

Child Protection and Education in Emergencies

In emergencies, quality education is crucial to provide children with physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection that can be both life-sustaining and life-saving. Despite this, research shows that child protection and education are among the least funded humanitarian sectors.

How big is the issue?

The UN estimates that one billion children live in conflict-affected areas, of which 250 million are under the age of five. These children, and those affected by the growing number of natural disasters around the world, are at serious risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Just one of these threats - child labour (defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development) affects 168 million children.

At the same time, children's education is set back by emergencies: 58 million primary school aged children and 20 million secondary school aged children are currently out of school due to conflict.¹ Their rates of completion, secondary enrolment and literacy, as well as mortality rates are substantially worse than in other countries. Only 79% of young people are literate in conflict-affected low-income countries, compared with 93% in other low-income countries.²

Disrupted education and weakened protection: a vicious cycle

Challenges to education provision and child protection are exacerbated in situations of conflict and disaster. In the coming decade, it is estimated that nearly 175 million children are likely to experience some level of disruption to their schooling,³ including drop out, slowed development and other psychosocial and protection concerns.⁴

Lack of access to education directly impacts children's safety and wellbeing. All children are exposed to threats during and after emergencies; however girls and boys who are out of school are at much higher risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. This includes sexual violence and exploitation; recruitment or use by armed forces or groups; hazardous child labour and becoming involved in criminal activities. Additionally, child protection concerns can prevent children from accessing education or diminish educational outcomes. In conflict zones, access to education is barred not only by general insecurity but also by targeted attacks against students, teachers and educational facilities, as well as the

¹ UNESCO. (2014). *Progress in getting all children to school stalls but some countries show the way forward: Policy paper 14/Fact sheet 28*.

² Plan-international. (2013). *Why we must invest in children's education in emergencies*.

³ Save the Children. (2014). *Education: An essential component of a humanitarian response*.

⁴ Nicolai, S; Hine, S; Wales, J. (2015). *Education in emergencies and protracted crisis towards strengthened response: Background paper for the Oslo Summit on education for development*.

use of those facilities for military purposes by parties to conflict. Armed conflict diverts public funds from education into military spending, making access to quality education difficult or impossible.

Safeguarding education and enhancing child protection – a virtuous cycle

Safe and free education can help mitigate the impact of conflict and disasters by giving children and families a sense of normalcy, stability, structure and hope for the future. Toxic stress in children arises from loss of loved ones, natural disasters or conflict situations, including for example exposure to violence. Supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can help prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress.⁵ Addressing toxic stress quickly can prevent the long term impact on a child’s cognitive, behavioural, and emotional development. Furthermore, when children go to school, carers have time to rebuild their livelihoods, re-establish sources of income, or simply come to terms with their experiences.

What’s more, education in itself makes children safer: higher levels of girls’ education are associated with delayed childbirth and marriage, lower fertility rates, significantly higher prenatal care and lower child mortality.⁶ A child in a safe school is less likely to be sexually or economically exploited or exposed to other risks, such as being recruited or used by armed forces or groups, often linked to organized crime.

Finally, education helps secure the future. It can give young people the necessary skills for decent employment, earn a living and become productive and responsible citizens. The positive effects that education has on threats such as recruitment, abduction, child labour and gender-based violence mitigate the need for responsive services later on.⁷ Education can do more than patch up the damage caused by conflict; it can help with long-term processes of peace-building, strengthening social cohesion as well as provide essential building blocks for future economic stability.

What do children think?

“Schools should be re-established so that we don’t fall behind, also because there is no school sometimes we go out on the fishing boats to help our parents and we stay out for three or four days where we cannot study.”

“We want more child friendly spaces for children to meet so that we can share feelings and put our minds at ease.”

“We need education so that we are ready for when disasters come to our country. We don’t just need money and gifts. We need you to help us stand again on our own feet.”

Save the Children, World Vision, Plan International and UNICEF summary report of children’s recommendations after Typhoon Haiyan (2014).

⁵ Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University. (2015). *Toxic Stress*.

⁶ UNICEF. (2014). *The investment case for education and equity*.

⁷ Nicolai, S; Triplehorn, C. (2003). *The role of education in protecting children in conflict*.

One vision: Four solutions.

Vision: *Boys and girls living in emergencies have equitable access to quality education and grow up free from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.*

- 1. Help children and families recover from conflict and disaster situations.** The longer children remain out of school, the less likely it becomes that they will return. Supporting their return to school is an important part of recovery.

Addressing child protection issues such as child labour can ensure that children are able to attend school.

Programs to support families with food, non-food items, and livelihood support can facilitate enrolment in school – as well as preventing early marriage, child labour, recruitment, and other forms of exploitation.

- 2. Keep children safe.** Children need schools to be places of safety and provide an environment where peers and teachers are sources of support.

Schools can convey life-saving information and strengthen critical survival skills and children's resilience to cope with different sources of stress. In school, children can learn how to avoid landmines, how to protect themselves from sexual abuse, how to prevent HIV/AIDS, and how to access health care and other services.

- 3. Strengthen children's participation in the humanitarian response.** Humanitarian efforts are most effective, and most protective when girls and boys of different ages input into assessment, design, implementation and monitoring - and schools are an ideal place for coordinating this engagement with children.

In schools, children can actively define their needs and strengths and build their capacity over time – thereby making the whole humanitarian response more effective and sustainable. At the same time, participation can be a positive and educational experience for children. Being in school, and helping shape responses to the crisis can help reduce children's feelings of helplessness and promote wellbeing.

- 4. Invest now to secure future gains.** Good quality, accessible education can counter the underlying causes of violence, by fostering values of inclusion, tolerance, human rights and conflict resolution.⁸

Early and adequate investments in education and child protection during and after emergencies are crucial in order to reduce needs and vulnerabilities in the future.

Did you know?

Children themselves almost always prioritise protection and education, and this is a compelling reason for humanitarians to do so. In 2013, children and families in Syria reported protection and education as the highest priority issues. This concept of protection was articulated by children through the word 'safety,' and research suggests that children's safety and right to protection are interpreted as a necessary precondition for, and therefore closely linked to their access to education.⁹

⁸ Talbot, C. (2013). *Education in Conflict. Emergencies in light of the post-2015 MDGs and EFA agendas*. Geneva: NORRAG.

⁹ War Child Holland. (2014). *Child rights situation analysis*.

Checklist for child protection and education in emergencies:

1. Promote the idea of 'student' as a status - whether formal or informal, this status can protect children from violence and exploitation, or bolster a sense of identity and inclusion for many.
2. Build schoolchildren's skills in listening, problem-solving and conflict resolution. This will help create stronger social cohesion and a more respectful and safe educational environment.
3. Set up joint child protection, education and psychosocial interventions to mitigate the serious risks that children face.
4. Conduct follow-up work to find children who do not attend school, either as a result of the emergency or because they were previously out of school. This will further aid in identifying those at-risk.
5. Provide quality and safe education for all children impacted by crisis and invest in strengthening national and community-based child protection systems and services. Also, tailor programs to benefit all children, including those with special needs.
6. Secure timely and adequate funding for child protection and education interventions.
7. Ask community members to help design education activities in a way that is protective of teachers, learners and the school environment.
8. Link schools or temporary learning spaces to providers of other social services (e.g. health, psychosocial and legal) through referral mechanisms (established systems by which teachers may refer children with needs to appropriate professionals of other social services).
9. Establish a safe complaint mechanism where community members can report threats to their safety and receive a timely response. Collect anonymised data on complaints for policy makers and practitioners to use.
10. Distribute protective information to teachers, students and parents, such as how to identify unexploded ordnance/explosive remnants of war, or reports of areas within which escalations of violence are expected.