

CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT: PROTECTING EDUCATION FROM ATTACK

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Article 36 is a specialist non-profit organisation, focused on reducing harm from weapons.

Education is widely recognised as a basic human right and has positive, transformative effects for students in both the immediate and long-term. Despite this, recent years have seen an increase in the number of attacks on schools and universities and their continued use for military purposes. This denies millions of children and students an education. Recognising this, Article 36 calls on states to:

- x Acknowledge that safe access to education is an essential building-block of a peaceful stable society.
- x Acknowledge explicitly the long-term effects caused to children, students, communities, societies, economies and cultures by both attacks on education and the use of schools and universities for military purposes.
- x Condemn attacks on education, which are a grave violation of children's rights, and on educational facilities, educational staff and students.
- x Recognise that international humanitarian law sets out minimum standards that parties to conflict must adhere to, and that there is also potential for good practices that go beyond the law.
- x Endorse, implement and support the Safe Schools Declaration, and refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION: A PATTERN OF HARM

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) documented a systematic pattern of attacks on education in 37 countries over the last five years.¹ Such attacks include the bombing, burning and destruction schools and universities and result in the death and injury of children, students and teachers. This in turn can increase the risk of abduction, violence and abuse, the disruption of learning opportunities and the deprivation of access to schools.

Even where places of education are not a target, the use of explosive weapons such as heavy mortars, air-dropped bombs and missiles in populated areas where schools and universities are located can damage or destroy educational facilities, or the essential infrastructure, including electricity and water, upon which they rely.

The loss of education services, and of an education, can have a devastating effect on the lives of children. For younger children, those in primary and secondary schools, education can be a psychological anchor, offering a sense of normality and providing structure during times of crisis, trauma and upheaval.

Education also delivers the mental stimulation needed for healthy cognitive, social and emotional development in children and young people. Without a sufficient primary and secondary education, children risk having lower levels of literacy, or even being illiterate, when they reach adulthood.

Schools can also be the location of health services or nutrition programmes for children who might otherwise be at risk of going without. Where education services are not available, being out of school places children and young people at higher risk of recruitment into armed groups, forced 'marriage' or exploitative work.

Young women and girls can be particularly affected by attacks on education: violence against female teachers and students are all too common and can include rape, abduction into sexual slavery or forced marriage, and threats or attacks designed to forcibly prescribe their dress or to limit their freedom of movement and their access to an education on the basis of their gender. Such attacks may take place at school, but also along routes to the school or university, or nearby. It is not surprising, then, that girls living in conflict affected countries are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.² This has clear implications for the achievement of gender parity.

EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Education not only affects the individual, but has much wider social, economic and development effects. Attacks on schools and universities can lead to weakened education systems; long-term loss of qualified teachers, administrators and academics; and a diminishing of the quality of education provided. This is true for higher education as much as schools, with attacks hindering research, development and training.

These longer-term impacts on education have negative knock-on effects for a country's economic, political and social development, as well as for the development of a robust civil society. Education (or lack thereof) can significantly contribute to increasing the income of a person, family or community.³ Institutions of education, universities in particular, also often act as repositories of cultural property, and foster wider social engagement with culture and heritage.

Education is also key to the fulfilment of other critical rights and needs. Education reduces economic and gender inequalities,⁴ and has a positive impact on a society's health by equipping individuals with knowledge of healthy behaviours as well as the ability to understand their health needs, follow physician directions, and advocate for themselves and their families. In this way, education empowers people, communities, and societies to live more healthy and sustainable lives.

EDUCATION AND PEACE

Education not only has consequences for a society's development, but for its stability. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the importance of education on "[t]he development of respect for his or her own cultural identity, language and values...and for civilizations different from his or her own; [and] The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin".⁴

Education can be key in fostering acceptance between people, and can be mobilised to defuse, recover from and reconcile after violent conflict. The academic freedom associated with education, and particularly higher education, can be essential in encouraging mutual understanding and dialogue, and thereby addressing social tensions and conflicts in a peaceful manner. In this way, education can contribute to more peaceful, as well as more prosperous, societies.

MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

Military occupation or use of places of education as bases, barracks, detention centres or armament stores can also deny children of their right to an education, exposes them to greater risk of attack, and thus damage and destruction, and puts the security of pupils and teachers at risk. Military use of schools renders them lawful military targets, regardless of whether their use was lawful or not.

Military occupation carries other hazards: where schools are used for military advances they are often subsequently booby-trapped with explosives, or when they are the target of attacks they can become sites contaminated with unexploded ordnance. This necessitates the clearance of landmines and explosive remnants of war and can significantly delay or even render impossible the return of staff and students long after a war has ended.

END NOTES

1. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) (2020), "Education Under Attack 2020", eua2020.protectingeducation.org/#introduction
2. European Commission (2020), "Education in Emergencies Factsheet", https://ec.europa.eu/echo/printpdf/what/humanitarian-aid/educationemergencies_en
3. UNESCO (2011), "Education Counts: Towards the Millennium Development Goals", <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001902/190214e.pdf>
4. UNESCO (2013), Education for All Global Monitoring Report - "Education Transforms Lives", <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000223115>
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29.