be reformed?

Armando Ali is Chief Executive Officer of PAL Network, a South-South partnership of 17 member organisations working to promote children's foundational learning across Africa, Asia, and America

The world is currently affected by a learning crisis mostly felt by children in the global south. Citizen-led Assessment (CLA) data indicates that on average only 4 in 10 children in the global south can read with comprehension. As I acknowledge the current learning crisis in the global south, I agree that crises-affected children are worse off. Children forced to relocate or born while their parents are on the move lack the basic conditions necessary for learning. This reality has catalysed the formation of a specific movement to address Education in Emergency (EiE) needs.

This reflection begins with what I consider the most noticeable, articulated, and welcoming structure for responding to EiE – the INEE (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies). Allow me to state that I am part of it; I fully believe in its mission and I commend its creation and the way it brings together varied voices to respond to specific needs of EiE. INEE's mission is to ensure that all individuals have the right to a quality, safe, relevant and equitable education. However, we can see in its composition and structure, signs of global inequalities that must be addressed if we want to make EiE response more sustainable in meeting the needs of affected populations.

As stated above, INEE represents the most structured way to respond to EiE providing a coordinated response to the tremendous effort required to respond to EiE. Individuals and organisations can freely adhere to it. Unlike other similar entities, INEE is not coordinating or guiding fundraising for EiE. It is essentially a hub of information, data, resources, and knowledge to inform responses to EiE. It does not dictate norms. It makes available different tools and resources that are currently or can be used to inform actions in EiE.

Yet while diversity of thought exists in the EiE sector, the data is telling us that people affected by crises are not the most represented in the humanitarian community. It also tells us that community organisations in the crises-affected areas are not the ones leading the response to EiE. Crises affected populations and entities are not at the forefront of representation in the INEE community (Brun and Shuayb 2023).

The question we should ask ourselves is: How are the most affected people and organisations included in the INEE platform, and how can their voices, perspectives and skills be considered whenever solutions to EiE are crafted?

One of the pressing problems faced in the EiE space is that the needs of crises affected populations require rapid answers in order to respond to pressing needs. Food, water and shelter are very often among the priorities. Education appears to be a permanent need as we will explore later. At the same time, the affected populations and institutions need to be alert to respond to the next crises as we know that such events are often recurrent.

INEE is a platform known for dialogue and sharing. The Data and Evidence Summit held by INEE in June 2023 brought together researchers and practitioners interested on EiE. Plenary and parallel sections promoted peer learning of what is going well and what challenges still prevail. Although the lack of evidence on learning outcomes for crises-affected children was visible, there was substantial evidence in other domains.

My personal experience at the conference was enlightening. I had the opportunity to learn a lot about other players and ongoing initiatives in EiE. Additionally, the INEE's working groups are designed to bring together members with special interests in specific areas. There are working groups on accelerated education, early child development, gender, socio-emotional learning, child protection, among others (INEE 2024b). The network also provides a list of resources made available for members and other organisations. INEE's website is full of resources in different thematic areas (INEE 2024c). Advocacy for a rapid and sustainable response for crisis-affected children is also noticeable at INEE. Members pass their messages about what needs to be done and voice their concerns. Amplifying the voice of the members' results is the democratisation of the space. INEE consistently calls for increased funding to enhance the response to EiE, highlighting the collective push towards better outcomes.

Yet, despite significant progress, there are important gaps that need to be addressed. The EiE space still faces the challenge of developing localised responses and inclusive learning outcomes measurements. The EiE sector is important in helping to strengthen data on education in contexts of crisis. On the measurement side, efforts should be made to measure early, measure all, measure well.

Assessment tools used by actors in foundational learning are designed to ensure data captures the learning progress of all children. This includes those from marginalised communities and hard to reach areas, including those experiencing conflict and crisis, aiming also to highlight the realities of the Global South. Data is therefore essential to inform evidence-based policy changes and resourcing to reduce educational inequalities. Data is a powerful tool for advocacy, yet is sorely lacking in settings of crisis. Without evidence-based advocacy efforts, disparities in learning outcomes among vulnerable demographic groups such as out of school children, children with disabilities and children in emergencies may go unnoticed and unaddressed. The right to foundational learning belongs to all children, we must therefore continue to ask ourselves which children's voices cannot be heard, in particular those living through emergencies.

In conclusion, I share two ideas on what else can be done to make EiE response more organic and sustainable. One, considering that communities and local organisations are underrepresented in the response to emergencies, solutions to EiE should consider developing local capacities and building local institutions to respond to the needs of EiE. The EiE community should reflect in ways to increase representation of affected populations in the global platforms for EiE. This should include developing local capacity to respond to the needs of affected population. This can potentially provide rapid and cost-effective responses.

Secondly, embracing the upcoming PAL large-scale assessments, we can promote evidence based solutions to EiE learning crises. PAL Network's 2024/25 ICAN and ICARe assessment will be collecting comparable data in 15 countries using internationally recognised tools. PAL Network's proposed large-scale common assessment offers an opportunity to bridge this data deficit by forging robust learning assessment systems modelled on the Citizen Led Assessment (CLA) approach. The assessment, primarily focusing on Numeracy and Literacy across 15 PAL Network geographies across Africa, South Asia and Latin America will also include pilot modules covering disability, education in emergencies, and social-emotional learning, thereby broadening and promoting a more inclusive understanding of learning outcomes in crises affected populations.

Implicated knowledges in education in emergencies: toward an ethic of solidarity and liberation³

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The ongoing genocide in Occupied Palestine, and protracted wars in Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and elsewhere, underscore the contradictions of a field dedicated to addressing human suffering—one where significant global attention and resources have been invested in education in emergencies (EiE), while simultaneous spending on armed conflict has killed an unprecedented number of children, decimated education systems, and wrought a staggering increase in forcibly displaced people.

These contradictions weigh heavily on us as we respond to Shah and Menashy's call to reimagine EiE as a field of scholarship and practice. We ask ourselves what conditions, principles, or demands might be required to reimagine a field that flourishes in response to devastation and operates by the same colonial, imperialist, racialised, saviourist, and capitalist logics (Brun and Shuayb 2023; Menashy and Zakharia 2022b; Novelli and Kutan 2023; Oddy 2023)? While a radical reimagining would entail the abolition of state-sanctioned harm, largely armed, and sometimes orchestrated by Northern states against their largely Southern counterparts, we give particular attention to the fundamental changes required of scholars and practitioners engaged in 'knowledge work' – meaning spaces of research, meaning-making, mutual teaching and learning, and self-reflection – that underpin the field's structures and ways of working. We draw from our research and experiences as Southern researchers based at institutions in the global North and South to offer three commitments that together help us to radically reimagine our roles as implicated subjects (Novelli and Kutan 2023).

The first commitment demands a shift from a politics of saviourism to a politics of solidarity. The EiE knowledge industry often embodies 'saviourism,' an orientation of benevolence or charity that perpetuates paternalism and places the 'saviour' in a position of power, with little accountability or scrutiny (Khan, Dickson, and Sondarjee 2023). These ways of working empower imperialist actors who have historically been implicated in genocide and destruction, rather than holding them accountable. The dynamic persists because EiE industry funding often relies on imperial support. The recent suspension of UNRWA funding by pro-Israeli governments in the Global North serves as a clear example of the politicisation of aid (Oddy and Will 2024; Save the Children 2024).

An education driven by a politics of saviourism is unlikely to address injustice or nurture liberation. We instead commit to a politics of solidarity that rejects the harm done to education communities. Knowledge work guided by a politics of solidarity is attentive to unequal power and reorients the structures and processes of EiE in ways that centre concerned communities, repositioning global EiE actors into complementary roles. EiE research in this vein seeks to learn from and support diverse forms of resistance and struggle in education. It avoids the tyranny of research participation that is externally imposed. And it proceeds through long-term unconditional relationships that are non-transactional and shaped by trust and respect. In our research, we encountered refugee-

led initiatives where interventions were defined, researched, and addressed by the community, with others in invited supporting roles (Menashy, Zakharia, and Shuayb 2021). These partnerships centre the ongoing knowledge work and educational efforts of affected populations (Zakharia 2024).

Working towards a politics of solidarity requires a second fundamental shift, away from the prevailing epistemic hegemony and arrogance often exhibited by EiE scholars and practitioners, towards what we observe as epistemic diversity and humility. EiE research is often complicit, or at best, naive about how it is implicated in perpetuating colonial and imperialist values, theories, epistemologies, research practices, and knowledge. Its Northern-centric perspective has not been adequately scrutinised, leading to the perpetuation of deficit perspectives and the privileging of Northern and often racialised expertise (Bian 2022; Menashy and Zakharia 2022b; Oddy 2023; Pailey 2020). This epistemic arrogance devalues and marginalises alternative forms of knowledge by imposing hegemonic forms of knowledge and knowledge work (Connell 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Quijano and Ennis 2000). It stifles diversity in educational approaches, learning methods, and research, and instead imposes universal models that fail to account for contextual nuances.

In our research, we have observed respect for epistemic diversity through partnerships that build on the wealth of knowledge within communities. Through an orientation of epistemic humility (Greer 2023; Srivastava 2022; M. Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2020), EiE partners embraced different ways of knowing and doing (Zakharia 2024). Such practices challenge the political economy of knowledge production within humanitarianism, which has systematically marginalised Global South researchers and their knowledges (Gauthier, Bazuzi, and Lameke 2020). By reversing theory building from South to North and repositioning expertise (Connell 2020), such practices also disrupt extractivist research dynamics.

A third commitment addresses these dynamics by moving away from extractivist research to research as reparation. Research funding criteria often disadvantage Southern scholars, relegating them to the role of data collectors rather than providing them with resources to contribute as knowledge producers and theorists. Furthermore, the parameters used to assess the ethics of research are often minimalistic and legalistic, primarily focused on protecting academic institutions. These assessments frequently overlook the ethics surrounding the extraction and deployment of knowledge, including considerations of the value of the research to the communities concerned. This scenario is further exacerbated by citational politics and research networks, where Southern research communities are neither equally nor adequately represented in scholarship or decision-making processes (Oddy 2023). Publication language and procedures perpetuate this imbalance, as accessibility and review mechanisms often act as barriers to Southern researcher access and contributions (Shuayb, Saab, and Brun 2023). Furthermore, the imposition of high registration fees for convenings, and the selection of venues in Global North countries, pose a significant challenge for Southern scholars who may be restricted from engaging based on bordering regimes and resourcing.

To address these disparities and contradictions, reparation through concrete shifts in knowledge production and dissemination practices is required. This entails acknowledging and compensating for unpaid labour, creating spaces for theories and ways of working to emerge from the Global South, and rethinking research criteria to be more

inclusive and equitable. Research as reparation embraces a politics of solidarity and epistemic diversity, and it reorients research agendas and funding to prioritise and value the needs and perspectives of impacted communities and those historically marginalised.

In our research, evidence of these three commitments – to a politics of solidarity, to epistemic diversity and humility, and to research as reparation – emerges at every level of engagement, including in school-based practices; in partnerships among Southern and Northern-based organisations; and among dissenting voices in global governance circles. Such commitments may serve to reconfigure EiE scholarship and reimagine the field – from forms of knowledge work implicated in imperial projects to forms of knowledge work implicated in solidarities, reparation, and mutual liberation (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021; Novelli and Kutun 2023). While how this is realised will look different from our varied locations in EiE, it is imperative that we mobilise collectively towards an ethic of solidarity and liberation.

Pay not aid: a response to EiE reimagined

Lyndsay Bird is an internationally renowned educator who has worked for several organisations including Save the Children, UNICEF and UNESCO. She has written and edited a range of publications on education in emergencies.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, most aid agencies appear unwilling rather than unable to change. The top down, hierarchical approach to delivery of education services in crisis situations has barely altered in the thirty years I have worked in the education in emergency (EiE) field. Shah and Menashy's commentary well captures the self-serving hypocrisy that surrounds the aid industry, and the EiE community as a sub-sector. The continued, and some might say wilful, reluctance by most organisations working in EiE to devolve responsibility and give agency to the communities they serve, may be because they are 'integrated into the "power dynamics of western humanitarianism" and driven by "the interests and funding from governments of the global north"' (Brun and Shuayb 2023, 9).

Donor funding with its geopolitical interests has over the decades resulted in a humanitarian aid industry that feeds itself, that pretends to defer to those it purports to serve, yet bloats top layers of management. Few aid organisations are immune. Many, if not most, provide salaries of tens of thousands, (and at CEO level, hundreds of thousands) of dollars to their international staff, yet balk at providing minimal salaries for teachers or their national staff (Bird and Schmid 2021). As a former UN staff member and international consultant, I admit to being part of the system and benefitting from it. Eventually the only way my conscience would allow was to leave what I saw as an inequitable system. My hope was that eventually a meaningful localisation process would be fully employed by the organisation that claimed to have initiated it. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

The current top-down model of international aid is not only inequitable, but also continues to support white supremacy and iniquitous colonial attitudes that many organisations are keen to discard. It fails to give genuine agency and direct control of finances to communities. The Paris Declaration of 2005 (OECD 2005) set out principles

to make international aid more effective at a country level, and the Grand Bargain of 2016 (IASC 2016) committed to improve the level, quality, and delivery of humanitarian funding. The recent and repeated calls for localisation in all its guises appear to be a ‘... natural place for working beyond silos as crisis affected populations tend not to operate with the same distinctions between sectors that structure the international aid apparatus’ (S. Barakat and Milton 2020, 149). However, ‘local’ within international aid frameworks can be wide-ranging, and for expediency often implies engagement at an organisational rather than household level. Additionally, lacking from approaches to date is a commitment to shifting financial control of aid to community level where services are delivered.

While humanitarian organisations might argue they are utilising cash transfers as a mechanism to give greater direct control, only 18 percent of humanitarian aid is given in the form of unconditional cash transfers (Give Directly n.d.). Rather, most aid continues to filter through intermediary channels and maintains what Shah and Menashy refer to as a ‘racialised logic’. It remains a trickle-down model that sees most benefit for those at the top. It is also reflective of a view in humanitarian circles that those directly affected by crises lack the means or capacity to resolve their own problems.

In response to Shah and Menashy’s questions, I believe a radical reworking of the current aid model needs to be implemented. It is incumbent on the West to pay what is owed with interest as part of reparations for the disasters of imperial history. This would require Western governments to give cash freely without conditions in recompense for hundreds of years of building their economies on the backs of colonial empires (Hickel 2015). There are several ways this could be done – through unconditional cash transfers, diaspora investments and/or the provision of universal basic income (see Clingendael 2023; Gentilini et al. 2020; Give Directly, n.d.; Room 1 2023). All three approaches represent a ‘pay not aid’ approach to EiE based on a revisionist model of the humanitarian system, delivering support and assistance directly to the household level (Klees 2010). More research may be necessary to determine which combination of these models would be appropriate and feasible for the EiE sector, assuming the EiE community is sufficiently committed to genuine and meaningful localisation.

To do this we first need to rid the aid industry of the patriarchal suspicion that households cannot manage their own finances and do not know what is best for them in times of crises. Research suggests that women, when given direct funding, spend it on health, food, and education. And education remains one of the top priorities that parents ask for during an emergency. It is seen as the most efficient way for their children to escape poverty (Nicolai and Hine 2015). Enabling education for children in crisis situations could therefore be ensured through direct cash transfers, allowing households to support what they value.

Reimagining and changing the current inequities of the aid system is possible: by collaborating with communities to demand justice and reparation, and by lobbying donors and governments to pay freely and universally. Only with trust and solidarity at its heart, can our community be genuinely led by those we serve.

Final reflections: what next for EiE?

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What each of the authors agree on, based on their extensive experiences and diverse perspectives within international organisations, (I)NGOs, and research institutions, is the urgent need for EiE to be reimagined and/or restructured from the ways it currently operates. Where we differ, is how best to achieve this.

For Lisa Chung Bender, it begins through processes of self-reflection, challenging cultures of white saviorism, racism and power which pervade the sector, as well as the education project writ large. This needs to extend, according to Julie Chinnery, towards a commitment to authenticity, which for her means ceding power and control to locally situated actors and experts and ensuring those promoting localisation are held to account for following through on such promises. Both Bender and Chinnery express discomfort with the norms of whiteness which have pervaded their work within the establishment, and both articulate a reparative and justice orientation to their ongoing engagement in the field (see Sriprakash 2022).

Armando Ali provides a striking example of what is possible when such stakeholders can advocate and shape agendas for action based on what they most value for their children, a point which Lyndsay Bird also makes when arguing for a shift towards direct aid mechanisms as reparations for affected households and local communities. But, as Polly Pallister Wilkins (2021, 103) notes, it is unclear if localisation itself is sufficient to address the cultures of white supremacy and racial hierarchies which pervade humanitarianism. Instead, she advocates for ontologies founded on relations of care and respect for diverse worldviews, allowing us to see and understand humanity differently. This perspective aligns with Zeena Zakharia and Maha Shuayb's vision for a politics of solidarity, alongside a need for epistemic diversity and humility within the EiE community. Ali, Bird, Zakharia and Shuayb all note this requires a shared appreciation of the deep challenges and complicities we currently face in our field, and an ability to reflect on the modest contributions we might each make towards an alternative ontology of EiE knowledge production and practice (see B. Barakat, Bellino, and Paulson 2024).

Unfortunately, fostering, nurturing and sustaining these solidarities remain difficult. This is due to what Shields and Paulson (2024) identify as a desire to protect privilege, power and resources and the systems and structures which enable it, ones which are maintained through epistemologies of ignorance and erasure, including within SDG 4 itself (S. Walker et al. 2023).

A report produced two months after INEE's (2020a) bold statement on Anti-Racism and Decolonisation identified the community's 'highly racialized hierarchy of leadership' and its maintenance of 'systems, structures and workplans described by white people' (Garton-Kristiansen 2020). Four years later, little has changed. As Oddy (2023, 456) aptly states, 'intentionality alone cannot rectify the entrenched inequitable dynamics.' But we, as with the contributors to this Forum, remain hopeful, that in space where we both recognise our own implications in such dynamics and actively resist them, new realms of intellectual inquiry, dialogue, and practical action become possible.

Notes

1. See IRC, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-statement>; Save the Children, <https://www.savethechildren.net/building-anti-racist-organisation>; World Vision, <https://www.worldvision.org/christian-faith-news-stories/3-ways-world-vision-fighting-racial-bias>

injustice; CARE International, <https://www.careinternational.org.uk/stories/blacklivesmatter-statement-support-care-international-uk>.

2. See for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMdoId2PSTQ&t=2s> as an illustration of one INGO's portrayal of such trauma and the need for its engagement in times of crisis.
3. This essay is the outcome of dialogic and collaborative writing. Please reference as: Zakharia-Shuayb, Zeena-Maha (2024). Implicated knowledges in education in emergencies: Toward an ethic of solidarity and liberation. *Compare*.

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