

## The impact of armed conflict on school education

### L'impatto dei conflitti armati sull'educazione scolastica

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#### Abstract

Armed conflict has a damaging effect on the lives of children and young people and affects their school education and future possibilities. This creates a serious challenge to the exercise of the human right for education and the achievement of a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – notably SDG 4, education for all, and SDG 5, gender equality. This paper examines the effects of armed conflict by discussing school closures, or partial closures, internal and external displacement, child soldiers, the *six grave violations* and the education of girls during armed conflict. The paper concludes with a discussion that argues that the policy of protection promoted by the United Nations is one that should be supported but there are other dimensions that also have to be considered: a more nuanced conceptualisation of childhood and a greater awareness and understanding of the child's lived experience and agency, the protection of children to be ensured in ceasefire and peace agreements and implementation of strategies to protect children from the effects of war and the enforcement of legal measures and political sanctions that can be used to hold to account the perpetrators of the abuse of children in armed conflict.

**Keywords:** armed conflict, children and young people, child soldiers, gender equality.

#### Sommario

I conflitti armati hanno un effetto dannoso sulla vita dei bambini e dei giovani e influiscono sulla loro istruzione scolastica e sulle loro possibilità future. Questo crea una seria sfida per garantire, in quanto diritti umani, l'accesso all'istruzione e al raggiungimento di una serie di Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile (OSS), in particolare l'OSS-4 *Istruzione per tutti* e l'OSS-5 *Parità di genere*. Questo manoscritto analizza gli effetti dei conflitti armati attraverso le chiusure scolastiche, totali o parziali, gli spostamenti interni ed esterni, i bambini soldato, le *sei gravi violazioni* e l'istruzione delle bambine durante i conflitti armati. Il manoscritto si conclude con una discussione a favore del sostegno alla politica di protezione promossa dalle Nazioni Unite, ma anche con una riflessione che porta l'attenzione su altre dimensioni che devono essere considerate: una concettualizzazione più articolata dell'infanzia e una maggiore consapevolezza e comprensione dell'esperienza vissuta e dell'*agency* del bambino; la protezione dei bambini come garanzia negli accordi di cessate il fuoco e di pace; l'attuazione di strategie per proteggere i bambini dagli effetti della guerra e l'applicazione di provvedimenti legali e di sanzioni politiche che possono essere messe in atto nei confronti degli autori responsabili degli abusi sui bambini nei conflitti armati.

**Parole chiave:** conflitti armati, bambini e giovani, bambini soldato, parità di genere.

#### Introduction

The war in Ukraine is the latest example of the serious and damaging effect of armed conflict on the lives of children and young people. Further it is a reminder of some of the *forgotten* conflicts throughout the world that have affected school education. Armed conflict disrupts family life: children and young people are dependents and the stability and mutual support of family life is seriously impaired by armed conflict (Santa Barbara, 2006). Parents may be called upon to fight or they struggle to sustain the security of the family, and ensure that there is adequate shelter, income and resources. There are often

continual challenges in obtaining enough food and water for the family. The figures for the number of children in conflict zones is alarming: 426 million children, and nearly 200 million of these children are living in the most lethal war zones in the world (Save the Children, 2023). While the tragic events in Ukraine are affecting many children, and this is highly publicised, there are other parts of the world where the ongoing conflicts receive less attention. The data from Save the Children identifies the top ten countries that have been affected by armed conflict and have impacted on children. These are Yemen, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Syria, Mali, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Burkino Faso and Myanmar (Save the Children, 2022). Armed conflict, and especially armed conflicts that are protracted, can create food insecurity which results in hunger and malnutrition. In 2019, for example, there were alerts about food insecurity in four areas that had been experiencing armed conflict: Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen (Brendavid *et al.*, 2021).

Armed conflict disrupts the infrastructure of local communities. This affects access to facilities and services, including health services, proper sanitation and social engagement with family, friends and neighbours (Betancourt *et al.*, 2020). Breakdowns in sanitation and health services can have dangerous effects as infectious diseases can spread rapidly. In Syria up to 50% of the health facilities in the country have been destroyed during the war and around 70% of the healthcare workers have left the country (Alhaffar and Janos, 2021). Vaccination programmes in Syria have been disrupted and there is an outbreak of Cholera that is spreading fast (Venkatesan, 2023). It is not simply physical health and wellbeing that is affected: children who have experienced armed conflict are more likely to suffer from mental health issues (Liu, 2017). State school systems are affected by armed conflict and this can mean destruction or damage to school buildings (see below) and funds allocated for school education can be diverted to support armed conflict (Galynska and Bilous, 2022). The deleterious effects of armed conflict on school systems and schooling disrupts the education of the children and young people. This is a major impediment to the aspiration of education for all, as articulated in human rights legislation (Manuchehr, 2011). Disturbingly, in some parts of the world, the armed conflict can last an entire childhood: for example, the conflict in Liberia lasted between 1989 and 2004 (Liu, 2017). In a more contemporary example, the conflict in Syria has lasted since 2011.

This article will commence with an overview of the human right to education and the importance of school education for the growth and development of children and young people. This will be followed by an examination of education, armed conflict and the sustainable development goals. After this, the impact of armed conflict on children and young people will be investigated. The next two sections will focus on child soldiers and the challenges for the education of girls during armed conflict. The article will conclude with a discussion that explores a multidimensional approach to the issue of children and young people in situations of armed conflict.

## **1. The right to education**

The right to education was a key part of the *Universal declaration of human rights*, promulgated in 1948 (United Nations, 2023a). Article 26 has three sections devoted to education. Section 1 outlines the human right and the minimum amount of education that is to be provided:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.

Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

This is revisited and reconfirmed in Article 28 of the *United Nations convention on the rights of the child* (UNCRC) of 1989 (United Nations, 2023b). Article 29 in UNCRC adds that the education of a child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

Subsections (c) and (d) of Article 29 promote the vision that education will help children develop respect for their cultural identity, language and values and prepare children for a «responsible life in a free society» (United Nations, 2023b). This free society will be characterised by a spirit of understanding and will be peaceful and tolerant. There will be equality of sexes and friendship between all peoples, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, religion or indigenous origin. Education, then, is a right for all children and not a privilege. Education is also the means by which children learn about their rights and the ways in which they can realise and exercise their rights (United Nations, 2023c). Arguably, this is based on an implicit assumption and expectation that these rights are embedded in the content of the school curricula, are actively taught in schools and that teachers are adequately prepared and sufficiently skilled and adept at teaching these rights to children and young people (Robinson *et al.*, 2020).

## 2. Education, armed conflict and the Sustainable Development Goals

Armed conflict threatens the progress of a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It threatens progress in SDG number 4 and in SDG number 16. SDG number 16 is explicitly configured to «promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels» (United Nations, 2023d). A number of the targets of SDG 16 are directly pertinent to the issue of armed conflict and school education. Target 16.1 refers to the significant reduction of all «forms of violence and related death rates everywhere». The second target, 16.2, is focused on children and aims to «end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children». Other targets promote the aim of «equal justice for all» (16.3), «develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels» (16.6) and «ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels» (16.7).

SDG 4 aims to «ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all». Target 4.1 aims to ensure that by 2030, «all boys and girls complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes». Target 4.5 aims to eliminate gender disparity by 2030 «in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable». Target 4.6 aims for greater levels of literacy and numeracy by 2030 and target 4.7 aims to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development which includes «promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence». SDG 5, «achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls» is closely related to SDG 4. The progress of other SDGs is also threatened by armed conflict. SDG 1, for example, «end poverty in all its forms everywhere» has been *derailed* by the effects

of the pandemic but also by the effects of the war in Ukraine and wars in other parts of the world.

### 3. The impact of armed conflict on school education

Schools are normally an important part of the infrastructure of local communities. There was a greater public awareness of how important schools are when schools were closed, or partially closed, during the restrictions and lockdowns enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic. These school closures had a significant impact on the daily lives of children, young people, parents and families and all those concerned with school education (Galynska and Bilous, 2022). Schools around the world have cautiously reopened and are striving to recover, or reconceive in more flexible ways, supportive and effective learning environments for children and young people (Singh *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Watterston, 2021). For children in situations of armed conflict, the closure, or partial closure, of school is a common experience. During periods of armed conflict, there is normally restricted movement, either enforced or adopted to ensure personal safety, and this can mean that it is not safe to attend school. Even when it is safe to go to school, the school building may have been destroyed, been damaged, or appropriated for other purpose. These other purposes can be as shelter for displaced people or the school can be used for military purposes, as a barracks or as a weapons store (Muthanna *et al.*, 2022). Where the school remains open, there can often be a shortage of learning resources and a shortage of qualified teachers, many of whom may not be paid on a regular basis.

Often children and their families are displaced as a result of armed conflict. This displacement can be external or internal. Figures from the European Commission indicate that at the end of 2021 there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced people throughout the world and 53.2 million of the total number were internally displaced (European Commission, 2023). The figure of 89.3 million rose to 100 million for the first time at the beginning of 2022. The figure rose again to 103 million by mid 2022 as a result of the war in Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023). The figures from the United Nations in 2022 indicate that a record number of 37 million children are displaced in the world. This figure includes 13.7 million children who are refugees and asylum seekers and approximately 22.8 children who have been displaced because of conflict and violence (United Nations, 2022). The forcible displacement of children in Ukraine can be added to this figure – two million Ukrainian children have fled the country and three million have been internally displaced. The vast majority of forcibly displaced people (83%) are located in middle to low income countries and this can create tensions and a strain on the limited resources in the host countries (European Commission, 2023). One of the effects of displacement is that there are many children who attend makeshift schools in refugee camps or unsuitable premises. These schools often have high teacher pupil ratios and struggle with limited resources and infrastructure. There can be increased challenges for the inclusion of children with disabilities in these makeshift schools (Crea *et al.*, 2022).

Fleeing armed conflict affects the schooling of children and future opportunities for their advancement. Since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011 nearly six million Syrians have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (Kırdar *et al.*, 2022). There are 3.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey and nearly 47% of these refugees are under 18 and a third are of school age (5-17). A distinction needs to be drawn between the children of economic migrants and children of refugees. Economic migrants have planned their migration and have aimed for economic stability and progress in their new context. Refugee households, including children, have experienced the trauma of forced displacement, leaving all of their assets behind them and often endure poverty, and

misunderstanding, in their new context. While Syrian children have been accepted in Turkish schools since 2014, over a third of the Syrian children are not attending school. Even where children do attend school, there is a high dropout rate of Syrian boys when they reach the age when they can take up employment. Syrian refugees were allowed full access to work in Turkey in 2016, but are engaged primarily in low paid, low skilled jobs and these are the jobs that the young Syrian men pursue when they leave school.

#### **4. Child soldiers**

The unlawful recruitment of children and young people into armed forces is prohibited under the *Paris Principles* which aimed to «prevent unlawful recruitment or use of children» (Unicef, 2007, p. 6) and also aimed to facilitate the release of children from armed forces and support their reintegration into their families and communities. In 2015, the United Nations Security Council passed *Resolution 1612*. This created a mechanism for the UN to monitor and report on grave violations that are committed against children in situations of armed conflict. There are six grave violations: the killing and maiming of children; recruiting and using child soldiers; attacks against schools or hospitals; rape or other grave sexual violence against children; abduction of children; denial of humanitarian access for children (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, 2013). There are also increasing concerns about the torture of children in periods of armed conflict (Grover, 2014).

There are many examples of children being manipulated, coerced, forced or abducted into armed forces (Unicef, 2022). Some are driven to join armed forces to escape poverty. Children can be recruited to engage in battle, to help with supplying the troops and both boys and girls are subject to sexual exploitation. In 2021, Unicef reported that the region with the highest level of recruitment of children has been West and Central Africa, and this has been the case since the introduction of the six grave violations in 2005 (Unicef, 2021). In the period between 2016 and 2021, more than 21,000 children were recruited by armed forces in this region. The Secretary-General to the United Nations Security Council reported 520 grave violations in Sudan, for the period from January 2020 to December 2021 (United Nations Security Council, 2022). This included 356 children who were killed or maimed, 74 children who suffered from rape or sexual violence and 34 children who were abducted. The report also condemned the attacks on schools and hospitals and the use of schools for military purposes. All of the official figures for grave violations must be treated with caution as there is always the possibility of under reporting and Baillie Abidi (2021) argues that the UN has a high threshold for the verification of grave violations. The children who are recruited for armed conflict are traumatised by their experiences. They are exposed to extreme violence, whether as witnesses or even as forced participants (United Nations, 2023e). They struggle to reintegrate when they return to their homes and to school.

#### **5. The education of girls during armed conflict**

There are increased risks of physical and sexual violence for women and girls during periods of armed conflict (Singh *et al.*, 2022). Sexual violence against women has been used as a weapon in a number of conflicts, including Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan. Girls are often forced or coerced into child marriages in situations of armed conflict and this affects their school attendance and educational attainment. In authoritarian states and regimes, schools can be used as instruments of social control. A disturbing aspect of this use of schools for social control is that access, and denial of access, to schools can be a

major part of the social control. Girls and young women can be particularly vulnerable and easy prey for imposed social control. In Afghanistan the Taliban regime has denied access to school for girls over 12 since September 2021. In December 2022, the Taliban further banned women from participating in university education (Unesco, 2022). According to Unesco, Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world to suspend secondary and higher education for girls and women (Unesco, 2023). This suspension is not for safety reasons but for religious-ideological reasons and enforced by a military regime.

Another recent example of denial of access to schooling for girls was enacted by the Boko Haram terrorist group in North East Nigeria. In this case, the girls were forcibly removed from school. Members of Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from their school in Chibok in April 2014 and held them against their will (Ebubedike *et al.*, 2023). Later in 2018, the terrorist group was responsible for abducting 110 girls from their school in Dapchi. Amnesty International notes that of the 276 girls who were abducted in 2014, 16 have been killed and 109 still remain missing (Amnesty International, 2022). In the case of Dapchi, only one girl remains in captivity. There are other instances of children being abducted from schools in Nigeria. The actions of the Taliban and Boko Haram are based on a gender construct of girls and women that consigns them to the roles of domestic chores and childcare (Adeyanju, 2020). These two groups deny the girls and young women the opportunity for education and are examples of a refusal to recognise the human rights of freedom, gender equality and the right to education. These actions are also impediments to the local and international progress of SDG 4 (*education for all*) and SDG 5 (*gender equality*).

## 6. Discussion

As it has been stated, education is a human right that supports the development and flourishing of children and young people. It is also the way in which children can learn about their rights and how to exercise these rights. The disruption of school education as a result of armed conflict denies children access to education, or provides limited access to education, and provides a barrier to their education in human rights. This denies children advancement in education and an understanding of their rightful role in society and for society. Armed conflict also denies many children the freedom and opportunity to be a child or young person and to develop their skills and talents in a safe and nurturing environment. An authoritarian regime, as it has been seen, can manipulate school education for propaganda and social control, or deny access to school education. Schools can also be sites where children and young people receive an education that allows them to think freely and question the aims and activities of the controlling regime (Selvik, 2021).

There are some critical issues about the human rights legislation and children in situations of armed conflict that need to be addressed. The first issue concerns the United Nations Security Council and the focus on protection of children. According to Lee-Koo (2018, p. 63), this is underpinned by «the dominant discourse construction of children as victims». This reflects the conceptualisation of children as innocent victims by the Security Council. However, this conceptualisation and discourse is being challenged as it is understood to reduce children to passivity, does not take into account the lived experiences of children and fails to recognise child agency. This is not to deny the pressing importance of the policy of protection for children and young people but there are other dimensions that can be added to the discourse. The role of children can change during periods of armed conflict. Children may have to provide for their families and may

become carers for parents, or family members, who may be sick or disabled (Kadir *et al.*, 2019). Children and young people can demonstrate «coping skills, survival skills and agency» and these are often «overlooked and underestimated» (Cavazzoni, 2022, p. 1). This agency that children have demonstrated will have an impact on their return to school and the relationships that evolve in school.

The second issue is related to the first and concerns the inclusion of provisions for child protection and the participation of children in ceasefire and peace agreements (Asokan, 2021). In ceasefire and peace agreements there are opportunities to reshape society such that children's rights are respected and protected. Molloy (2022) argues that children's rights must be promoted during the peace negotiating process and included in peace agreements. Further, these rights must be protected and implemented in the post-conflict era. Uganda and Columbia provide good examples of countries that have addressed children's rights and protection in peace agreements. This child protection includes support for child soldiers who return from involvement in armed conflict to find that their families have been killed or displaced or may even reject them. Child soldiers require sustained rehabilitation to return to any kind of normal life and may have been physically disabled in the armed conflict (Liu, 2017; Betancourt *et al.*, 2020).

The active participation of children in peace negotiations is another important part of the peace process that can help to preserve children's rights. One of the ambitions of the *Convention of the rights of the child* – article 12.1 – is that children, with due regard to age and maturity, will have the opportunity to express their views on matters that affect them, and this can be applied to peace and post conflict negotiations (United Nations, 2023b). While children's voices are often marginalised or absent in peace processes, there is a strong argument that they should be included and included from the very inception of the process to ensure that their needs and rights are understood, respected and enacted (Mezzera, 2022).

The third issue is the strategies that can be employed to protect children from the effects of war. Save the Children have outlined four components: preventing children being put at risk; upholding international laws and standards; holding violators to account and rebuilding shattered lives (Save the Children, 2018). The best way to prevent children being put at risk is to prevent wars, or at least aim to ensure child safety and protection in war. Upholding international laws and standards means observing international protocols, including the *Paris Principles* and *Safe schools Declaration*. Holding violators to account entails stringent tracking of grave violations and full use of international justice systems. Asokan (2021) argues, however, that very few perpetrators of grave violations have been held to account and this is a matter of pressing urgency. The final component, rebuilding shattered lives, means focussing energy and resources on the rehabilitation of children whether they have experienced the effects of war or have been actively engaged as child soldiers. This also means rebuilding schools and school systems and reengaging children and young people with education.

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