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Schools and Education in armed conflicts

Abstract:

Four years of war in Syria provide alarming figures about the impact of this conflict on civilians. Out of all the victims, once again children appear as the most exposed human targets to the consequences of war. One of the most unknown aspects of this conflict is its impact in Syrian children and teenagers' education.

Educational vulnerability is not usually a visible subject in conflict analysis. However, the need to reinforce and prioritise the protection of children and young peoples' right to education is becoming more evident, even in wartime. The destruction of schools favours the exposure of children and young people to forced recruitment, to violence, and also increases gender inequality and weakens countries to achieve peace.

Resumen:

Los 4 años de guerra en Siria ofrecen cifras alarmantes del impacto del conflicto en la población civil. De entre todas las víctimas, los niños aparecen, una vez más, como los objetivos humanos más expuestos a las consecuencias de la guerra. Uno de los aspectos menos conocidos del conflicto es el impacto que ha ocasionado en la educación de niños y adolescentes sirios.

La vulnerabilidad educativa no suele ser un asunto visible en los análisis de los conflictos. Sin embargo, cada vez se hace más evidente la necesidad de potenciar la protección al derecho a la educación de los niños y jóvenes y priorizar la atención a esta necesidad, incluso en medio de la guerra. La destrucción de escuelas favorece la exposición de niños y jóvenes al reclutamiento forzado y a la violencia, incrementa las desigualdades de género y debilita a los países en sus esfuerzos para alcanzar la paz.

Keywords:

Education, armed conflict, school, international humanitarian law, Lucens Guidelines, refugees, Syria.

Palabras clave:

Educación, conflicto armado, escuelas, Derecho Internacional Humanitario, Directrices de Lucens, refugiados, Siria.

Education of syrian children before and after the conflict

The Syrian case exemplifies the destruction of a country's education system. In 2011, before the beginning of the crisis, Syria had a good basic education system where 97% of school-age children were going to school. Regarding secondary school, 67% of teenagers were enrolled in a school. As a whole, Syria's literate population was around 90%. Between the 2004 and 2009 national education budget went from 14% to 19%, making its literacy status higher than in any neighbour countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan or Egypt¹. However, the internal conflict taking place in Syria has left over 200,000 casualties, 7.6 million internally displaced people, 3.8 million refugees, 10 million people in a situation of food insecurity and 1.2 million requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.

Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has registered over a million Syrian children as refugees, out of which 75% are under the age of 12. Out of all Syrian children in school-age (4.8 million), 2.2 million do not receive educational care, half of them are out of school and over 4,000 educational centres have been destroyed.

According to data given by NGOs in January 2015, countries hosting the largest number of refugees are Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, being children almost half of them.

Refugee families from Syria are people who have crossed international borders either threatened by prosecution or having been prosecuted in their home country. They have been living for 4 years in plastic and wood makeshift camps, organised in different camps divided in settlements for every 40-50 families in extreme conditions². Only a small proportion of these refugee children have gone back to school. In Jordan, where almost 300,000 refugee children were registered in October 2013, only half of them were going to school. Percentages go down to 20% in the Lebanon, who hosts almost 400,000 refugee children, making the number of Syrian unschooled children greater than Lebanese children in school³.

¹ *Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted. Global action to rescue the schooling a generation*, available in <http://www.unhcr.org>

² *Acción contra el hambre, Tú contra el hambre*, nº 68, febrero 2015, p. 4-89. Available in www.accioncontraelhambre.org

³ UNRWA, www.unrwa.es/que-hacemos/emergencias/siria

Impact of the syrian conflict on the education system of host countries

The education system of host countries are suffering from the impact of the arrival of Syrians. Schools' capacities are surpassed with such an influx of students since they have to increase their school materials and transport, whereas in other cases curricular and language necessities are an obstacle to schools that are already weak. For instance, Arabic is a vehicular language in Syrian schools, whereas in the Lebanon classes are taught either in French or in English. This is detrimental towards older students who find it more difficult to adapt to new languages, being one more reason for school dropouts.

Another case to bear in mind is that of children with special education necessities, who tend to be left behind because neither their families nor the host country's education system are able to face the curricular adaptation requirements or special transportation measures.

Teachers suffer too—they have to be trained to make a specific work with new students that arrive in situation of stress and, in many cases, suffer from psychological harm due to past experiences and their current conditions and circumstances. To these must be added the overcrowding in class and difficulties due to the different education systems.

Such a complex situation, which will be partially analysed in this paper, jeopardises the acceptance of asylum status, and some organisations have reported complaints of abuses and bullying among school students.

The economic support that communities of refugees receive is essential on almost every occasion, since costs of transport and school materials, for instance, are added to the 90 euros they have to pay for their rent every month, as well as to the 180 euros for their visa renewal every 6 months.

For those reasons, many humanitarian assistance initiatives aim to alleviate the burden on local schools, facilitating thereby non-formal education programmes (parallel education to the education system). In some cases, as for the case of Palestinian refugees in the Lebanon, their own projects are established and schools are built and organised to alleviate the pressure on the host country⁴, as well as to ease stress for the limited education systems in neighbour countries. It must be borne in mind that the Lebanon, with a population of 4 million people, received 800,000 Syrian refugees in 2013⁵, number that went up to 400,000 in 2015.

In view of such a cluster of difficulties, it is not surprising that school dropouts are so high among refugee children. Syrian refugee children have a school dropout rate two times larger than Lebanese children and many who leave their studies are under the age of 12⁶. In turn, Jordan, with a population of around 6 million people, has hosted

⁴ <http://www.unrwa.es>

⁵ October 2013, data from UNHCR in http://unhcr.org/futuresofSyria/the_challenge-of-education.html.

⁶ World Bank, *Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict, Report*,

over half a million refugees since 2011, yet 56% of Syrian children do not receive any formal education at all.

There are several reasons to drop school—first, economic difficulties for some families to pay school transport fees; second, especially in the case of girls, not having a safe way to go to school. Many families fear letting their girls travel long distances, deciding to withdraw them from school. Therefore, going to school is an unsurmountable barrier for many children, especially if they happen to be girls and if population density is low.

Sometimes, the vulnerability lies in the education centre itself. Abuses on the part of teachers, as well as discrimination and bullying on foreign refugees have been reported.

Education as a fundamental human right. from international humanitarian law to lucens guidelines

The legal definition of the right to education has its base in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. The right to education is considered to be binding under all circumstances and must be protected, even in crisis and emergency situations due to internal conflicts and civil wars. The Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War signed on 12 August 1949 holds a full description relative to protecting education under military occupation (Art. 50); the protection of the education of children and interned teenagers (Art. 49).

In regards to refugees, the International Humanitarian Law protects civil refugees in countries where there is a military conflict and acknowledges them as vulnerable people thanks to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the subsequent 1969 Convention. However, displaced persons, that is, the group of people that has not crossed any international border yet has had to abandon their homes, is only protected by International Humanitarian Law. According to International Humanitarian Law, displacements are forbidden unless necessary for military reasons or to protect the population. International Humanitarian Law also considers that the systematic policy of unjustified displacement of civilians is a crime against humanity⁷.

However, the difficulty on law enforcement to assist people and protect the right to education lies in the characteristics of modern conflicts. There are no conflicts between states nowadays, but asymmetrical wars driven by armed or terrorist groups who do not recognise nor respect the international legal framework. That is why the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum raised the need for a clear and integrated declaration on protection for schools in times of armed conflicts, by virtue of International Humanitarian Law⁸.

20/09/2013, p. 78. Available in

<http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/LBN-ESIA%20of%20Syrian%20Conflict-%20EX%20SUMMARY%20ENGLISH.pdf>

⁷ In <https://www.irrc.org/spa/war-and-law/protected-persons/refugee-displaced-persons.html>.

⁸ Unesco, *Education in situations of emergency and crisis, Education for All Assessment Thematic*

In turn, acknowledging the necessity of countering the military use of schools has experienced an increase: in 2009, the United Nations Security Council insisted on that matter and the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations modified in 2012 some Infantry Battalion manuals to forbid the use of schools by the military in their operations⁹.

The United Nations Security Council strongly condemns in its 18 September 2014 Working Group on Children and Armed Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo conclusions attacks on schools and urges all parties to apply and respect the civilian character of education centres. It also proposes some measures to be implemented in the other countries:

- Establishing procedures of verification of schools protection
- Ensure judicial supervision
- Provide help for the rehabilitation of schools
- Urge on financial help to focus on rehabilitation and recruitment of teachers and psychiatrists' soften the effects of war in children¹⁰.

On this matter, the UN special representative for children and armed conflicts had repeatedly urged countries, already in 2014, that schools shall not be used for military purposes.

The proposed measures are based on Lucens Guidelines. In 2012, a group of international experts formed by militaries, UN representatives and governmental and non-governmental organisations met in the Swiss city of Lucens in the search for developing initiatives and guidelines for action to reduce the military use of schools and universities. The purpose was to establish measures in accordance with international law that are useful to make decisions in military operations to protect the right to education in conflict areas. The guidelines provided affect all parties involved in conflicts and are aimed to be implemented not only during an armed conflict but also afterwards. Such guidelines, promoted by the *Global coalition to protect education from attacks*¹¹, are an estimable starting point for conducting the international scenario towards the necessity of keeping armed groups out of schools, as well as to guarantee that all children affected by armed conflict can continue with their studies.

Study, disponible en <http://unesdoc.unesco.org>

⁹ COURSEN, Zama, "Aumentan los ataques violentos contra escuelas en zonas de conflicto", *Human Rights Watch, Policy Review*, 4 March 2014, available in <http://www.hrw.org/es/news/2014/03/04/aumentan-los-ataques-violentos-contra-escuelas-en-zonas-de-conflicto>

¹⁰ <http://www.un.org/es/comun/docs/?symbol=S/AC.51/2014/3>

¹¹ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, GCPEA includes: ACNUR, Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), Geneva Call, Human Rights Watch, Institute International/IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund, Norwegian Refugee Council, Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict, SAIH, Save the Children, the Scholars at Risk Network, UNESCO, UNICEF and War Child Holland. Text available in <http://www.protectingeducation.org>

Attacks on schools

In many countries, going to school is a high risk activity.

The asymmetrical character of armed conflicts has worsened threats for children. Without a defined battlefield, with increasing terrorism and the diversification of the parties intervening in the conflict, the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate actions are becoming blurred. Deliberate and systematic attacks in current wars are being carried out against teachers, students and schools, given that armed groups consider it to be a legitimate military strategy. Sometimes they consist of attacks such as gas or acid throwing to girls; others, there are bombs or shootings against educational centres. Teachers are also a target¹².

The shooting that suffered Malala has been popular worldwide, yet it unfortunately is a usual, deplorable practice. In November 2014, 11 children died in a school attack in Al-Qaboun, in east Damascus. In Afghanistan, groups of rebels attack schools deliberately and frequently, being registered over 613 incidents in 2009. In 2010, around 450 schools had to close in Afghanistan due to insecurity and 74 children died as a consequence of suicide attacks and bombs set in the route girls took to go to school. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Israeli military attacks destroyed 280 schools between 2008 and 2009. In southern Thailand, teachers and students have become target of attacks. In Pakistan, insurgent groups operating in the northern east area have attacked secondary and primary schools for girls. 95 girls were wounded in one attack when they were leaving their school. In India, Naxals have systematically attacked school centres in Chhattisgarh, aiming to weaken government infrastructures. In Yemen, 725 schools in Saada's governorate had to close during conflicts in 2009-2010 and over 200 educational centres were destroyed¹³. In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram has burnt down over 300 schools since 2012. In Donetsk 10 people were killed in a school shelled in October 2014, whereas the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict destroyed at least 7 schools related to the UN for Palestinian refugees and damaged a total of 134 schools.

Global Coalition to protect education from attack¹⁴ registers and analyses cases of students, teachers, schools and universities that have experienced deliberate attacks worldwide. Reasons for these attacks are varied—in Afghanistan, for instance, that leads ranking, armed groups say they attack schools for being a symbol of the government. In turn, attacks in southern Thailand are argued to be for religious and language reasons, since secessionist Muslims reject both Buddhism and the official language.

¹² GARCÍA SÁNCHEZ, Ignacio J. "Los aspectos humanos en la Política Común de Seguridad y Defensa de la Unión Europea": http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2012/DIEEEA40-2012_FactorHumanoPCSD_IJGS.pdf

¹³ Unesco, *Informe de Seguimiento de la EPT en el Mundo 2011*, p.162-164, available in <http://www.unesco.org>

¹⁴ http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/attachments/eua_2014_summary_spanish_lowres.pdf

The use of schools for military purposes is one of the consequences of an increase in attacks against schools in conflict areas too. On the one hand, government military forces argue that schools are a resource for governmental use. On the other hand, armed groups use schools as a refuge. As a result, schools become military bases, barracks, arms depots, shooting stands, detention and torture centres or a place for terrorist training.

The use of schools for military purposes provokes either children displacement or prevents them from developing their right to education, besides overexposing boys and girls to attacks from the other side.

Need for change in humanitarian assistance

The acknowledgement of the impact of conflicts in education is leading to a need for change in the way of dealing with this problem. Some international organisations urge to change the way of thinking humanitarian assistance, as well as to recognise the fundamental role of education in a situation of emergency like an armed conflict, since the traditional help method does not meet the education necessities of children who are experiencing a conflict¹⁵.

The 2011 Education for All Global Monitoring Report¹⁶ shows that only 2% of total humanitarian aid goes to education, being the least financed request. Moreover, this report identifies the necessity to remedy four systematic failures:

- Failures of protection
- Failures of provision
- Failures of early recovery and reconstruction
- Failures of peacebuilding

The first failure is proposed to be remedied with the creation of an international commission that will make reports on attacks perpetrated against educational systems, in the search for finishing with current impunity.

As for improving the supply of educational services, it must be acknowledged that school can be a place where violent ideologies are spread, being indoctrinated in radicalism and violence. For that reason, the role of teachers and the course content is essential.

A failure in education can lead to promote violent conflicts when children are taught to strengthen social divisions, intolerance and prejudices that lead to war. Failures of reconstruction of a country mean a change in the design of humanitarian assistance. Such change shall tend to improve the current evaluation systems that measure the affected countries' educational needs, as well as to establish to administrative provisions in order to improve refugees' access to education. The artificial division

¹⁵ *Guía del IIPE para la planificación de la Educación en Situaciones de Emergencia y reconstrucción*, in <http://www.iiep.unesco.org>

¹⁶ UNESCO, op. cit.

within humanitarian or development assistance must come to an end in the future to establish a more flexible regulation.

A high-quality education is an exploitation and violence insurance, as well as a place to learn how to solve conflicts and contribute to a relevant extent to reconciliation.

Finally, proposals concerning peacebuilding are thought to urge donor countries to prioritise assistance to those countries that favour inclusive educational systems. It is intended to implement measures to evaluate the possible impact of an educational policy in former resentful points, bearing in mind that school is a place to learn and develop values such as tolerance, respect and peaceful coexistence.

Apart from these proposals, organisations working at ground level have been able to develop original and direct initiatives to soothe the impact of what in the educational future of children and teenagers. For instance, a network of Syrian and Jordanian volunteers help Unicef and Save the Children providing emergency educational assistance in literacy, maths and language for children in refugee camps to go to school, making informal education an emergency support in an accelerated teaching programme.

In regards to teenagers, some basic training courses (such as hairdressing, English, mechanics, computing and electronic maintenance) have been established in order to provide students with abilities that will help them have a career in the post-conflict¹⁷.

Besides campaigns developed among the affected children that help restabilising an emergency education system, there have been other campaigns like the one launched by *Entreculturas*, who seeks to raise awareness of the influence of armed conflicts in the education system. *Entreculturas* also encourages violence prevention by publishing didactic units about armed conflicts in the education system in order to acknowledge the impact of war in education¹⁸.

Giving priority to education in armed conflicts means protecting both children and schools

Graça Machel published in August 1966 *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, the most thorough report on the impact of armed conflict on children¹⁹. The report gives details of attacks of which children are victims, considering them to be objectives of genocide, sexual violence and recruitment as child soldiers.

One conclusion of this report is a reminder of necessities that are common to all children —food, health, decent education and family protection. Such recognition has consequences for demands that are still pending —the necessity to protect the right to education for children, even in areas of conflicts. Education is normally considered

¹⁷ <http://childrenofsyria.info/2015/03/12/anthony-lake-what-future-for-the-children-of-syria/>

¹⁸ <http://www.entreculturas.org/files/documentos/materiales-educativos>.

¹⁹ http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_4401.html

a priority in a post-conflict situation, but it is not so frequent acknowledging education as a basic necessity, such as refuge, food, water, sanitary facilities, etc. However, education is worldwide argued to be important as a key factor to bring back stability to the country.

In spite of not having complete information about the problems that countries in conflict are facing, they undoubtedly are far from reaching the Education for All objectives²⁰.

In a situation of chaos, school can be a refuge since it gives protection, normality and a space for children to be protagonists. School can also contribute to psychological recoveries and facilitates children's reintegration in normal live and academic career²¹.

All 28 international organisations members of Save the Children propose to frontload school protection, as well as to consider their actors as non-recruited in order to prevent the participation of children in wars and to promote measures for children affected by armed conflicts to recover physically and psychologically. It is essential being considered to be in need for more help. Security is improved by educational achievements and they reduce the exposition of children to risks, given that education provides for physical, psychological and cognitive protection.

When a war begins the whole educational structure collapses —class attendance decreases, teachers lose their jobs, qualification of instructors diminishes and the educational quality is damaged. When schools close, either temporarily or permanently, other services that are provided in schools are lost too. That is the case of medical assistance. If governments do not invest in the reconstruction of demolished schools, the impact of war in society can perpetuate for decades.

A third of the world's population lives in fragile states, being 'fragile' those countries that have small capacity to apply their governmental functions and lacks in the development of relations with their society. En fragile states, where risks of experiencing a conflict are higher, governments do not take responsibility for the rights of their populations, multiplying risks for the most vulnerable —migrations, forced displacements, economic instability and medical negligence. In this context, education becomes an internal conflict with little visibility. When a conflict takes place, negative effects on children and a whole generation are devastating. The effect of conflicts in education has been considered by UNESCO as a 'deadly spiral'²².

²⁰ IZQUIERDO, M. José, *La Educación básica para todos los niños y niñas se retrasa en el mundo*, available in http://www.ieeee.es/galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA08-2015

²¹ SAVE THE CHILDREN, *Reescribamos el futuro. Educación para niños en países afectados por conflictos* in <http://www.savethechildren.es/reescribamoselfuturo/info.html>

²² UNESCO, op. cit.

²² TZEMAN, Gayle, *Fragile States, fragile lives*, Council for Foreign Relations, working paper, June 2014, p. 7

When a country is in conflict, apart from being killed or wounded, risks for children and teenagers are amplified —forced displacements, malnutrition, sanitary negligence, poverty, exposure to sexual violence, forced recruitment, etc²³. Preserving and reinforcing schools for children is one of the best options to protect them from children trafficking, recruitment as child soldiers, prostitution or child marriage. It is a stated fact that women and children, refugees and displaced are the most vulnerable group in armed conflicts²⁴. Consequences are, among others, physical and psychological harm, lack of birth certificate or death in the attempt of reaching a safer place. Both in Jordan and in the Lebanon there are 7-year-old children working in dangerous conditions for hours to get a miserable wage.

Girls, who tend to find a job in the agricultural field or in domestic work, are notably exposed to sexual violence.

In this context, going to school is a way of normalising children's life, helping them to overcome the stressful circumstances they are going through and to reassemble their lives. However, it is not normally an easy or safe activity.

Conclusions

No country reaches a sustainable economic development without having achieved some education progress. In spite of being a long-term investment, development in the educational field remains crucial not only to increase human capacities but also as an essential component within the development of a nation.

It seems to be a general agreement on the consideration of schools as a place to protect all children that is especially favourable to girls. More on that, investing in girls' education produces one of the greatest profitability rates out of all possible investments in economic development.

School is not a safe place for many girls who live in countries in conflict. An increase in education translates in greater security in their adult life.

Each supplementary year of formal education reduces in a 20% the possibility of children to take part in conflicts²⁵. However, conflicts can be stoked due to education deficiencies, being essential both preventing schools to be used as violence booster and providing children a quality education so that despair for the future is reduced. Going to school makes children develop a feeling of citizenship and it is an important factor to prevent fragile states from leading to internal conflicts.

Those who have experienced a conflict or have been displaced from their hometown are victims whose rights have been violated. Refugees camp in north Kenya city of

²³ PALACIÁN, Blanca, *El creciente uso de los niños soldado*, in

http://www.iece.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA12-2015_NinosSoldado_BPI.pdf.

²⁴ ESTÉBANEZ, Pilar, "El papel de la mujer y el género en los conflictos", in *Cuadernos de Estrategia*, Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa, 2012, p. 287-295.

²⁵ INEE, red internacional para la educación en situaciones de emergencia, available in <http://www.ineesite.org/en/education-fragility/multiple-faces-of-education>

Dadaab, where over half a million refugees have been living for more than 20 years, represents the effects of excluding three generations of children from receiving an education. It is in these contexts where it is shown that education should be considered the fourth pillar of international humanitarian law.

Even though the influence of armed conflicts in education is undervalued, the international community tends to a progressive recognition of increasing and protecting education rights, even in situation of conflict. People who have finished secondary school contribute three times more to stability and democracy. Consequently, the educational work is essential to reconstruct a country after a conflict.

Today, there are enough studies and reports to prove the need for prioritising schools' and educational institutions' protection even in the middle of a war, yet it is still necessary to work on providing more data and making public individual and social effects of the lack of such protection.

Unfortunately, destroying schools, attacking teachers and killing children who go to school is not new in a conflict scenario. What is new are the several non-systematic but effective initiatives to minimise the effect of conflicts.

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