

The struggle for education in fragile states



Introduction: conflict and fragile states

Wars and armed conflicts have a disastrous impact on the functioning of a society. Conflicts do not only cause visible signs of destruction – destroyed buildings, houses, roads and other infrastructure – but also less visible signs such as the psychological impacts of loss and separation of family members or friends, loss of shelter, personal belongings and community services. The needs arising from armed conflicts are considerable as civilians are generally denied access to basic services (water and sanitation, food, electricity etc) given their government's limited capacity to satisfy basic needs in a conflict situation.

Similarly, fragile states are too often unable, or unwilling, to provide basic goods and services to their citizens. A fragile state is not necessarily a conflict affected state: DFID defines a fragile state as occurring where "the government cannot or will not deliver core functions (service entitlements, justice and security) to the majority of its people, including the poor (DFID, 2005). Fragile states and states in conflict are often grouped together because citizens in these countries face similar challenges with accessing basic services, including education.

Armed conflicts and state fragility are therefore associated with higher poverty levels as there is an increased failure of economic and social services, and often a rise in human rights violations. Children's fundamental right to education in particular is too often ignored in conflict affected and fragile states.

Education in conflict areas and fragile states.

It is now a decade since the Dakar World Education Forum, which was held back in 2000, and real progress can be noted on a number of countries' commitment to improving children's access to education – in particular over 40 million more children have entered the school system. However, as a report by Save the Children (2009) shows, over 72 million children still have no access to education and more than half of these – some 40 million children – live in conflict affected fragile states (CAFS). According to the International Rescue Committee, an estimated 750,000 children are caught up in emergencies each year, disrupting their education for weeks, months, or years, with many never getting back to school after this disruption.

Why is education essential in conflict affected and fragile states?

First and foremost, education is a fundamental right, even during emergencies.

In addition, education in conflict situations can be lifesaving and life sustaining for children as it is a means to escape the brutality of the war. By discovering and learning new things in school, children are able to learn to deal with their traumas, and the destruction surrounding them, and therefore look forward to a brighter future.

Finally, education in conflict areas and fragile states is crucial to the post conflict and recovery phases as good quality and relevant education contributes to consolidate peace efforts, stability, good governance and economic growth, leading to more effective and strong states.

Children's words from conflict situations

Due to the war, many Iraqis have fled their homes, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries or living as internally displaced persons in Iraq. Children make up about half of the four million people uprooted from their homes, and in many cases they are missing out on school and on a chance for a brighter future. As Claire Hajaj – chief of External relations for UNICEF-Iraq – recognises, a child out of school is much more exposed to harm than one learning in the classroom. Manal, a nine-year-old primary school student fears a gloomy educational future, "I love my school, it's the only place I can go to have some rest from all the violence in Iraq, but my father will take me out as my teacher comes two days a week and there are nearly one hundred students in my class" she said.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) more than five million primary aged children (6-11 years) are out of school and more than six million 12-17 years-olds have never been to school. Decades of conflict and dictatorship have left schools dilapidated, with teachers underpaid or simply not paid not at all. Eric Imbele who used to attend *Cite de L'espoir* primary school, says: "for the last two years I have been unable to go to school. I cannot wait for my school to be rebuilt so that I can resume my studies and catch up with children of my age".

In conflict situations, it is not surprising that parents are unwilling to send their kids to school, as they fear armed attacks, abduction or recruitment by militias. According to the International Organisation War Child, there are an estimated 300,000 children fighting in the world today, 40% of them are girls.