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THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION: REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTIVE POST-AGREEMENT WORK

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KEY MESSAGES

- × The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) is a tool for strengthening norms towards the goal of fully protecting civilians from the impacts of armed violence, focused on protecting education from attack
- × Effective partnership between states, international organisations and civil society with common goals has been key to the SSD initiative
- × Universalising the SSD is a tool in the work of norm-building, helping to keep a focus on the problems the SSD frames and responds to
- × Promoting the implementation of the SSD's commitments is useful to both norm building and creating practical change
- × Continued monitoring and framing of both the problem of attacks on education, and political progress to respond to it through the SSD, is also crucial to maintaining progress

REFLECTIONS

For similar processes to develop international political commitments to protect civilians:

- × It is valuable to look towards next steps early during initiatives and text drafting, to strategize on strong implementation and the balancing and prioritisation of different types of norm-building activity
- × Practical exercises, toolkits and discussions are some of the most useful tools in promoting the implementation of commitments
- × Work to build the buy-in of different ministries, whose priorities may be in tension, is crucial to developing commitment in such processes



Palestinians inspect a classroom of a United Nations-run school that was damaged in Israeli shelling, Khan Younis, Gaza Strip, 2018. © Reuters/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa

The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD)¹ is an international political commitment made by states, which is focused on protecting education from attack during armed conflict and preventing the military use of educational facilities. In the six years since it was launched at the first International Conference on Safe Schools in Oslo, Norway, over one hundred states have added their endorsement to the Declaration.²

This paper gives an overview of how universalisation, implementation and monitoring activities in support of the SSD have been approached since its agreement in 2015, by the community of states, international organisations and civil society most closely involved in the initiative. It looks at the types of approaches that have been considered valuable for pushing progress forward on the SSD's commitments and its ultimate goals of strengthening norms and practice around the protection of education. The purpose of this overview is to produce reflections that might be of interest for the safe schools community, as well as to suggest possible points of learning for other similar international political commitment processes, particularly in terms of structuring, prioritising and sequencing post-agreement work. Its intended audiences are representatives of states, international organisations and civil society interested in reflecting on effective ways of working around international agreements to better protect civilians.

This paper builds on Article 36's 2019 paper 'Reflections from the Safe Schools Declaration process for future international political commitments on civilian protection' – which focused on the process to develop the SSD and its text – including recapping and updating some of the material presented there.³ Its analysis is based on reviewing available public materials and some internal documents, as well as drawing from background conversations with some individuals that have been centrally involved in work around the SSD during and since its agreement. Whilst drawing on the insights of a range of people, Article 36 takes responsibility for the content of this paper. The paper does not represent a comprehensive analysis. It is intended to provide some reflections from Article 36's perspective based on our work on this issue, and from the point of view of looking ahead to future work on different initiatives.

Following a note on the general importance of partnership and the structure of the global coalition of international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that works to support the SSD and its goals, the paper looks in turn at activities undertaken since 2015 towards the universalisation of the SSD, its implementation, and monitoring, giving a narrative and commenting on approaches considered effective, as well as some potential strategic points of reflection.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Effective working relationships between the states leading the SSD and key partners in international organisations and civil society have been important to the initiation of the process towards the SSD, the Declaration's agreement, and progress since 2015. Some of the roles taken by these different types of actors are described later in this paper; in general, working in partnership and close collaboration with open communication, towards common goals and on specific activities and objectives where different actors can make different contributions, has (perhaps unsurprisingly) appeared useful to making effective progress.

The governments of Norway and Argentina have played a particularly central role in the SSD, with other states forming part of a core group at the time of the Declaration text consultations or taking on work or leadership in other initiatives at the international level since. On the international organisation and civil society side, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) has played a central role, with some members particularly contributing capacity or leadership to specific areas of work. Other organisations have also made specific contributions to the process – for example, Geneva Call undertakes advocacy with non-state armed groups, encouraging their endorsement of a 'deed of commitment' which contains similar commitments to the SSD (amongst others).⁴ This work has helped to address some of states' questions about the limitations of the SSD in addressing the harm caused by non-state actors.

To contextualise some of the reflections on approaches and activities below with a sense of the GCPEA's reach, capacity, and resourcing, a short note on its structure and composition is given here. GCPEA is a coalition that includes a mixture of international NGOs and international organisations, many of which have national sections or programmes that do much of the national or regional-level work described in this paper. The Steering Committee of GCPEA are its members, which include Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, UNESCO and UNICEF.⁵ GCPEA also has a central secretariat split between Geneva and New York. It currently has 6 staff including an Executive Director and staff focusing on advocacy and research. GCPEA works with partners such as NGOs, academics and other experts who are not members of the coalition (including Article 36). This work might be on specific products or events (such as monthly updates on attacks on schools GCPEA partners on with Insecurity Insight⁶), or thematic issues (such as on military engagement with the Dallaire Institute, a specialist partner with military and military advocacy experts). GCPEA currently has a structure of two working groups: one focusing on endorsement and implementation of the SSD, and which integrates GCPEA's thematic work on gender; and one focused on monitoring and reporting, which covers the GCPEA's Education Under Attack research and efforts to improve data collection on attacks on education. GCPEA is funded by several donors, including some of its Steering Committee members and the government of Norway.

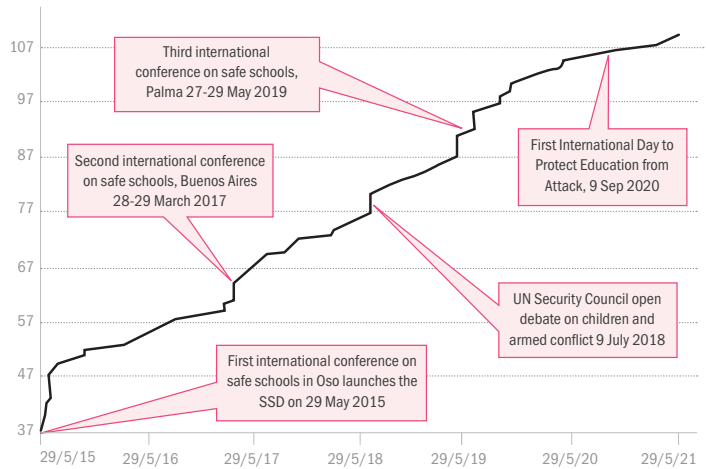
UNIVERSALISATION: PROGRESS AND FOCUS POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

At its adoption conference in 2015 in Oslo, 37 states endorsed the SSD. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially collects states' endorsements, requiring the submission of a letter to join the endorsement list.⁷ As of July 2021 there are now 109 endorsers. Because the SSD launched with a relatively small group of supporters, universalisation activity – increasing the number of states endorsing the SSD – was the major initial focus for the SSD's leading states and GCPEA, towards developing the normative force and impact of the Declaration. Looking back from 2021, the core group strategy adopted during the development of the SSD of prioritising a strong text rather weakening the initiative to allow the early inclusion of certain resistant states appears to have proved a good approach. Endorsements have increased significantly since 2015 and from a diverse range of states. Many initial objectors (such as Germany, Canada, the UK, and France) are now part of the SSD (with GCPEA having focused national advocacy on these sceptical states one by one as political opportunities arose).⁸

This considerable progress has required significant, active work from states and their partners in international organisations and civil society. Various states – particularly those that have played the main leadership role in the SSD – have worked to encourage others to join the SSD, for example through hosting events to promote updates on universalisation, and through convening further International Conferences on Safe Schools (discussed below). Presenting the SSD as a civilian protection and an education initiative and linking these priorities to others like the Sustainable Development Goals has generally been beneficial in showing the value of the initiative.

GCPEA has focused considerable capacity on universalisation advocacy since 2015, through its coalition staff capacity in Geneva and New York, and the work of particularly active Steering Committee members. Member organisations have dedicated capacity to advocacy for gathering endorsements to the SSD at the international, regional, and national levels. In prioritising universalisation advocacy, GCPEA has aimed to encourage states with a range of profiles to join the SSD, including those whose populations are most heavily affected by attacks on education, military active states including those most sceptical to the SSD during its negotiation, and countries involved in peacekeeping. GCPEA's work has included focused national advocacy or public campaigns for endorsement in some countries where more concerted work was needed, due, for example, to their being conflict-affected or to scepticism of the SSD. It has also included regional work, such as advocacy by Save the Children at the African Union's Peace and Security Council, which linked the SSD with other topics of concern to AU member states. GCPEA members' international structures and reach has been significant to being able to push this universalisation work forward effectively.

FIGURE 1: CUMULATIVE NUMBER OF STATES ENDORSING THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION 29 MAY 2015 - JULY 2021



The process of advocacy to gather further endorsements has played a key part in keeping attention – nationally and internationally – on the need to protect education from attack and prevent the military use of schools, over the past six years. The SSD, its endorsement and implementation are ultimately a tool towards these goals – rather than an end in themselves.

International events around which universalisation activity can be concentrated, and states can announce their support for the SSD have provided focus points for gathering endorsements – and for bringing this attention (see Figure 1).

The two further International Conferences on Safe Schools that have been convened to review progress on the SSD since 2015 have been particularly significant for this (these were the second International Conference on Safe Schools in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2017 and the third International Conference on Safe Schools in Palma, Spain in 2019). The invitation to these conferences was an open one: both endorsing and non-endorsing states were able to and did attend. In Buenos Aires, 45 states who had endorsed before the start of the conference were present, along with 48 non-endorsers, of which 22 subsequently endorsed the SSD including some at the conference. 14 endorsers did not attend. In Palma, there were 46 states present who had endorsed by the start of the conference and 34 non-endorsers, of which 11 subsequently endorsed, including at the conference. 43 endorsers did not attend.

Other regular international events where GCPEA could focus advocacy, such as UN Security Council (UNSC) open debates on children and armed conflict, have also been significant to increasing the number of endorsers. In 2020 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) declared an annual International Day to Protect Education from Attack (9 September) in a resolution led by Qatar,⁹ with UNESCO and Unicef (who are members of GCPEA) mandated to facilitate its observance. This provides another focus point.

GCPEA has encouraged states to call on others to endorse the SSD in statements to these and other international forums whenever relevant, including encouraging group statements by endorsers. Calls to endorse (or statements welcoming endorsements) have also been made by UN office holders and bodies with whom the community around the SSD have worked, such as the UN Secretary General (UNSG) (in his annual Children and Armed Conflict report), the special representative on children and armed conflict, the high commissioner for human rights and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, among others. GCPEA has also undertaken advocacy within human rights treaty bodies (for example where particular endorser countries are undergoing review, or where relevant meetings are taking place) to obtain mention and recognition in these spaces and help build the norms around the SSD.

IMPLEMENTING THE SSD'S COMMITMENTS

PRIORITIES FOR THE SSD COMMUNITY: BALANCING UNIVERSALISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

During the SSD's drafting and early after its agreement, it was recognised by many of the individuals involved in the initiative that working on both universalisation and implementation would be important in the initial years: focusing on increasing SSD endorsements alone would be insufficient if the SSD was to be an effective instrument. Some implementation-focused activity was necessary to create a culture of work and generate the expectation of making practical change through the SSD. The risk of the Declaration being treated as only a statement of principles, rather than a commitment to action, needed to be avoided. How the commitments might be operationalised and implemented was already being considered during drafting.

Much of the initial focus by leading states and GCPEA was on gathering endorsements, with a focus on reaching 50 countries and then 100, before aiming to shift the balance of work and focus to implementation advocacy and activities. Establishing a strategy for the balance between universalisation and implementation activities and systematic plans for developing particular pieces of state-led work and a community of practice at an early stage, was identified by several of those spoken to for this paper as a lesson that could be beneficial to similar initiatives. Taking such a strategy might be especially helpful to international initiatives whose meaning and goals are significantly contested by endorser countries – which was not the case for the SSD.

A narrative and reflections on some of the main types of activities undertaken to promote implementation since 2015 by the community of states, international organisations and NGOs involved in the SSD are laid out below. Many of these activities aimed to encourage universalisation as well, through developing understanding and engagement towards endorsement: universalisation and implementation are ultimately part of a continuum of engagement with the goals and norms the SSD seeks to promote.

In general, it is worth noting that some of the commitments in the SSD (see Box A) are, as written, more conducive to narrow progress indicators or targets for implementation; others might benefit from discussion and elaboration on the practical steps that their implementation could involve; and for some commitments, the level or type of implementation activity could vary considerably from state to state (for example, states that are militarily active or affected by attacks on education may have more action to take on prosecuting violations).

The implementation of commitments that are not accompanied by elaborated documents such as the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict¹⁰ (referenced in the first commitment) could potentially be approached in different ways. For example, endorsing states and their partners might develop structured discussions or undertake sharing and training on subjects such as good practice, operationalisation and raising standards. In relation to the SSD's second commitment on data collection for example, the GCPEA secretariat has led a process to develop technical standards with the buy-in of various stakeholders that is now being rolled out for use and feedback, including at SSD-related meetings.

BOX A: THE COMMITMENTS ADOPTED BY STATES IN THE SSD

- × “Use the Guidelines, and bring them into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate;
- × Make every effort at a national level to collect reliable relevant data on attacks on educational facilities, on the victims of attacks, and on military use of schools and universities during armed conflict, including through existing monitoring and reporting mechanisms; to facilitate such data collection; and to provide assistance to victims, in a non-discriminatory manner;
- × Investigate allegations of violations of applicable national and international law and, where appropriate, duly prosecute perpetrators;
- × Develop, adopt and promote ‘conflict-sensitive’ approaches to education in international humanitarian and development programmes, and at a national level where relevant;
- × Seek to ensure the continuation of education during armed conflict, support the reestablishment of educational facilities and, where in a position to do so, provide and facilitate international cooperation and assistance to programmes working to prevent or respond to attacks on education, including for the implementation of this declaration;
- × Support the efforts of the UN Security Council on children and armed conflict, and of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and other relevant UN organs, entities and agencies; and
- × Meet on a regular basis, inviting relevant international organisations and civil society, so as to review the implementation of this declaration and the use of the guidelines.”¹¹

GCPEA'S GENERAL FOCUS, PRIORITIES, AND ROLE

The SSD's commitments map closely onto GCPEA's framing of the problem of attacks on education and suggested solutions at the time of the SSD's drafting in 2015. However, there are not necessarily capacities within the coalition – or its state partners – to devote to leading the promotion of implementation in each commitment area. GCPEA has made overarching political/strategic decisions on its main areas of thematic advocacy and technical work. In other thematic areas, secretariat resources, coalition expertise and organisational mandates, national programming and other factors have informed the extent of work done nationally and internationally (for example, some Steering Committee members have led specific work on violations and accountability; others work on conflict-sensitive education as part of their broader mandates, rather than their SSD-specific activities).

In terms of overall prioritisation and focus, whilst calling for SSD implementation broadly, GCPEA has focused the most resources in its implementation advocacy with states on the commitment to “Use the Guidelines [for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict], and bring them into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate.” This can be seen as the core commitment of the SSD: the Declaration was conceived in large part as a mechanism by which states could adopt and use the Guidelines (which were not a state-led initiative) and directly address the practices causing harm that the SSD is framed around.

GCPEA's other focus area as a coalition overall, as mentioned above, is on strengthening data collection, monitoring and reporting on attacks on education and military use of schools. This includes both undertaking research on attacks (discussed more below), and work to improve standards and standardisation in data collection, which aligns with the second commitment in the SSD. The GCPEA secretariat and its research staff have taken a proactive lead in this area technically. Over the past years GCPEA has been working with a range of stakeholders and experts (convened through a Reference Group) on a ‘Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education,’ the working draft of which was released earlier this year.¹² The need to improve data collection – in order to improve understanding and responses to the problem – and to build capacities to do so has been recognised for several years. GCPEA's approach has been to develop the toolkit as a set of technical standards and practical tools in collaboration and consultation with a wide range of interested parties and experts, including through co-opting and including practices and approaches that others have already developed and used successfully. Though in the early stages of its rollout (which will include various trainings with Education Clusters and presentations to states, as well as case study research), the production of this toolkit by GCPEA is already recognised as a useful product that is needed to fill a gap towards strengthening data collection and reporting. Framed in terms of SSD implementation, this work by GCPEA should assist states considerably in operationalising and implementing the second commitment of the Declaration.

INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS TO REVIEW PROGRESS

Through the final commitment in the SSD, states are committed in an open-ended way to further meetings to review their progress. Such meetings are intended to keep momentum by both providing a hook for universalisation activity (as described above) as well as a means to focus on progress in implementation. Meetings of endorsers allow states to share steps they have taken to meet their commitments and to receive positive attention for this: they also aim to create the expectation that endorsers should be making this progress.

Two international meetings have been convened by states since 2015 – one by Argentina (co-hosted with Norway) in Buenos Aires in 2017, and one by Spain in Palma in 2019. The Fourth International Conference on Safe Schools is scheduled for October 2021, to be hosted by Nigeria (with Norway, Argentina, and Spain) in Abuja. Various other states have expressed an interest in hosting further meetings in the future: more have looked to take on this ownership and role as the SSD and activities around it have grown. International meetings so far have been undertaken with significant collaboration with GCPEA.

For the Buenos Aires conference in March 2017 GCPEA (and Article 36) provided input before and during the conference, including convening strategic discussions in advance on how the meeting should be framed and organised, developing a plan in partnership with Argentina and Norway. It was recognised in these discussions that establishing the expectation and culture of ongoing action on implementation was crucial at this early stage, to ensure the SSD would be a meaningful initiative. The Buenos Aires conference agenda was therefore organised around the commitment areas in the SSD, inviting states to give updates on the progress they had made or on national practice. Attempting to establish causality between the SSD and changes in trends in attacks on education or the military use of schools would have been challenging at this point – but example case studies of changes in policies, or of militaries giving back educational facilities, could be meaningfully highlighted.

Though the invitation to the conference went out to states relatively close to the time, in a preparation seminar in Geneva shortly before the conference several states were able to share updates on implementation, from which GCPEA was able to collate various examples of policy and practice that the coalition highlighted in different ways. Finding speakers from individual states to share practice or changes in policy on the Buenos Aires conference panels was more challenging, though some shared examples in the general debate. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) made a presentation highlighting UN Department of Peace Operations's policy prohibiting the use of schools by peacekeepers, and examples of vacation of schools. Examples of implementation shared by states were collected in the conference report.¹³

GCPEA and the Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (now the Dallaire Institute) launched a toolkit on implementing the guidelines¹⁴ at the conference, which is still used in advocacy. When Argentina presented the Buenos Aires conference report at a meeting in Geneva in autumn 2017, GCPEA also launched ‘A Framework for Action,’¹⁵ which both gave suggestions for how the different commitments of the SSD could be implemented, and highlighted changes and good practice that states and others had already undertaken.

No outcome text was negotiated at the Buenos Aires conference, which concentrated on presentations of the problem, the work being done, and bringing some inspiring speakers. There was also high-level state representation, and media work. The general approach taken for this first post-Declaration conference might be seen as aiming to help build a sense of positive collective work and community, around a practical tool for improving civilian protection that endorser were invited to use. Illustrating some ways in which endorser could make progress by encouraging sharing was part of this. This is a different approach to, for example, focusing on reporting and accountability through undertaking a rigid measuring of endorser's actions so far against commitments.

For the Palma conference in May 2019 GCPEA was again involved in discussions around the planning of the conference. The conference overall focused on the themes of impacts on women and girls, monitoring and reporting, and the implementation of the Guidelines. There was a session where a panel of states from different regions shared how their countries had approached implementation. Spain also wished to make the conference more interactive, so suggested undertaking a tabletop exercise of scenarios on using the Guidelines in armed conflict for one of the sessions. This was proposed as a way to draw out some of the key practical issues around this core commitment in the SSD. Article 36 designed and coordinated the exercise in partnership with the Ministries of Defence of Spain and Argentina, GCPEA and other NGO partners.¹⁶ This practical exercise and discussion was widely welcomed by participants as a useful approach for understanding implementation issues and how the SSD and Guidelines could be operationalised. Representing a pivot towards a greater focus on implementation work, at the conference Norway also announced it would be setting up an international implementation network, and Spain that it would be conducting a series of technical trainings on the SSD for states.

REGIONAL WORKSHOPS ON IMPLEMENTATION

Regional workshops on implementation have been also convened by GCPEA in partnership with states since 2015, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 2016¹⁷ and Panama City in December 2017.¹⁸ States convening regionally to discuss progress on the SSD also constitutes action under its final commitment, and some initially expected that there might be more work done in this format given the resources involved in convening international conferences, and the possible advantages of more specific regionally-focused discussions. In practice, endorsing countries have stepped forward to convene international conferences every two years.

The main goal of the regional workshops convened in 2016 and 2017 was to provide starting points for further national follow up, as well as encouraging attention to the issue and the sharing of practice, focusing on national experiences and actions taken. For GCPEA, the workshops represented an opportunity to build relationships for further implementation work, as well as to raise awareness and start conversations. GCPEA member organisations have also taken on regionally focused advocacy work since these activities.

The workshops were tailored thematically with the aim of concentrating on the aspects of the SSD considered most relevant to the states of the region – for the workshop in Panama for example organisers aimed to focus on states' participation in peacekeeping as troop contributing countries, through which these states might engage in military practice

relevant to the SSD. The regional meeting in Ethiopia included a session focused around giving input to the Guidelines implementation 'Toolkit' launched in Buenos Aires, which gave a useful and practical point of engagement and productive discussion.

GCPEA also convened a cross-regional workshop on 'promising practices' for protecting education and preventing military use in Istanbul in October 2015,¹⁹ exploring different field-based strategies. This involved inviting country teams to develop action plans, which included ministry of education officials as well as international organisations and NGOs, to look at how work could be taken forward.

NATIONAL-LEVEL ADVOCACY AND SCENARIO-BASED ENGAGEMENT

Concerted country by country activity to encourage states to join the SSD and then engage meaningfully in changes in policy and practice has been an important part of GCPEA's implementation advocacy work. In some cases, the secretariat has provided support and ad hoc activities such as advocacy visits to particular countries, civil society consultations and workshop convening. The national programmes of GCPEA members have done the bulk of the in-depth work, given that they are well placed to build relationships and engagement. GCPEA has convened national level workshops similar to the regional workshops described above, aimed at providing starting points for further engagement. These have included discussing the putting in place of roadmaps for follow up action, which aim to prompt further action or discussion, with varied engagement.

The main focus in national implementation advocacy has been on the first commitment of the SSD on bringing the Guidelines into policy and use, and on promoting policy changes to documents such as military manuals, doctrines, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). Though processes to review such documents are generally not openly announced to invite input, GCPEA has engaged directly with some of these when possible, including with militarily active states that are not affected domestically by attacks on education. In prioritising countries implementation advocacy at the national level with those countries that are affected by attacks on education, GCPEA have relied on their Education Under Attack research to identify the endorser countries across different regions that are most affected.

National workshops have included undertaking trainings on the SSD and Guidelines with government officials, police and armed forces. Scenario-based discussion and training activities on the SSD and Guidelines have generally been considered a helpful tool for advancing conversations on implementation. Such activities have been undertaken by states, GCPEA and its members in international, national or smaller military workshops both whilst gathering endorsements and with endorser. GCPEA has worked with the Dallaire Institute on this. The scenario-based workshop format has been especially useful for building understanding amongst militaries and others about the level of constraint implied by the SSD and Guidelines, and how that might relate to their current practice and legal frameworks. In this area, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also provided technical support and presentations to endorser and non-endorser states on how the SSD and Guidelines interact with existing law. Where a state has endorsed the SSD and Guidelines, the ICRC can also incorporate this into its dialogues on child protection in conflict.²⁰

The level of implementation activity in different endorsing countries has been mixed. Some endorsing countries have systematically undertaken changes in policy and practice, whereas others have not reported as much progress: in general, there remains much implementation work to do. The SSD being a political rather than legal instrument may have contributed to less urgency, clarity or resourcing for implementation and follow up for some.²¹ The SSD is also relevant to the work of multiple ministries in any given country (for example ministries covering education, foreign affairs, development and defence). The priorities of these different parts of the state may also be in some tension, with a state's obligation to provide education potentially conflicting with some military practices that the SSD aims to address, for example. Ensuring a home or focal point for SSD work, individuals willing to take ownership and leadership, and cooperation and agreement between ministries on the purpose and value of the SSD, have been important factors for progress in various countries. For GCPEA, highlighting and celebrating changes made in national policies and practices that align with the goals of the SSD has also been considered important to generating momentum and demonstrating how practical change can be made.

ROLES AND LEADERSHIP FROM DIFFERENT STATES

The SSD is an initiative led, endorsed and implemented by states with the support and partnership of a broader range of actors. In such initiatives, a strong core group of countries committed to driving progress forward from text development to universalisation and implementation can be beneficial.

As mentioned above, as endorsements and activity under the SSD have developed, a greater number and range of states have taken on roles such as hosting conferences and launching initiatives for implementation and cooperation, as well as undertaking bilateral work and regional initiatives with other states and organisations to encourage endorsement and develop conversations on how the SSD can be practically used. With the SSD, having states undertake this work from different perspectives – for example, as a peacekeeping troop contributing country, a country affected by attacks on education, or a country that participates in military cooperation such as through NATO – has been very beneficial.

For initiatives like the SSD, having the support of a strong donor country or countries is also important to the process, for example for convening international meetings, as well as for supporting the work of non-governmental stakeholders. For the SSD, Norway has for example sponsored the travel of state representatives to conferences through UNDP, and funded GCPEA and other organisations working in this area.

As mentioned above, in 2019 Norway and Spain pledged to take on the roles of leading two activities (that have been linked together) to support implementation. Norway has started to develop an SSD Implementation Network of states, aimed at facilitating peer exchange and expert input, to which a series of technical trainings facilitated by Spain will be one contribution. The Implementation Network (whose commencement was delayed during 2020 due to the pandemic) will aim to increase activity and cooperation between states that have endorsed the SSD. It intends to give the opportunity to strengthen dialogue between states and with other experts to collectively discuss how to advance implementation. The network will give opportunities for making links and undertaking joint work on implementation outside of the periods leading up to the

BOX B: AN EXAMPLE NATIONAL ADVOCACY MODEL

GCPEA member Save the Children, along with partners including Plan International and World Vision, has led national (and regional) advocacy work around endorsing and implementing the SSD and protecting education from attack in several countries in West and Central Africa. In each country, they have aimed to deploy a similar model to help support progress in implementation, which has been led by national or regional offices. The approach has involved encouraging SSD endorsing governments to set up national steering committees or working groups with representatives of all the relevant ministries as well as NGOs and other civil society. The role of these committees is to collectively monitor and ensure implementation. They then support the committees to put in place annual plans with objectives, which Save the Children and other organisations can support technically as necessary, such as with training and other resources. The aim is to work collaboratively to engage different actors with how the commitments of the SSD and Guidelines can be implemented, and to build shared understandings. Building community awareness and involvement in protecting education from attack has been a key part of the work as well. This way of working has been seen as a useful model for supporting progress amongst committed endorsing states.

Some countries in West Africa have made significant changes in national policy following their endorsement of the SSD, such as Mali and Nigeria, which have brought the Guidelines into domestic policy frameworks. Nigeria has been a champion of the SSD's universalisation and implementation and is hosting the next international conference on safe schools. In the Sahel region, the military use of schools has dropped considerably, with endorsing states and their ministries of defence committed to doing the necessary work to avoid the occupation of educational facilities.

international conferences on safe schools – which have until now been the main time when such connection takes place. Undertaken in partnership with GCPEA, the network will include an online platform to facilitate communication.²²

In early 2021 Spain undertook the first series of technical cooperation training meetings with representatives from twenty countries attending (these were conducted fully online, given the ongoing challenges of the pandemic). The trainings were convened by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation with support from GCPEA. The training sessions covered the impact of attacks on education; the content of the SSD and Guidelines; monitoring, reporting and accountability for attacks; and protecting schools from military use. They involved practical exercises with different tools, presentations and small group interactive discussions, including between members of armed forces on how they were using the Guidelines.²³

As well as countries that have supported the SSD throughout its development, several states that were initially sceptical of the SSD but subsequently joined the initiative have taken strong steps on national implementation and contributed to advancing the SSD and its goals

internationally. The UK, for example, was initially very resistant to the SSD as an initiative. Following work by several organisations including Save the Children and Human Rights Watch, including a public campaign with UK schoolchildren,²⁴ and following an internal legal review confirming that the UK's existing policy and practice were already substantially aligned with the commitments in the SSD and Guidelines, the UK joined the SSD and in 2018 updated military policy to reflect its commitment. It also set up a cross-departmental working group on the SSD to ensure coordination between relevant ministries (which was superseded by a Children and Armed Conflict working group). UK representatives have spoken up strongly for the SSD at international meetings, including at the UN Security Council.²⁵ At the Palma conference, the UK also offered peer assistance to other countries in implementing the SSD, and to help others answer questions that had held the UK back from joining the initiative (such as around the merits or difficulties of joining an initiative to raise standards in protecting civilians 'beyond existing law'). Save the Children (which continues substantial work with the UK around the SSD) has also been invited to give trainings on the Declaration and Guidelines to the UK military to assist in ensuring knowledge of these commitments across the armed forces.

MONITORING THE PROBLEM OF ATTACKS ON EDUCATION, AND WORK TO ADDRESS IT

GCPEA has taken a major role in monitoring both incidents of attacks on education and the military use of educational facilities – which it documents through the Education Under Attack research and reports – and monitoring state-led activity to address this harm through the universalisation and implementation of the SSD and its commitments. Monitoring and framing the scale of the problem through research on the impacts of attacks on education is a key part of developing norms and keeping a focus on implementing solutions. In the absence of systematic data from other sources (including the possibility of transparent monitoring and reporting by states), continued independent research by GCPEA is crucial. Similarly, in the absence of a process for more formal, regular, or systematic reporting by states on their progress made to implement the SSD and its commitments (due to the resource burden for states and other factors), the information gathering undertaken by GCPEA is valuable for assessing progress and highlighting practical measures that committed states can take.

GCPEA now publishes its flagship research, Education Under Attack (EUA), every two years. EUA reports were first published by UNESCO in 2007²⁶ and 2010,²⁷ playing a major role in framing the problem of attacks on education as well as in advocacy for UN Security Council Resolution 1998,²⁸ under which attacks on schools and hospitals trigger listing under the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on violations against children in armed conflict. Following these reports, the research was transferred to be branded as a product of the global coalition and an important part of its identity, with GCPEA publishing subsequent EUA reports in 2014,²⁹ 2018³⁰ and 2020.³¹ EUA is a substantial and rigorous piece of research produced and authored by two GCPEA secretariat staff, with some support from research consultants. The biannual report goes

through a review and consultation process with GCPEA's working group on monitoring and reporting, before being signed off by its Steering Committee. GCPEA recently chose to reduce the time between reports (from four years to two) to serve the needs of coalition advocacy (to which more timely data is beneficial) and because EUA data now serves as the main source for SDG indicator 4.a.3 on attacks on education.³² GCPEA also publishes its EUA data on UNOCHA's humanitarian data exchange.³³ Since 2019 GCPEA have also had a partnership with Insecurity Insight on producing a monthly update on attacks on education.³⁴ Between the biannual reports, GCPEA may also produce thematic briefings or fact sheets for specific purposes. As mentioned above, EUA helps inform GCPEA's decisions on their prioritisation of implementation advocacy, by providing analysis of which countries are most heavily affected, where have incidents increased in the past two years, and so on.

In terms of scope and content, the latest EUA report (2020) gives a global overview of trends in attacks on education according to GCPEA's data for the past five years, and profiles attacks on education and military use in 37 countries for the period since the last report. Incidents covered by the data are threats or use of force against people and places of education (including child recruitment) as well as the military use of schools and universities.³⁵ The focus in EUA is on monitoring the immediate harm caused by these incidents, rather than longer term impacts – though the 'Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education' recently released by GCPEA to help improve monitoring and report has a wider scope.³⁶ Countries are profiled in EUA if they meet the criteria of both experiencing insecurity or armed conflict, and experiencing a systematic pattern of attacks on education. The intention is to exclude countries with few attacks on education, and GCPEA categorises countries by how heavily affected they are. The data sources used include reviewing reports, media reports, monitoring by other organisations³⁷ and contact with organisations working in affected countries. Some of the limitations to the data identified by GCPEA – mainly arising from the source material available – include undercounting, lack of disaggregation and delayed reporting. The research continues to play a central role in building shared understandings of the problem of attacks on education and how these should be responded to.

In terms of monitoring activity to address harm GCPEA monitors endorsements of the SSD and maintains a list and map³⁸ (complementing the Norwegian MFA's official list), and sends updates when new endorsements come in or other developments relevant to the SSD (such as new conference announcements) occur. The 'Positive Developments' section of the EUA 2020 report lists endorsements of the SSD. Examples of progress in terms of developments, case studies and practice in relation to each commitment area of the SSD are also listed.³⁹ More formal monitoring and reporting by states on their progress and practice in different commitment areas of the SSD (for example at regular international meetings) has not been proposed or agreed, with resource implications and other factors likely preventing this being taken on. GCPEA has therefore sought to proactively collect examples of positive changes in policy and practice on an ongoing basis since 2015, from developments in military policy to individual examples of the handing back of schools from militaries. GCPEA has highlighted these in different ways, such as presentations to briefings and events; EUA reports; other GCPEA publications such as 'A Framework for Action'⁴⁰ and a 2019 factsheet on the 'Practical Impact of the Safe Schools Declaration';⁴¹ and online updates.⁴² GCPEA member Human Rights Watch has done in-depth

research collecting recent (and historic) examples of law, policy and military doctrine on protecting schools and universities from military use, with the intention of contributing to implementation advocacy by showing how such policies can be adopted. The most recently published study was released at the Palma conference in 2019.⁴³ Human Rights Watch has also looked at trends in military use before and after the SSD in endorsing and non-endorsing countries, and whether conclusions might be drawn about impacts.⁴⁴ Collecting examples and case studies to show progress, feasibility and impact – and sharing them at relevant moments and events to encourage action and show momentum – has been considered important from early on, as mentioned above.

Finally, GCPEA seeks to monitor states' individual and joint statements about the SSD to international forums such as UN Security Council debates, as well as references to the SSD and related issues in the reporting, resolutions and statements of UN office holders and forums/mechanisms. Information and analysis on this is shared for example in newsletters⁴⁵ and online⁴⁶ to highlight the state of debate and strong interventions, which feeds back into universalisation and implementation advocacy through the assessment it provides of the positions of different states.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has given a narrative of and provided reflections on the significance of some of the activities undertaken by the community of states, international organisations and civil society committed to the SSD since its agreement in 2015, towards universalising, implementing, and monitoring the SSD's progress and the problem of attacks on education. These activities all serve the ultimate goal of developing norms and action to protect education, and civilians, from the impacts of armed violence. In this work, effective working partnerships between different kinds of actors, who can take on different roles, has been key. Universalising the SSD is a tool in the work of norm building and keeping a focus on the issues the Declaration responds to. Convened events and political moments that can bring attention and foster commitment through have been important to the process of gathering endorsement. Commencing work early on encouraging policy and practical change beyond endorsement is also crucial to this work and to creating meaningful change; practical exercises, tools and discussions, and the recording and presenting of changes, have been particularly valuable to the SSD community in promoting this implementation. The continued importance of research, information gathering, and framing is also evident in work to advance the SSD's agenda since 2015. The monitoring by GCPEA of both attacks on education and policy responses to this remains crucial in working towards the ultimate goals of this process: working towards the full protection of civilians through protecting the futures of children and their communities.

ENDNOTES

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