

September 2008 action:

Back to school?

Children in conflict zones deserve an education too

RESULTS
the power to end hunger and poverty

“Education remains a basic human right, whatever the circumstances, even during conflict.”

DFID: Keeping our promises: Delivering education for all. 2006

TAKE ACTION:

As children in the UK return to school after their summer holidays, write to the media to highlight the 37 million children in conflict-affected countries who are denied the opportunity to go to school.

This action aims to:

- Raise public awareness of a neglected issue
- Generate published letters that you can take when you visit your MP to discuss education next month

Introduction

Millions of children living in conflict-affected fragile states (CAFS) are continuing to miss out on the opportunity of an education. If the world does not immediately intensify its efforts to reach these children, the prospects for achieving the second millennium development goal, of universal primary education by 2015, seem almost impossible.

This fact is made glaringly apparent when you consider that up to 37 million children living in CAFS continue to be denied the right to an education. This figure accounts for over half of the total number of children around the world who are not at school, and represents one in three children living in conflict-affected countries.

Many of the reasons for so many children being denied an education in CAFS are obvious. Physical violence, decimated national infrastructures, weak or non-existent political institutions and the diversion of scarce financial resources to the procurement of arms all conspire to create an environment that is not conducive to the establishment of effective education systems. When you factor in issues such as the recruitment of children as soldiers, massive internal displacement and high levels of poverty and disease a truly bleak picture emerges. It is therefore little wonder that effective education systems have failed to take root in many CAFS.

Although the difficulties of providing education in CAFS are clear, this does not mean it is impossible. It is also not an excuse for the

international community to give up on supporting efforts to provide children living in these countries with the opportunity of a decent education. Rather, these weak states arguably need the most help from the global community. But at present, resources are scandalously lacking.

The international community must wake up to the realisation that it is only by an increased effort to target children in conflict zones will global aspirations on education be met. Neglecting those in greatest need means the world is squandering the talent and potential of an entire generation, and may be dooming their countries to an inescapable cycle of conflict and poverty.

The transformative power of education

The benefits of providing education to children in conflict-affected states are far reaching, and can help to lay the foundations for a more prosperous and peaceful future. It can contribute to the development of democracy, human rights and political stability, and produce a skilled and adaptable populace who can contribute towards economic development and good governance.

As well as the obvious long term returns, investing in education also has many immediate benefits – such as providing physical and psychological protection to children in war zones, and giving a safe space to those whose lives have been turned upside down by conflict and violence.

Just as the provision of good quality education can be a positive force for peace, stability and progress, the opposite can also be true. The

denial of education can further exacerbate conflict. If children are not at school they are at increased risk of being recruited into armies or militias. Girls in particular are at greater risk of being forced into prostitution, and may face threats of sexual violence, exposing them to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. A lack of education can also make children more susceptible to intolerant and hateful ideologies, which perpetuate conflict and further erode the fabric of divided societies.

The international response

Despite the value and importance of providing education in CAFS, the international community has failed to prioritise education in these countries.

It is estimated that on average only 4 percent of total Overseas Development Aid (ODA) to conflict-affected states is directed at education, compared to 13 percent in lower-income countries that are not affected by conflict. Overall, CAFS receive less than a quarter of global basic education aid, and less than half the aid that middle-income countries receive. This demonstrates a worryingly low priority for education in the international community's broader aid and relief strategy for CAFS.

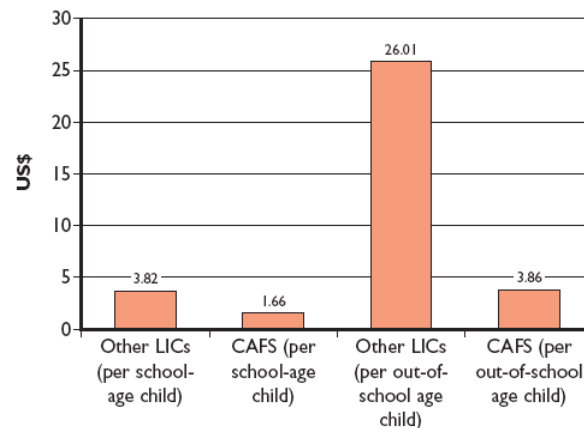
If progress is to be made in reducing the number of children who are out of school, the international community must ensure that their spending priorities are determined by consideration of greatest need, not by political expediency. For the goal of universal primary education to be achieved by 2015, it is estimated that an additional US\$10 billion per year is needed. Assessments of education financing gaps show that \$5.8 billion of this amount should go to CAFS.

The UK's response

In recent years DFID has significantly increased its general education spending, but there remains an alarming disparity between its education spending in CAFS and other low-income countries. 30 CAFC's have received just 16 percent of DFID's allocated education spending, with 66 percent going to other low-income

countries. Primary-age children in conflict-affected states receive the equivalent of only one-seventh of the basic education aid of their out-of-school counterparts in other low-income countries.

Figure 3: DFID Basic Education commitments per school-age child in 2004 (in US\$)



Source: Save the Children

DFID clearly recognises the importance of education in reducing poverty and is fully committed to achieving the MDG on education. It has also acknowledged the importance of providing education in CAFS, making a pledge to “make immediate and long-term commitments to increase support for education in fragile and conflict-affected states as part of integrated reconstruction programmes”. However, to date it has failed to sufficiently support education in CAFS.

Conclusion

Education is not a panacea for all the problems affecting CAFS, but it is clear that without it little or no progress can be made in either ending the cycle of violence and conflict or attaining the goal of universal primary education. The task of ensuring that children in these countries are provided with a good quality primary education will be no easy feat and presents perhaps one of the toughest development challenges facing the world today. Nevertheless it is a challenge which must be confronted head-on if we are to help bring the one-in-three out-of-school children in CAFS back into the education system, giving them and their countries the chance of a brighter future.