



Save the Children Rewrite the Future

The right to quality education in armed conflict

Education's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding



“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed.”

Preamble of UNESCO's Constitution

“Education – the right kind of quality education – can give children hope and opportunities, and heal divisions and the traumas of war. A school can and should be a place of peace.”

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia

“My education is a treasure for me. It is portable wealth that doesn't expire and can't be stolen.”

Liberian parent

The right to quality education for children in armed conflict

Millions of girls and boys live and breathe actual or threatened violence in conflict-affected fragile states (CAFS)¹, their lives blighted by trauma, displacement and a denial of their most basic rights, including education. Yet quality education can play an important role in protecting children during ongoing crisis and restoring countries to peace and development.

Conflict-affected countries are more often than not the furthest away from reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Over half the world's 72 million out-of-school children – 37 million – live in conflict-affected fragile states, even though these countries make up just 13 % of the world's population. Children in conflict zones are routinely denied the transformative effects that quality education brings. Education is a human right that demands fulfilment even in situations of danger and deprivation. It is also what children and parents consistently ask for even at the height of crisis.

“When you are educated, you can reason by yourself. You can understand that war is not the best way out. You will be able to solve problems, and you can understand, because war is about misunderstanding.”

Liberian primary school student

Peace begins in the minds of children

Most people recognise instinctively the role of education in preventing conflict and in building peace. Most people also understand the dangers inherent in the abuse of education systems. The international community – national governments, donors, civil society, and others – must work together to find ways to ensure that quality education is a reality in countries affected by conflict and is implemented in a way that promotes peace.

A quality educational system makes a positive, transformative contribution to conflict-affected societies, and operates as a counterweight to conflict and those who seek to promote conflict. Quality education provides a platform from which other Millennium Development Goals can be achieved, and can promote peace and development more broadly. The benefits of education are lasting because the children who acquire them will transfer them to the next generation. It is the unalienable duty of the international community to ensure that quality education is provided before, during and after conflicts, and particularly when peace settlements are negotiated.

Education as the peace dividend: Opportunities for change

Peace processes provide an important opportunity to improve education systems and help foster peace. When parties to a conflict are engaged in a peace process there is a rare opportunity to agree on a shared new education blueprint for the country. However, of the 37 full peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2005 that are publicly available, 11 make no mention of education at all. Even in those that do include education, there is great variation in the way it is perceived and addressed in terms of security, protection, economic development or socio-political issues.

As well as opportunities, there are of course challenges as education is a fundamental component of political and social reform. These challenges need to be addressed in order to ensure that the education included in peace processes is of the type that promotes peace and is being used to create tolerance rather than further division. Peace may not be sustained unless agreements clearly address the inequalities – including those in education – that contributed to the initial sparks of conflict.

¹ Save the Children has compiled its own list of ‘conflict-affected fragile states’ (CAFS) in order to analyse issues relating to education in those ‘fragile’ states experiencing income disparity, weak governance and inequality, and which are also affected by conflict. Countries categorised as conflict-affected are those included on the Project Ploughshare list of states as having experienced at least one armed conflict during the period 1995 to 2004, or those classed as ‘critical’ on the 2006 Failed States Index, which assesses violent internal conflicts. Countries categorised as fragile are those classified as either ‘Core’ or ‘Severe’ on the 2006 Low Income Countries Under Stress list, which categorises countries according to their Country Policy and Institutional Assessment rating. See Save the Children’s report *Last in Line, Last in School 2008* for further details on the country classification and for a full list of conflict-affected fragile states.

The potential to divide: education as a weapon

Educational systems can be a force for good, but they can also be abused. Exclusion from education plays a crucial role in fuelling conflict. Governments may intentionally manipulate the education system to shore up their power base, as happened in Burundi in the 1990s and Germany in the 1930s. Curricula, textbooks and educational policies can all be turned into platforms for propaganda. Students, teachers and administrative staff may be targeted for intimidation, recruitment and indoctrination, and school premises are often damaged, destroyed or occupied by fighters. In conflict areas, government spending on education can sometimes be diverted to security, further lowering the quality of provision.²

Direct attacks on the education sector are a characteristic of confrontations around the world. In its 2007 report 'Education under Attack' UNESCO maintains that attacks on education will continue unless the international community supports the development of an independent monitoring system to monitor attacks as part of violations of child rights, under the Security Council Resolution 1612.

Time for change: Quality education for peace

Quality education has the power to heal. Education provides children and their families with hope, and it is especially prized in the midst of crisis when schools can offer children protection and dependable routines. Committed teachers and a balanced curriculum give children an alternative to confusion and conflict. Dedicated teachers also demonstrate positive values, such as acceptance of diversity, kindness and consideration for others' feelings. The simple habit of going to school and working with caring adults in a supportive and tolerant environment can help war-affected children recover from trauma.

Education must remain a priority during times of crisis as much as during times of stability. Without education, there will be fewer citizens able to contribute to rebuilding their country. This could fuel a downward spiral that increases the likelihood of future outbursts of violence.

Studies show that increased levels of primary and secondary quality education in a country reduce conflict.³ Across society, every additional year of formal schooling for males reduces the risk of their becoming involved in conflict by 20%, and an annual growth rate of 5% has the same stabilising effect as one year of schooling.⁴

Four critical elements are needed ensure that education can play a significant role in peacebuilding and conflict prevention: Inclusion/access; safety/protection; relevance; and accountability.

Schools must be inclusive and accessible

If education is to realise its full potential for peacebuilding, it must reach out to the unreached children – the girl too scared to walk to school, the displaced child refused registration, the 'bush wife'⁵ of a local commander and the former child soldier returned home. These are just a few of the issues for children in conflict situations, many of which can be addressed by inclusive, quality education that provides protection and safety. Educational systems must create an inclusive environment where all children can take part and are empowered to explore their talents. This must include those with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, different religions, and any other marginalised groups typically discriminated against.

² O'Malley, B. (2007) Education under Attack UNESCO; Lai, B and Thyne, C (2007) 'The Effect of Civil War on Education, 1980-1997, Journal of Peace Research, 44 (3), pp. 277-292.

³ Dupuy (2008) op. cit.

⁴ Collier, P. (2000) 'Doing well out of War: An economic perspective', in Berdal, M. and Malone, D. M. (eds.) Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder.

⁵ Girls who are forcibly taken by rebel leaders as 'wives' to cook, clean and perform sexual favours. These can be as young as eleven or twelve.

Education must be safe and protective

As described earlier, attacks on students, teachers and school administrative personnel⁶ leave long-lasting fear and distrust. To build sustainable peace and overcome these fears it is essential that schools, children and teachers are fully protected in a variety of ways. The UNESCO report 'Education under Attack' outlines the scale of this problem and what needs to change in terms of respect for International Humanitarian Law and other international legal instruments. Save the Children endorses these principles and supports advocacy at a national and international level on protection of children, schools and teachers.

In armed conflicts, violence outside the school often reinforces the use of violence in the school, but this linkage can also work in reverse, with school violence reinforcing and legitimising the use of violence to assert authority and obedience in the outside world.⁷

Another mechanism for resolving conflicts within and outside the school is through peace education, or Human Rights Education, and conflict transformation skills. These kinds of initiatives reflect activities that promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow people of all ages and skills levels to develop the behavioural changes that prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflict peacefully or create conditions conducive to peace. Peace education commonly embraces different strands, from advocacy to law reform, human rights education and concepts of social justice, supplementing the process of peacebuilding.

Education must be relevant and appropriate

Curriculum reform after a conflict winds down is an opportunity to improve the overall quality of education. Attention to curricula is important "to avoid reproducing contents that at worst have contributed to conflict and, at best, have done nothing to prevent it."⁸

The relevance of the curriculum is particularly important for children affected by conflict, and should address issues of security, health, psycho-social support, conflict resolution and other life skills.⁹ This again needs to be taken in the context of the relevance for the child as well as for the country.

Education system must be accountable

Education systems need to be transparent and accountable first and foremost for children, parents and communities. This is particularly the case during conflict situations when education systems are undermined or in some cases totally destroyed. Participation in educational processes, for example through establishment of school management councils (SMCs) or parent-teacher associations (PTAs) is a way of building up relationships inside and outside of school, and with them levels of trust, cooperation and reciprocity.

"When there is democracy inside the school, inside the classroom, when children are grown up, the democratic values and culture they have learned in school will be reflected in the society and community, and that in the long run will help peace and democracy."

Nepalese teachers' group

Children and communities are increasingly being recognised as important contributors to wider forms of accountability in conflict-affected fragile states that can enable donors to overcome some of the typical concerns or 'trust gaps' when making decisions over which countries to provide education aid.¹⁰

⁶ O'Malley (2007) op. cit.

⁷ Dupuy (2008) op. cit..

⁸ Tawil, S. and Harley, A. (eds.) (2004) 'Education, Conflict and Social Cohesion', UNESCO International Bureau of Education, Geneva, p. 25.

⁹ Sinclair, M. 2004 Learning to live together: building skills, values and attitudes for the twenty-first century, IBE UNESCO, www.

inesite.org/core/Learning_to_Live_Together.pdf

The above elements are some of the key aspects of a quality education system that need to be addressed by education planners, donors and governments if long-lasting peace is to be attained.

Conclusion

Save the Children is strongly convinced that education has a critical role to play in building social cohesion and stability. Education reaches across political divides and encourages alternative visions of the future based around children's needs. Schools are a critical site for this transformation because today's students are the future's leaders and opinion-makers, and because schools are institutions with the potential to model new ways of working in the communities they serve.

But it is also clear that despite this confidence many children in conflict-affected fragile states do not have access to any education, let alone a transformative education. For the millions of children who day after day are unable to go to school, it is essential that we act in global collaboration ensuring quality education for all children in all contexts. If we do not, many more children will be denied their right to education and the opportunities to build peace in the minds of younger generations will again be lost.

Recommendations

Quality education that promotes critical awareness, tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict is important to sustain a peaceful society and should be included in all peace agreements.

- **Save the Children calls upon the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to urge State Parties to support the inclusion of education as part of peace agreements recognising that education is a critical element in ensuring lasting and sustainable peace.**
- **Save the Children calls upon the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to urge State Parties to protect schools from attack and to ensure that schools are places where intellectual curiosity and respect for universal human rights is fostered.**
- **Save the Children calls upon the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to urge State Parties to uphold their obligation to ensure that schools are inclusive and use a non-biased curriculum, and educational materials are relevant to the children and their context.**

¹⁰ The FTI Progressive Framework looks more at the development targets for education and where fragile states are situated along the trajectory towards the 'ideal' target. This framework therefore helps CAFS assess where they are and where they realistically might get to over a period of time, while recognising that their situation may fluctuate and that conflict or fragility is not static. FTI-Fragile States Task Team (2006) Draft Document: Progressive Framework for Education in Fragile States. Prepared for the FTI Fragile States Task Group October 2006.