

Education for children during armed conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction

I have seen how one year of school changes a child and how years of school transform that child's future. I have watched as the power of education saved families from being poor, babies from dying and young girls from lives of servitude. And I have lived long enough to see a generation of children, armed with education, lift up a nation.

Graça Machel¹

The right to education is often lost in countries at war. Why, it is asked, should the right to education be a priority in such situations when surely the main concern should be to protect children from violence?

However, conflicts provide no exception to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which elaborates in article 28 the right of the child to education. The Convention recognizes the right of every child to a free primary education, and encourages the development of secondary education that is accessible and available.

Indeed, schooling can be all the more important for children and families in times of crisis. Unfortunately, huge challenges have to be overcome to maintain education systems in countries at war or in post-conflict situations. A number of measures are urgently needed to preserve and protect the right to education for children affected by war. We should not ignore the valuable contribution that education can make as an efficient means to promote reconciliation and peace.

Schooling: perspectives for the future and a means to get back to life

Schooling is no more a luxury in wartime than in times of peace. On the contrary, during times of conflict, education is indispensable for teaching behaviours that can help children protect themselves and their families. They can gain knowledge crucial to survival, such as a basic health education, personal safety information, and learning about landmines and how to avoid them.

In war-torn countries, education is not only a way of teaching children life skills, but it can also help healing and rehabilitation. At school, children have access to training that gives them hope and teaches them skills for the future. Children benefit from the contact with other children and teachers,

which helps them preserve their physical as well as psychological health. Children attending school in times of conflict have a sense, although limited, of normality, of confidence and of security, which protects them from depression and isolation. Keeping schools open or reopening schools is a way of maintaining or reintroducing normal life into a community and reassures children and their parents. School enrolment serves as a 'barometer' of a community's perceived hope for the future. For example, since the end of the Rwandan crisis, 67% of children have been enrolled in more than 2,000 primary schools across the country—a tremendous sign of confidence in the nation's future.²

The difficulties of preserving education in wartime

The destruction of educational infrastructure is one of the most serious setbacks a country can face. Schools and teachers are often deliberate targets in wartime. About 45% of primary schools in Mozambique were destroyed during the war. In the Rwandan conflict, more than 60% of the teachers fled the country or were killed.³ When a country loses the means to provide instruction to its children and this situation continues for years, it can contribute to further, longer-term instability—as education is a key factor in poverty alleviation and development. Even when education is maintained during the conflict, if teachers are killed, flee or become combatants themselves, who will teach the children? More often than not, after the conflict countries face a lack of school staff and a broken infrastructure.

In wartime, children might be internally displaced or become refugees, with obvious detrimental consequences on their education. A nomadic existence as a displaced child eliminates any hope of regular school attendance. Those who arrive in refugee camps might be sick or malnourished, and their health problems can be exacerbated by the difficult living conditions found there—such as a lack of food, adequate sanitation or drinking water. Furthermore, in chaotic camps children are easy prey for economic or sexual exploitation.

Even when schools and pupils remain in place during a conflict, the instruction they receive is of lesser quality. Teachers often have to deal with increased numbers of students as whole families and communities flee the violence in other areas. Educational materials are often in scarce supply, and school premises might be damaged or destroyed outright. Despite these difficulties, communities can and do rise to the challenge of maintaining or re-establishing education during or after a conflict. In Tanzania, after the influx of half a million refugees from Rwanda in 1994, an emergency education system was set up: makeshift schools were hastily built with rocks and logs thus enabling 65% of refugee children to have access to a minimum level of education.⁴ In Eritrea, in the 1980s, classes were held under trees, in caves or in camouflaged huts. In Afghanistan, women risked their lives to set up underground classes for their daughters.

The challenges to educators do not stop with the end of a war. For example, the sanctions against Iraq, established by the United Nations Security Council on 6 August 1990, led to an alarming drop in that country's educational level. A decade later teachers are poorly paid and still lack adequate teaching materials. Children, suffering from hunger, are less assiduous in class. Many have to work after their lessons or quit school altogether to contribute to the family.

Children in war have special needs. In a climate of fear and instability, it is hard to create an atmosphere of confidence conducive to learning. Children might have witnessed persecution or massacre of their family or community members. Suffering from malnutrition and lacking adequate healthcare, they can be physically and psychologically damaged. Often the teachers, themselves similarly afflicted, do not know how to manage or have the tools to do so.

Child soldiers constitute a special challenge for education systems already under strain. Children as young as 10 have been recruited by armed combatants. They witness atrocities and sometimes

commit them, frequently doing so under the influence of drugs. Children might feel invincible because of their soldier status, and at the same time they are frightened and vulnerable children. By the time they are demobilized—if they are demobilized—they have known only violence, death, hatred and vengeance. They may have been deprived of healthy emotional, intellectual and physical development. Many have become socially isolated and should have the opportunity to benefit from psychological support services, which are usually desperately lacking in the post-war society. Reintegrating these children into the education system poses many difficulties. They sometimes prefer to quit school rather than feel the humiliation of studying with younger children. If they are readmitted to school, how can a child sit next to a former child combatant, when the former has lived with the brutality of the latter? Some schools refuse to admit former child soldiers for fear of violence that could ensue. These children are sometimes rejected by their own families because they are considered a disgrace. The only chance for reintegrating such children into society is through psychological support and specialized education.

Measures to protect education in emergencies

Despite the fact that international humanitarian law protects education and its infrastructures even in times of conflict,⁵ schools and education systems are too often targets.

The international community should demand that combatants respect education infrastructures. Security Council resolution 1261 of 25 August 1999 condemned ‘attacks on objects protected under international law, including places that usually have a significant presence of children such as schools and hospitals’ and called ‘on all parties concerned to put an end to such practices’. Governments should commit themselves to protect these places so that they would constitute ‘peace corridors’ where children would be safe from the conflicts that ravage their countries.

Children in refugee camps should be grouped together to receive basic instruction essential to their future and be involved in educational activities that teach them the principles of equality, of non-discrimination and of respect for the rights of others. Even in make-shift classrooms children can learn to respect others and how to work together.

Special training could be given to teachers so that they would be able to recognize signs of psychological trauma in children—specifically victims of displacement, bereavement and abandonment. Teachers should be able to direct these children to psychological support services that could help them get out of the vicious circle of hatred and vengeance. Of course, this means that countries must provide the resources for such services.

In developing countries, out of the 130 million children who have never attended school, at least two-thirds are girls.⁶ Ensuring that girls get back to school after a conflict has disrupted their studies is especially urgent. Girls who have access to education have better life chances and wider opportunities than ones who have never attended school.

Education as a means to restore peace

After a conflict ends, rebuilding education infrastructures, training teachers, gathering and distributing educational materials must be prioritized. In addition, specific programmes need to be implemented to address the special needs of children in a post-conflict society.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as many NGOs are deeply committed to developing and implementing educational projects that raise awareness about human rights, humanitarian law, tolerance, peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict management. These programmes address essential coping skills and long-term development needs of both children and the community as a whole.

In 1989, UNICEF helped the Lebanese government and 240 NGOs train 10,000 young people who, in turn, organized educational activities that reached a further 200,000 children. The aim of these activities was to promote reconciliation, conflict resolution and reconstruction.⁷ In 1996, under the auspices of UNICEF and in collaboration with the Movement for Peace, millions of children and adults in Colombia mobilized to put an end to violence and work for peace and social justice. They forced the then-government to make this objective a priority.

UNICEF also supports programmes that respond to the psychological needs of displaced children and help prepare them for peace. In Colombia, the programme *El Retorno de la Alegria* (The Return of Joy) engages displaced teenagers in therapeutic games as well as recreational activities to help them recover from psychological trauma. In Rwanda, children learn collaboration and conflict resolution skills thanks to cultural and recreational activities. In Sri Lanka, which has been beset by civil war for more than fifteen years, the curriculum includes lessons on conflict resolution.⁸ Similar initiatives exist around the world.

In Liberia, UNHCR and Save the Children have provided psychosocial support to ex-child soldiers among refugees from Sierra Leone. They have offered them remedial courses as well as vocational training. UNHCR also trained teachers and community leaders to better meet educational needs in Kenya and Guinea. Schools for refugee children provide classes on peace and life skills, as well as teacher training on these matters.

In 1999, UNESCO supported groups of young Kosovars who organized sport and cultural activities for teenagers in six refugee camps in Albania. They were involved in the management of the camps and ensured the security and cleanliness there. They also communicated vital information about landmines.

The ICRC is committed to giving children other perspectives for their future through education, training and work. It tries at the same time to dissuade them from military recruitment. Many NGOs also work in the field, rebuilding schools, training teachers and providing educational materials.

Conclusion

Individual NGOs have made remarkable contributions towards education in many countries, and they have now joined in a Global Campaign for Education. Today, I say to the NGO community: we cannot win the battle ... without your expertise, your energy, and your capacity for action.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan⁹

All of these initiatives are encouraging, but much remains to be done. Civil society organizations and NGOs have taken a leading role in raising awareness and demanding accountability of states regarding their treaty commitments. The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict oversees a network

of local, regional and international NGOs to share information and influence decision-making to protect children. Could such networks include in their efforts a focus on promoting education programmes and vocational training during periods of conflict? The international community should be encouraged to respect the fundamental rights of children during armed conflicts, especially the prohibition to recruit persons under the age of 18 into the armed forces and their participation in hostilities. This presupposes that age 18 be recognized throughout the world as the age of majority, despite of cultural differences, as well as establishing systems for birth registration records where none exist.

On 12 February 2002, the Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts entered into force. This protocol imposes more rigorous limits on the recruitment of children in armed conflicts. It remains to be seen how well this Protocol will be respected. Additionally, the United Nations General Assembly's special session on children took place in New York from 8 to 10 May 2002. It aimed at enabling the international community to take stock of progress towards the protection of children since the 1990 World Summit for Children. Many were disappointed at the plan of action, as it reiterated past commitments and did not strengthen a follow-up mechanism. It appears that it will continue to be NGOs, rather than governments, at the forefront of advocating the importance of education in times of conflict, and children's rights in general.

One important civil society initiative is the Global Campaign for Education, a network of development NGOs and teachers' unions operating in 180 countries. The Campaign seeks to hold governments responsible for the fact that 125 million children worldwide are denied access to basic education. But universal primary education will be an impossible goal if we do not develop strategies to specifically address the education needs of one of the most disadvantaged groups—children in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Only worldwide mobilization of civil society and public opinion will force the stakeholders to take action. The Global Campaign for Education has launched a massive public awareness campaign to hold governments, the international financial institutions, international organizations and aid agencies accountable for their promises to children. It is initiatives such as this one, rather than high-level statements and promises, that will ensure that every child's right to an education, even those in conflict zones, is respected.

My dear young people: I see the light in your eyes, the energy of your bodies and the hope that is in your spirit. I know it is you, not I, who will make the future. It is you, not I, who will fix our wrongs and carry forward all that is right with the world.

Nelson Mandela¹⁰

Isabelle Roger

Notes

1. Graça Machel in UNICEF, 2000, 'Our promise to the world's children', in *The State of the World's Children 2001*, UNICEF, at < <http://www.unicef.org/sowc01/>> .
2. Madieng Seck, 'Après la guerre, "Ouvrez les écoles et enseignez la tolérance!"', at < <http://www.famafrique.org/nouv2/nouv00-05-23a.html>> .
3. Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Education*, at < <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/cfp-pec/nationalforum/elementary/education-en.asp>> .

4. UNICEF 1998, *The State of the World's Children 1999*, Panel 9 – A New Beginning: Education in Emergencies, p. 46, at < <http://www.unicef.org/pubsgen/sowc99/sowc99e.pdf>> .
5. These include the *Geneva Conventions*, *The Additional Protocol re Victims of International Armed Conflicts*, and the *Additional Protocol re Victims of Non-international Armed Conflicts*. See < <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/WebCONVFULL?OpenView>> for the full text of each.
6. Canadian International Development Agency, *Basic education—Ensuring opportunity for all*, at < <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/education-e>> .
7. UNICEF 1998, *op. cit.*
8. UNICEF 1998, *op. cit.*
9. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan speaking at a Global Campaign for Education rally in Dakar, Senegal, 27 April 2000.
10. Nelson Mandela in UNICEF 2000, 'Our promise to the world's children', in *The State of the World's Children 2001*, UNICEF, at < http://www.unicef.org/sowc01/our_promise.htm> .