## Standardizing chaos: a neo-institutional analysis of the INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction

Patricia Bromley[a]; Marina Andina[b]
[a] School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA [b] Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Overseas Processing Entity, Vienna, Austria

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*[a]School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA; [b]Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Overseas Processing Entity, Vienna, Austria*

Violent conflict and humanitarian disasters such as floods, famines, or tsunamis, have existed since the start of human history. However, it is only recently that education in these emergency situations has emerged as a visible organizational field. We aim to use a unique theoretical application of sociological neo-institutionalism to explain the rapid and recent rise of emergency education as a professional field, focusing specifically on the creation of global standards called the INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction. We argue that international standards in emergency education arise due to the institutionalization of education as a human right and rationalization of approaches to solving social problems. A key implication of our argument is that decoupling between formal standards and on-the-ground practice is likely to be endemic, lessening the day-to-day utility of the standards. However, the creation of international standards and an organizational field of emergency education professionals may provide long-term benefits by contributing to the re-definition of humanitarian intervention to include education.

**Keywords:** emergency education; institutional theory; standardization; professionalization; humanitarian response; international development; human rights

## Introduction

Violent armed conflict and natural disasters have existed since the start of human history. Each emergency, ranging from sudden natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia to chronic armed conflict as in the Palestinian territories, is distinct in scope and scale and takes place in a unique context that shapes humanitarian responses. Amidst these age-old crises is the recent rise of an unexpected phenomenon – global standards for providing a common minimum level of education to those affected by crises. Given the extreme dissimilarity of emergency contexts, it is surprising to see the rise of a special field of education conceptualizing these events as similar, and unforeseen that chaotic emergency situations would be an appropriate venue for the creation of global standards in education.

This paper aims to contribute to the small but growing academic literature on emergency education, responding to urgent calls for research that goes beyond unpublished agency reports (Talbot 2005; Kagawa 2005). We provide a sociological explanation for the rapid and recent creation of the field of emergency education through

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*Corresponding author. Email: triciam@stanford.edu

an analysis of the accompanying international standards, called the Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction (hereafter referred to as the MS).

The paper argues that global standards in emergency education arise as a rational response to crises due to two broad world cultural changes. First, education worldwide has become conceptualized as a fundamental human right. The notion of a right to education emerged first after World War II, but gained widespread acceptance with the rise of a global human rights movement in the 1990s. Acceptance of education as a right for all persons makes it possible to think about special categories outside normal circumstances, such as emergencies. Second, international standardization emerges as a response to all manner of social problems in an increasingly intercon- nected and rationalized world (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002; Mendel 2006).

Further, we argue that conceptualizing standards in emergency education as primarily driven by shifts in world culture has important implications for the field. Decoupling between the MS and on-the-ground practice of educational service provi- sion is likely to be endemic, as the standards emerge from cultural blueprints rather than technical rationality. Decoupling lessens the value of the MS to practitioners; however the creation of standards plays an important role in institutionalizing this emerging organizational field. Institutionalization and professionalization of a field of emergency education may have the long-term benefit of blurring the boundaries between humanitarian intervention and international development so that education becomes unquestionably part of the response to emergency situations.

The MS were developed in 2004 by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), an open international network of non-governmental organiza- tions (NGOs), UN agencies, donors, practitioners, researchers and individuals. INEE's Working Group on Minimum Standards is made up primarily of NGOs such as CARE, Save the Children, and Catholic Relief Services, but also inter-governmental agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the UNHCR.

During and in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters such as armed conflict, the affected populations have extensive humanitarian needs, such as clean water, food, shelter, and safety. And education is increasingly recognized as a key component of mitigating psychological harm, providing immediate health and safety information, and promoting long-term stability, reconstruction, and development (Machel 1996; Sinclair 1998, 2001, 2002). The MS are designed to provide guidance to all the stakeholders involved in education in emergencies, conflict, and post- conflict situations to attaining a minimum level of education. In these challenging contexts, the MS provide:

> a capacity-building and training tool for humanitarian agencies, governments and local populations to enhance the effectiveness and quality of their educational assistance, and thus to make a significant difference in the lives of people affected by disaster. They will also help to enhance accountability and predictability among humanitarian actors, and improve coordination among partners, including education authorities. (INEE 2009)

The MS focus on five areas within education; community participation, access and learning environment, teaching and learning, teachers and other education personnel, and education policy and coordination. They contain, for example, checklists and assessment tools for situation analysis, psychosocial conditions, and school feeding programs, as well as a code of conduct for the providers of emergency education services. The MS have been used in crises such as the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan,

and in the conflicts in Darfur and northern Uganda, and are available in 12 languages (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Dari, Bahasa Indonesian, Japanese, Portuguese, Thai, Bangla, Urdu, and Khmer).

## Education as a human right

The institutionalization of education as a human right is fundamental to the rise of emergency education as a field. Thinking of education as a human right leads to an emphasis on incorporating every human being, regardless of their circumstances, into a system of schooling, and is routinely cited as a key rationale for providing education in emergencies. For example, the first sentence in the introduction to the MS states, 'All individuals have a right to education' (INEE 2004a, 5).

The idea of education as a fundamental human right and means to progress gained currency after World War II (Meyer et al. 1997; Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985; Chabbott 2003; Chabbott and Ramirez 2000). Most notably, the conception of education as a human right is laid out in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), and Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (United Nations 1966). The specific notion of refugee's right to education first appears in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the right to free and compulsory education for all children is further formalized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Sinclair 1998). The Dakar Framework that emerged out of the 1990 Education for All Conference in Jomtien also emphasizes the need for extra efforts to reach groups such as children in areas of conflict or crisis.

Despite claims of education as a human right going back to 1948, for most of the post-World War II period instrumental and human capital justifications for education dominate education and development discourse (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000). However, by the time of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, the discourse had shifted such that normative conceptions of education as a human right outweigh the instrumental justifications (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000). Chabbott and Ramirez argue that 'normative arguments show up in the claim on universality in the title of the conference, of human beings having inalienable learning needs … and of underlying equity concerns embedded in calls for quality education for all' (2000, 180). Powell's (2006) work on special education provides another example of this type of sociological reasoning of how special categories of education emerge from the institutionalization of mass education as a right and obligation. We posit that the normative shift in the 1990s emphasizing education as a human right over and above instrumental purposes provides a foundation for the creation of a field of emergency education.

In contrast, an older, instrumental style of reasoning about education argues that 'it is easier to rebuild roads and bridges than it is to reconstruct institutions and strengthen the social fabric of a society' (Raphael 1998, 8). This type of thinking is still prevalent in the arguments of many governments and donors hesitating to support emergency education. From this standpoint, emergency education raises complex issues such as a fear of creating a feeling of permanence among refugees, concern educational provision will attract greater numbers of refugees, and worries that education in refugee camps will create resentment among the citizens of host countries (many of whom lack access to education themselves). In addition, there is often disagreement between refugees, host countries, and international aid workers over the content of schooling (Sommers 1999). Machel (1996) and others (Sommers 1999,

2004; Kagawa 2005) point out that some agencies take a limited view of emergency relief only to include health, food, and shelter. There are numerous responses to these arguments against emergency education (see, for example, Sommers 1999), but our goal is to point out that in a world moving toward viewing education as a human right, it is ever less legitimate to claim educational service provision is too difficult or should be subordinated to other reconstruction efforts.

## The rise of global models and standards

Even with the rise of education as a human right, international standards in emergency education were not an inevitable phenomenon. At least three other possibilities merit consideration. First, given government concerns about repatriation and the highly specific conditions surrounding each emergency, one option could have been expansive government involvement in the creation of formal policies unique to each nation-state. The Preamble of the Turku Declaration for Minimum Humanitarian Standards calls for 'the development and strict implementation of national legislation' for humanitarian response (as published in Eide, Rosas, and Meron 2005, 219). Other international human rights instruments, such as the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, similarly call for the creation of national policies.

A second possibility for minimum standards in emergency education is the creation of an inter-governmental agreement through the United Nations. Indeed, in the early 1990s an inter-governmental agreement for Minimum Humanitarian Standards in situations of internal violence, disturbances, tensions and public emergency was drafted and brought to the United Nations, but has failed to gain adequate support (Petrasek 1998).

Finally, *ad hoc* responses could have continued, without the emergence of formal procedures. As in the case of stagnation of the Minimum Humanitarian Standards, key stakeholders are often unwilling to support even non-binding agreements, making it seem unlikely that key stakeholders would agree to international minimum standards. Petrasek (1998) explains that governments are reluctant to endorse a formal agreement on minimum humanitarian standards due to concerns about sovereignty, and NGOs such as Amnesty International also criticize the project for being too watered down. A further concern among all parties is the on-going debate over how to delineate between humanitarian response and longer-term international development. Furthermore, the unique educational needs of affected populations and variation in resources for each crisis make it seem unlikely that international standards would be seen as a useful tool.

However, instead of the status quo or government-led agreements, we see the emergence of a specific type of international standards – broadly inclusive voluntary arrangements led by NGOs. What explains the rise of voluntary international standards as a way to address education in emergencies? We find two main explanations in existing theory – a rational choice explanation from institutional economics and a meta-cultural explanation from neo-institutional sociologists.

A common explanation for the rise of international standards is through their purpose. That is, a problem exists, therefore standards emerge to coordinate and monitor a solution. From this perspective, the origins of standards are located in the interests, either calculating or altruistic, of actors. Standards 'are conceptualized as rules of the game that create order, facilitate exchange, and provide collective benefits unattainable through individual action' (Bartley 2007, 306).

This purpose-oriented approach may be particularly valuable in explaining international standards for technical specifications on products such as credit cards or shipping containers, or enforceable international agreements. These trade-related international standards, negotiated and enforced by government agreement, particularly through the World Trade Organization, expanded rapidly through the 1990s to today (Mattli and Büthe 2003). The practical benefits of enforcing mandatory standards of many products worldwide are obvious: consumers can use their bank cards in machines in most countries; shipping containers are compatible with different forms of transportation worldwide.

Unlike technical standards, international standards in emergency education are harder to understand from a purely instrumental perspective. First, it is difficult to assess outcomes in complex social science arenas such as emergency education or fields with similar standards, such as the environment, labor, and human rights (Bartley 2007). Second, the creation and enforcement of these international standards is not the exclusive purview of governments, but rather private non-governmental actors. Thus, even if standards are known to be effective, there is no clear mechanism for enforcement. Third, if we take seriously the instrumental goals of international standards, we might expect any international negotiations to collapse under the tug-of-war between the divergent interests of the multiple government and NGO stakeholders in complex and politically-sensitive situations like emergencies.

A second view, known as sociological neo-institutionalism, provides insight into why we see the rise of standards despite uncertain effectiveness and divergent interests. In this view global standards are conceptualized as the product of a shared world culture (Meyer et al. 1997). Culture, in this use of the word, is not a symbolic system of values, but rather a set of cognitive models or blueprints. World culture is characterized by five norms – professionalization, rationalization, individualism, voluntarism, and global citizenship (Boli and Thomas 1997). The emergence of a rationalizing and professional world culture with an emphasis on global citizenship fosters the perception of standardization as an appropriate means for bringing order even to complex international contexts (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002; Mendel 2006). In addition, these macro scripts constitute the 'individual as someone who can, may, and should act globally' (Boli and Thomas 1997, 180). That is, private individuals and associations of individuals, not just governments, are empowered to act internationally on matters such as minimum standards in emergency education. Thus, international standards are 'a product of a world steeped in rationalization and the primacy of individual actorhood' (Drori, Meyer, and Huang 2006, 92).

In the following sections we show how a world cultural lens sheds light on aspects of the MS that are surprising if viewed from a purely instrumental standpoint. The emergence of a world culture and global models for action enable the disparate contexts of emergency situations to be conceptualized as analogous to one another, thereby making the notion of international minimum standards plausible. Envisioning transnational standards as a product of world culture rather than technical effectiveness helps explain the script-like process used to create the MS and the high level of agreement around the process and its contents.

## Creating the minimum standards

The Working Group for MS went about the process of creating standards for emergency education by following the example of other international initiatives. The

Sphere Project, a handbook of guidelines for humanitarian organizations, is explicitly referenced as the model for creating emergency education standards. The Working Group focused on broad participation by requiring regional consultation delegates to conduct meetings at the local, national and sub-regional levels with representatives of affected communities, including students, teachers and other education personnel, NGO, government, and UN representatives with experience in education, donors and academics. The INEE Facilitator's Guide suggested that the meetings could take place in locations ranging from refugee camps to UN or NGO field offices with groups of 10–30 members of the affected population, such as students, teachers, parents, government authorities and NGOs (INEE 2004b). As many as 300–650 additional people were consulted by each delegate. In total, delegates and INEE members in the regions coordinated over 110 sub-regional meetings in 47 countries to gather input and information from over 1900 different stakeholders. Information gathered at the local level was then used to guide the regional consultations.

After completing the regional consultations, members of the Working Group wanted to ensure the results of the regional meetings were included in drafting the final document. As a check on the final writing process, it included a peer-review where reviewers were selected to 'represent a diverse group, not just experts from the West/North' (INEE 2004b, 7), as well as for their expertise in the areas of education, child protection, health and humanitarian issues (INEE 2005). The final document was launched in December 2004 at a conference organized by INEE: the Second Global Inter-Agency Consultation on Education in Emergencies and Early Recovery in Cape Town, South Africa.

Only 18 months passed between the first meeting of the Working Group and the launch of the MS in December 2004. Given the number and diversity of professionals involved and the geographic distance, the speed at which the Minimum Standards were created is astounding even from a purely logistical standpoint, to say nothing of the potential for the process being delayed if any one of the regional groups or the international group were unable to quickly come to consensus. The speed at which the final standards were created suggests a high degree of agreement among participants surrounding not only the content of the documents, but also the process by which international standards should be developed.

In addition to the explicit desire to use the Sphere Project as a model, creating the MS followed a pattern recognizable in other international conferences and collaborations such as the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA). Andina (2007) shows that the similarities between the WCEFA and the MS include not only the regional-to-international pattern of meetings, but also attention to professional and geographic diversity of participants and the way the meetings generated formal documents through a process of voluntary consensus. The rise of voluntary international standards as a form of global governance is not unique to emergency education or international development; it is part of a broader trend. Bartley (2007) describes similar processes in both labor standards and the certification of forest products, where international certification is both voluntary and led by private actors such as NGOs. From an instrumental standpoint, it is difficult to explain why creators of the MS would simply replicate a course of action from other fields rather than find a process unique to the needs of emergency education.

An explanation for why the process for creating the MS followed a recognizable pattern and how the document was able to emerge so quickly can be found in the work of Chabbott (2003). Educational development activities today follow a script

that has emerged over the last 50 years. Professionals first problematize an issue and then develop written materials outlining the issue by gathering a diverse group of relevant stakeholders. A broad range of relevant experts are identified and brought together, their membership is designed to represent as many interested parties as possible. Then, through discussion they create a final product that is presented as consensus among the participants. This pattern is clearly evident in the creation of the MS. Thus, 'despite great variations in history, social structure, and economic resources from country to country, and within countries from one locality to another, standardized blueprints of how to "do" development tend to emerge and prevail' (Chabbott 2003, 5).

We argue that the emergence of voluntary international standards and the inclusive process used to create them stem from world cultural norms that legitimate voluntary, participatory processes over authoritarian or top-down rule in many organizational and professional fields. In the long run, the voluntary, non-binding nature of such standards could compromise their ability to solve social problems or, conversely, the normative and cultural pressures leading to the creation of such standards could drive compliance even in the absence of overt coercion and sanctions. Despite potential drawbacks, voluntary and participatory agreements have a high level of legitimacy in the current world.

## Discourse in the MS

Creators of the MS used regional consultations with the intention that 'the standards would be based on regional field-based experience and would reflect regional concerns' (INEE 2007). We might expect, for example, that in tsunami-prone regions of Southeast Asia we could see special emphasis on those affected by natural disasters or in places with chronic crisis like Palestine there would be special attention given to long-term refugees. Given the diverse histories and challenges facing different regions of the world, and the intentional effort to include diverse perspectives, it is plausible that the groups identified as participants and providers of emergency education in each regional consultation would map onto well-known regional concerns and have little overlap across regions.

We consider the nature of discourse by analyzing documents produced at the four regional consultations leading up to the creation of the international standards. Specifically, we use data collected by the second author to compare the groups identified as participants and providers of emergency education across the regional consultations and the final international document. Using a process of emergent coding, we compare the occurrence of particular words and phrases in the documents.

Instead of diversity in the discourse of who is included as a participant or provider of emergency education, we see a substantial amount of overlap between world regions. Even highly specific terms are mentioned in multiple regions, such as the group 'Community Education Committee' appearing in three regional consultations. As seen in Table 1, 40% of participant groups are mentioned by all documents; and Table 2 shows that over 50% of providers are mentioned by all documents. Using a weaker definition of agreement, that most documents must mention a participant or provider, we find extensive conformity. Two-thirds of participant groups and 80% of providers are mentioned by most of the documents. In addition, all provider groups except for two – universities and inter-governmental organizations – are mentioned by multiple documents. This agreement between regions is surprising

Table 1.  Emergency education participant references by document.

| Key words | Africa | Asia | LAC | MENA and Europe | MS | Total out of five documents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Children | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Adolescents/youth | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Vulnerable groups | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Adults | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Refugees; IDPs | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Marginalized groups | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Minority groups | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Dropouts; Out of school | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Special needs; Disabled | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Girls | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Child soldiers; Abducted children | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Young/teenage mothers | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Undocumented/stateless populations | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Orphans; Separated children | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| HIV/AIDS | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total out of 15 categories | 11 (73%) | 14 (93%) | 7 (47%) | 8 (53%) | 12 (80%) | |

Note: IDPs, internally displaced persons; LAC, Latin America and Caribbean; MENA, Middle East and North Africa; MS, international minimum standards.

from an instrumental perspective, but can by explained if we consider the rise of emergency education as a product of shared cognitive models of how to 'do' development and humanitarian aid.

Going further, we observe that agreement exists mainly around discourse that emphasizes local, rather than national or international, providers of emergency education. Table 2 shows that five out of the six groups we identified as local providers (affected communities, local communities, parents, teachers, and students) are mentioned by all regions; the sixth local provider was mentioned by three documents. On average, local providers are mentioned by 4.6 of the possible five documents, national groups are mentioned by 3.3 documents and international groups are mentioned by just 2.5 documents. Thus, the greatest level of consensus exists around the notion that local actors are central to emergency education provision.

A final point to consider is that there does not appear to be a systematic way to predict which region will mention a particular group. For example, in the groups identified as participants in emergency education in Table 1, we see that Asia mentions HIV but Africa does not, while both Asia and Africa mention child soldiers. An instrumental explanation would predict that discourse in Africa would include child soldiers and HIV, while Asia might be concerned with vulnerable children being sold into the sex trade. Four specific groups (disabled, minorities, girls, dropouts) are mentioned in all the documents, yet three groups (undocumented, orphans, and HIV) are mentioned in only one region (Asia). Finally, religious organizations are often the first to take on the burden of emergency education

Table 2. Emergency education service provider references by document.

| Key words | Africa | Asia | LAC | MENA and Europe | MS | Total out of five documents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Local | | | | | | |
| Affected community | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Local community; Local/ traditional leadership; Community networks/ organizations | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Parents | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Teachers | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Learners (youth and adults); Students; Children and youth/adolescents | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Community Education Committee | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Average | | | | | | 4.67 |
| National | | | | | | |
| Ministry of Education; Education authorities | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Government agencies | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Universities | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Average | | | | | | 3.33 |
| International | | | | | | |
| UN agencies | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Multilateral organizations | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Average | | | | | | 2.50 |
| Total out of 15 categories | 12 (80%) | 11 (73%) | 10 (67%) | 12 (80%) | 14 (93%) | |

Note: LAC, Latin America and Caribbean; MENA, Middle East and North Africa; MS, international minimum standards.

worldwide, thus it is surprising that religious institutions are only mentioned as a key provider of emergency education in the joint Middle East/Europe document. Given the extensive involvement of religious organizations, we should expect to see them mentioned as service providers in most or all of the regional consultations.[1] Overall, there is a lack of instrumental discourse in the documents, evidenced by high levels of agreement across regions and the lack of connection between regional challenges and the groups identified as providers or participants in emergency education.

## Discussion

There is a tension between the global-level work of professionals with shared standards and the distinct, local context of each emergency. In most cases refugee or displaced communities have resumed some form of education for their children even before international education experts arrive (Sommers 1999). Often these locally-led initiatives may be more relevant and beneficial to students than those stemming from

global standards. However, local initiatives may also vary in ways that go against international norms. An extreme example is the case of Rwanda, where those responsible for perpetrating genocide assumed control of education in refugee camps in Eastern Zaire (Aguilar and Richmond 1998; Sommers 1999). Instead of serving to promote peace and reconciliation, schools became a site for furthering intolerance. In other cases, such as Sierra Leone, girls are denied access to refugee-led schools in the name of protection. Implementing international standards may help avoid unwanted possibilities of local schooling, but it may be at the cost of allowing other community-led education initiatives to thrive. In order to create international minimum standards that are applicable to all emergency situations, differences between the crises must be downplayed, which could undermine beneficial locally-led programs.

A heightened awareness of the importance of local involvement is found throughout the MS documents. In fact, we found that the greatest level of consensus existed around notions of local-level involvement in emergency education. However, a key feature of the shared discourse is that it can be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, in the Middle East document, a community is defined as 'a group of people with common interests/concern and working together for a common goal in education' (INEE 2004a). This broad definition encompasses not only local participants, but also national governments and international agencies. In contrast, the international MS defines community participation as 'both the processes and activities that allow members of an affected population to be heard, empowering them to be part of the decision-making process and enabling them to direct action on education issues' (INEE 2004b, 13). As further illustration, in a discussion of negotiation about terminology in the MS the INEE website explains some phrases are intentionally vague. The INEE states 'the term "education authorities" was chosen over "national authorities"' because 'the term – education authorities – is flexible and may represent intact and de facto (liberation movements) government authorities' (INEE 2007). Thus, although professionals may agree on the discourse, these vague terms are likely to be interpreted differently in diverse implementation settings.

Ambiguous discourse poses a challenge for implementing the standards. A recent evaluation finds that MS users have trouble operationalizing the general recommendations, stating that 'the Minimum Standards were not sufficiently specific, leaving them open to varying interpretations, which may potentially dilute the quality of the Standard and/or its indicator(s)' (Anderson et al. 2006, 8). On one hand, vague language is problematic for implementation, providing less guidance than on-the-ground service providers hope for and endemic decoupling between the policy and practice. On the other hand, ambiguous discourse likely allowed creators of the standards to come to agreement on general concepts. The MS cover such a broad range of contexts that generalized language is necessary to allow local-level adaptation and interpretation. Highly specific language would render the international standards less relevant to a broad range of situations. In addition, from a process standpoint it would be exceedingly difficult to come to consensus through the broad, participatory consultative process using more specific discourse.

In their classic study of schools, Meyer and Rowan (1977) call this separation between formal structure and instrumental rationality 'decoupling.' The preference for generalized, flexible language, even in regional pre-cursors to the MS, facilitates decoupling by allowing varied interpretations of a term. For example, 'vulnerable groups' are defined in the MS as those with 'special needs, such as the disabled [*sic*], adolescent girls, children associated with fighting forces, abducted children, [and]

teenage mothers' (INEE 2004b, 40). The Africa document notes that vulnerable groups include women, out of school children, child soldiers, young mothers and disabled youth and children, while the Asia document indicates vulnerable groups include separated children, those with HIV/AIDS, and those with trauma. Flexible language enables local interpretations and adaptations of a broad framework and is a necessary component of global frameworks in order to make their content relevant to many international contexts.

As a result of the ambiguity of discourse in the MS, the standards may partially fail to fill their intended purpose of providing guidance to education service providers in emergency education. However, the creation of such standards benefits those in the field by helping redefine the boundaries of emergency humanitarian aid to include education, traditionally thought of as a long-term international development concern. Brunsson and Jacobsson show that 'when standardizers create a standards-based organization they change the organization of the field as a whole' (2002, 53). Sociological literature has aptly demonstrated that professional discourse has a far-reaching influence over defining particular problems as socially-relevant, identifying rational solutions, and defining the boundaries of organizational fields. Professional discourse sets the foundation for an organizational field by systematizing and formalizing what counts as legitimate knowledge and organizational forms (Ferguson 1998; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). That is, the discourse of professionals and setting standards define the very nature of a professional field. The MS help shape field boundaries by, most importantly, putting education into the realm of humanitarian response. They also play a role in determining who counts as a participant of emergency education and which actors are empowered to provide or evaluate educational services, as well as legitimizing particular forms of curriculum and teaching.

## Conclusion

Unlike many studies, which view standardization as a solution to technical problems, we argue that standardization in emergency education arises from meta-cultural understandings of education. The field of emergency education emerges from a worldwide emphasis on mass education in general, and the conceptualization of education as a right globally. The institutionalization of mass education drives the integration of special situations like 'emergency education' as an anomalous category of education in general. Furthermore, voluntary standards emerge as a commonly-accepted solution to complex social issues.

This cultural view explains a number of features of emergency education standards that are otherwise surprising. First, although humanitarian disasters date back to the start of human history, emergency education only became recognized as a concern for affected populations after education became institutionalized as a human right. Second, the process of creating the MS followed a pattern recognizable from the evolution of other international agreements, emphasizing broad participation and voluntary consensus, rather than emerging out of the specific case of education in emergencies. Third, our analysis of the discourse within each document shows a high level of consensus across regions and agreement was reached rapidly, which is unexpected from an instrumental implementation standpoint.

We argue that emergency education professionals, despite their diverse areas of expertise and geographic backgrounds, already shared a common language and ideas

about general priorities in emergency education that stem from institutionalized notions of education, humanitarian aid, and international development. So, for example, humanitarian aid and international development professionals worldwide agree on the importance of including the 'local community' in providing educational services. However, exactly who the 'local community' includes and what role they should take is left open. This flexible discourse hinders the MS in their goal of serving as a guide for service providers. However, the multiple interpretations of general discourse also enabled professionals to come to agreement on the creation of the standards and allow the MS to be adapted in a broad variety of contexts.

We argue the key contribution of the MS is not in their utility in each emergency, but in their role in defining the field of emergency education and reshaping understandings of international development and humanitarian aid. As organizational research has shown, building a strong field requires activities beyond the creation of shared standards, such as policy advocacy, generating and disseminating research, and creating venues for professionals to associate (such as meetings and conferences). The INEE has a central role in these other field-building activities as well. For example, the INEE also aims to facilitate policy development around education and fragility and has supported much research on this topic. We view policy and research on education and fragility as part of the same field-building process as the creation of the MS. Experts are working to define the boundaries of the field and establish a common understanding of its boundaries through activities like creating the MS and related research and policy advocacy. As a whole the emergence of a professional field dedicated to emergency education will raise attention to this issue and contribute to the institutionalization of education as part of humanitarian response.

There is a basic tension underlying our work on whether the emergence of the MS is positive or not. There are positive aspects, most importantly the special attention given to education as a priority when humanitarian disasters occur and the pressure on education initiatives to conform to international human rights norms. However, we argue decoupling between international standards and local practice is inherent to the process and thus implementation will be a constant source of frustration for practitioners. In addition, international standards and the creation of a field of emergency education experts may dampen the creation of community-led education initiatives and discourage community participation. The MS are not in themselves inherently positive or negative, having both aspects. Our main goal is not to critique the standards, but to provide an explanation for why they emerge and implications of the rise of emergency education as an international professional field. The challenge for international experts in emergency education is to walk the tightrope of promoting international understandings of education in emergency situations while being attentive to the local context of each crisis.

### Acknowledgements

### Note

1.  We thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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