



Protecting education from attack during armed conflict

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Attacks on and military use of education facilities frequently occur during armed conflict, disrupting and destroying education and the opportunities that it brings. When affected populations lose access to education, they lose the protection it offers to children and young people. Protecting and ensuring access to education during conflict is enshrined in international humanitarian law and is thus a core part of the humanitarian mission.

In this episode of Humanity in War, podcast host Elizabeth Rushing speaks with Michel Anglade, Director of Save the Children and representative of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), and Mark Chapple, ICRC Head of Education, on the life-saving and protective value of education and focuses on the legal and policy influence on protecting access to education during armed conflict.

Humanity in War · Episode 14: Protecting education from attack during armed conflict

Michel, could you please lay out the context for us and outline what the problem is we are talking about today? What does an attack on education look like? Who does it involve? And please share some examples of the reasons that they have been carried out in the past.

Michel: First of all, I would like to start by highlighting, the scale of the problem. It's really something which in my view is underreported, and we are not speaking enough about it. So, it's great to have this discussion and this conversation today.

According to the GCPEA, in 2022, there were more than 3,000 attacks on education, and that's a 17% increase compared to the previous year. GCPEA the coalition found that the military use of school increased in 2022, with over 500 reported cases of military use of school, and overall, more than 6,000 students and educators were either killed, injured, abducted, arrested, or harmed during these attacks – an increase as well of 20% compared to 2021. So, we can see that attacks on education are unfortunately happening on a large scale and are not addressed as much as we should be, and obviously they have a huge impact on education. There are millions of children deprived of an education because of attacks on their school.

I would like to maybe zoom on one country to give you an example. You may remember that in 2014, there was the abduction of girls from a school in the northern part of Nigeria, the Chibok girls, and it made headlines all over the world. People were campaigning to have these girls who had been abducted to be released, and most of them were released. We released a report last week showing that these attacks on education in Nigeria have continued since then. They are no longer in the headlines of the media, yet it's still a large-scale problem. We recorded more than 70 attacks on schools in Nigeria during 2014 to 2022; close to 1,700 students were kidnaped from schools in Nigeria and over 180 school children were killed or injured during these attacks. So, it's just one country – but unfortunately, the situation I'm describing in northern Nigeria has happened in many countries around the world.

What is an attack on education? The GCPEA refers to any threats or use of force against students, teachers, academics, schools, and universities, perpetrated by armed forces, as an attack on education. I would like to stress one point here. Sometimes the "threat" is enough to have the school closed, to have students no longer going to school, or to have teachers no longer willing to teach because of the threats to their lives.

Regarding the reasons why education often comes under attack – the GCPEA just released research on the motivation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to attack education facilities. There were different reasons being mentioned. The first one is that sometimes the schools and their staff are seen as symbols of states – the states that they oppose, and the states they fight against.

Schools are also soft targets. I mean they are not usually being guarded. And therefore, because they are soft targets, they also come under attack. Some of the reasons also mentioned, are that it may produce significant media attention, which is also something sometimes NSAGs would like to seek, and therefore a large-scale attack on a school could be a way of attracting this media coverage.

We have seen also schools coming under attack because NSAGs may oppose the curriculum being used in these schools. We have seen this, for example, in the Sahel where the curriculum may be seen by some NSAGs as not in line with their ideology and with the ideas they promote. Schools have also been targeted for recruitment in NSAGs, where the school is being attacked for abducting both boys in the ranks of the NSAGs, and also girls who may be forced to work or forced to marry some of the fighters. So, there are a lot of different reasons why schools may come under attack, and we need to address all these reasons if we want to better protect schools from attack.

Also, regarding the military use of schools you mentioned, sometimes schools are being used by either NSAGs or regular armies because they provide shelter and facilities in the schools and they are being used as barracks, which has a huge impact on the access to education for children living in conflict areas.

Education has a very transversal aspect that provides opportunity and the ability to transform every new generation. And as we have just discussed, it has a strong protective element. So, in this sense, Mark, can you paint us a picture of how and why it's so crucial for access and continuity of education to remain protected during armed conflict?

Mark: So, as you said, education doesn't just provide hope and aspirations for the future as well as vital skills for communities. It also has really significant protective value for the children and for their parents. I think many of us around the world saw during the COVID pandemic that when children were kept out of school when schools were closed, we saw a rise in protection issues globally and not just connected to COVID, but broader than that. We've seen a lot of research showing how protective education can be.

Broadly, schools themselves are safe places where children can learn safely and be protected from other risks and free from exposure to other risks. We see in many communities affected by crises that when children are not in school, they're exposed to things like early marriage, child labor, recruitment into armed forces and armed groups, and other risks of exploitation or abuse that take place. The school themselves offer other services like access to health care services, nutrition meals, and referrals to social services.

So, children in school are generally safe and protected. We see an example in some of our work in South Sudan, where children who we were able to support to access education safely were able to avoid being recruited into armed forces and armed groups and also avoid early marriage and child marriage. So, education in that context had a very real, life-changing impact and protective impact. As well as this kind of protective nature, we also know that it improves mental health and wellbeing and can help reduce the impact of the trauma experienced by children during conflict and violence.

Alongside this, you know, the reason we should prioritize it is because this is what children and communities prioritize. Research done by Michel's colleagues years ago at Save the Children showed that 99% of children in conflict and crisis prioritized education as the first service they wanted to receive.

They want their lives to go back to normal. They want a chance to learn, and they want a chance to build a life for themselves. And education can provide that. If we are being accountable to the people we work with, we need to listen to their wishes. We need to listen to what they prioritize.

And so, you ask, why is continuity of education important. We know the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return to school. And this not only has consequences for them and their personal development, but for the future stability and the development of the communities they're in. When education is interrupted by conflict for a long time, we are at a real risk of creating a lost generation of children in that context.

So as humanitarians, we must work together to find ways of ensuring that education is protected and safe access is assured, and that learning can continue in conflict and crises.

Thank you, Mark. And that leads me seamlessly to my next question, which is what we are doing given this impact and the added values, that you mentioned of education and its protective aspect, can you illustrate the work that the ICRC does and how our core mandate in relation to international humanitarian law (IHL) allows for such projects to be carried out?

Mark: Sure. As you mentioned, the protection of education and in some cases the provision of education during conflict is enshrined in IHL, primarily in the fourth Geneva Convention and a number of additional protocols.

So, this really speaks to our mandate, to what we do. And, you know, ICRC is very much focused on protecting education and ensuring safe access to education. And the reason we do this, rather than perhaps leave it to others, is that we have privileged access. We have a real added value to the sector, the education emergency sector, through our access; our access to geographical areas, close to frontlines, areas controlled by NSAGs and in some cases no other actor, no other international humanitarian actor is able to access.

And we also have access to the parties, to the conflict, the people with the guns. And because of our mandate, because of our relationships and our ability to engage in dialogue with these groups, again, we have the ability to highlight IHL, to highlight the provisions in there for protection of education and work with these armed groups to try and ensure education is protected in their areas of operation.

Our response, though, isn't just focused on our protection dialog. We have a multidisciplinary response which involves all our teams from protection, through assistance, through legal, through our cooperation with movement colleagues as well. And in this case, not only do we conduct the protection dialog with parties to conflict, to protect schools from attack and military use, we also have dialog with military forces to support them, to move their military facilities and installations away from schools. We have had some success in that in a number of places, where military checkpoints, military outposts have been moved away from schools or access routes to schools, which can then encourage safe access to education.

Our weapons contamination (WEC) teams do risk awareness and safer behavior training programs, which is working with children, teachers, and communities to help them understand the risks in those communities and better safely respond to those risks, so they feel safer about going to school even when there are risks in those communities. And of course, we do direct assistance where other actors are not present, where other people can't respond – and that might be rehabilitation of schools, it might be temporary learning spaces, it might be distribution of education, materials, or inclusion in our cash distribution to support learning in a safe and protected environment.

And given our privileged access to places of detention, we also work on advocating with detention authorities for provision of education for children, young people, juveniles in detention, so they can continue to learn while they are detained.

I think it's important also to note what we don't do and what we're not trying to be. Michel is here from Save the Children and they have a lot of focus on what happens inside the classroom as well. The quality of the learning, focusing on learning outcomes. As ICRC, we are not that agency. Our work is to protect education and make sure education can continue in a safe learning environment. But what happens in the classroom, with some exceptions, like our risk awareness and safety behavior training, we don't tend to engage in that. We do not engage in discussions around curriculum, around academic achievement. We make sure it can happen, education can continue, and education is safe. But this is where external coordination, working with Save the Children, other partners in the education cluster and the relevant ministries of education in the areas we are working in is key, because without that coordination, they're the people who provide the teaching.

So, in many contexts where we work, we might rehabilitate a school, we might provide notebooks, pads and pens, but it's the teachers who will continue to do the learning and ICRC don't provide those teachers. So external coordination, cooperation, collaboration is really key to make sure our work is sustainable for the long term as well.

Turning back to you, Michel, could you please share with us the work that organizations such as the two that you work with, the Save the Children and the GCPEA, what work you are doing in these areas, and particularly why it's important for states and parties to uphold international declarations like the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD).

Michel: Many thanks for this question. First of all, if I may, I would like to go back to a point Mark just made, which is, I think very important: in a lot of humanitarian crises, if you look a couple decades ago, humanitarian needs were basically seen as water, sanitation, health and food, but nobody was mentioning education. And yet, as Mark highlighted, when we ask in crises, when we ask in countries affected by conflict, when we ask to both adults and children, what is your number one priority, education comes first. And I think that's something obviously which tells us a lot.

We are here today in Geneva, and if we are doing a survey in Geneva, I'm sure that if you ask parents, what's your number one priority, a lot of them will say, well, I hope my children will be successful in school. Parents in countries affected by conflict are no different. They want their children to have access to quality education. And I think that's something extremely important. And that's the reason we have seen really a huge momentum regarding the provision of education in conflict situation, in crisis. If we want to be accountable to the people we are seeking to assist, we need to provide education because that's what they ask for first and foremost.

Going back to your questions, I would start with the Safe School Declaration (SSD), a political declaration which was launched in 2015 by a few member states, and which has now been endorsed by 118 states across the world.

What is this political declaration about? It's a commitment. It's not a legally binding document. It's a commitment by member states to protect students, teachers, schools, universities during armed conflict. But obviously the commitment is not enough. We need to move from endorsement to the actual implementation of SSD. The GCPEA is composed of many organizations, including Save the Children, and we advocate for the endorsement of the SSD, because we think it's an important normative framework to better protect education in situations of conflict. And we have seen some very tangible progress here – the SSD has now been referenced in the resolution adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and has been also referenced in

resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council (HRC), here in Geneva. So, we can see this kind of normative framework gaining ground. And that's something which is very positive.

But as I said, once the state has endorsed the declaration, they need also to take concrete steps to implement the declaration. And what we have seen here is that states such as Mali and Burkina Faso have established technical committees and have developed national action plans to implement the SSD, and that is truly needed in these two countries where unfortunately we have seen increasing number of attacks on education. We have seen the Central African Republic prohibiting the military use of school. These are concrete examples where the safe school declaration is being translated in countries on the ground into practical policy and laws, which basically better protect indication from attack.

You were mentioning as well that we need to measure as well. So, the GCPEA has invested a lot in monitoring, reporting on attacks on education. Before the SSD was launched in 2015 and before the GCPEA was established, there were no data on attacks on schools. So, I think we have gone a long way in terms of better monitoring, collecting data, analyzing this data. The GCPEA released every two years a global report where all the attacks which have happened over the last two years are being reported. That is also something which has been key in terms of advocating for better protection of education from attack.

And we have seen that it does make a difference. There was a recent study done by the GCPEA, which shows that in 13 countries which have endorsed the declaration in 2015, so when it was launched between 2015 and 2020, there's been a decrease, a decline in terms of the incidents of military use of school and universities, and also in some of these countries, a decline of the attacks on education. So, all these are positive examples of how the SSD is making a difference on the ground. But it can only make a difference on the ground if there is regular sustained advocacy and then translation of the principle of a 'safe school' into changing in policies and practice.

We have seen also in countries which are not directly affected by conflict, but in some countries, the military doctrine has changed, to also incorporate in the military doctrine the protection of education from attacks and to make sure that also armies are aware of the fact that we should refrain from attacking schools because of the huge impact it has on our on the children, on education, on the continuation of education.

As Mark highlighted, I mean, the attacks on education not only deprive a child from having access to education, but we have what we have seen in a lot of countries is that when a school has come under attack, children drop from school but never returned to school. So, it's basically the end of their education, which is a tragedy.

With that in mind, of course, there's no real formula for success. But with all this data and research that your team has been conducting, do you have some lessons learned that you think that we should follow in the next steps?

Michel: There are many lessons learned. The first one is continuing for the endorsement of the SSD – 118 states have endorsed it so far, but we need to do more. Then as I was highlighting, the second lesson learned is really, ownership at the country level by all actors. We should not only work with the Ministry for Education, but also the Ministry of Defense, other Ministries and a lot of different actors across the government. We obviously need also to engage much more with NSAGs as they are responsible for the majority of attacks on education. So, we need to work with all stakeholders to have an impact.

As I was mentioning with examples from Burkina Faso, from Mali, we need to make sure that this ownership translates into real action on the ground. So, it's not only about whether my government has endorsed the SSD, but what my government is doing to implement the SSD.

I would also like to mention an example from Nigeria, where following the endorsement of a SSD, there was a development of a trainer's guide for their national forces and the Safe School Policy was also developed and adopted by the Nigerian government and more recently, the establishment of the Financing Safe Schools to ensure that these activities could be implemented.

The government of Mali established the first National Committee to guide the implementation of a SSD, and then there were local technical committees as well, which were established to oversee the implementation of the SSD. And Mali is currently working on a draft rule to protect education from attacks. So, we saw also examples that show that ownership is key to move forward for in terms of implementation.

We should not see the protection of education in isolation from the overall protection agenda, but something which is key to it, and also the role that the SSD can play to set the norms in terms of protection from education.

We are working and engaging with the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council, which is also key to make sure that step by step, the protection of education from attacks is widely accepted and recognized. And that's where the SSD allows some flexibility in some sense because it's not a legally binding document, but step by step, we can see that it's creating norms, which is crucial to protect education from attack.

Over the last few years, one of the lessons learned is to really develop a community of practice. We need to encourage governments to discuss with each other. We have seen this for the endorsement of the SSD where the GCPEA was doing some advocacy work and it was not working. And it's when the armed forces of a country speak with the armed forces of another country to say, yes, I think the SSD is a good thing, we have also review of military doctrine and we think that's something which is adding value. So to promote this kind of peer-to-peer exchange, especially between armed forces and the Ministry of Defense, which has been something instrumental.

And because it was very useful, there was in 2021 the establishment of a state-led implementation network, which is an initiative led by the government of Norway. And we think it's important that it's government-led, which created a forum for the states who endorsed the SSD to exchange on good practices, but also on the challenges we face to implement the SSD and to be notified for the areas where planning could be needed to better protect education from attack. Developing this kind of community of practice has been something extremely useful.

Another lesson learned is to have state champion the schools and we had several states who really said, well, we want the protection of education from attack to be a key priority for us. And that's something which has been also a game changer to better protect education from attack.

Maybe the last point as well is about looking at some states championing this cause. We have seen more and more funding being allocated both to the provision of education in-conflict situation as well to the protection of education, and that's also something which is which is positive. So, we saw some of the lessons learned and working in coalition and not seeing education in silos has been absolutely key offering to promote this agenda and to ensure better protection of education in conflict.

Mark: Yeah, I just wanted to come in on that as well, because as Michel said, although the SSD isn't IHL and isn't legally binding, it is something that ICRC supports, we support the endorsement and the implementation of it by state parties. And to that end, we collaborate with Michel and colleagues at the GCPEA at a global level, but also colleagues at field level we work with who also work with Save the Children, GCPEA, to try and support governments to understand the full implications of this declaration.

And indeed, we've been supporting colleagues in a number of delegations because again, our added value, as Michel was saying, not just working in collaboration, but we have some of those entry points to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Defense, that the NGOs perhaps might not have. So together we can really help work with state parties and reassure them about the implications of becoming a signatory to the SSD.

Mark, can you really bring us back to the cautionary tale of when these are not respected? What are the long-term effects that we're looking at when states and parties do not adhere to these frameworks? And what are the biggest obstacles in place that we need to remove?

Mark: I think we've talked a little bit about how protective education is and ensuring access to education is first and foremost a protective service. If that's not there, these children are exposed to a huge amount of other risks. But we also know that education is one of the first services to stop when conflict breaks out.

As you can imagine, children and families stay home from school because they're scared, because they don't know what's happening out there. And unless there's humanitarian intervention, it's often one of the last services to restart when conflict abates. So, it's really critical that there's external humanitarian support to ensure access to education can continue during conflict and crises. If it's not protected, if it doesn't continue, then it can have far reaching consequences for societies, which can include, as we see in many cases, a kind of push factor. Population movement to areas where education is provided, as Michel said, people prioritize education. If the children can't get education in that context, they will move to somewhere where their children get education, where their children are safe, a totally understandable impulse.

It can also lead to this exposure to protection risks and a kind of hollowing out of society, what we might call a brain drain, where people with high levels of education or those who are studying to gain the skills and experience necessary to run a functioning society, leave that society. And this lack of qualified professionals means that there's nobody there to run hospitals, to run public institutions, to run schools. It means a lack of economic development and therefore an increase in poverty. And perhaps most importantly for ICRC, quite a lot of research has been done that shows there's a direct correlation between low levels of education and high levels of conflict and violence.

So, if we're really aiming to reduce conflict, violence, war and instability around the world, it's important we protect education because when education is disrupted by conflict, it can sadly fuel future conflict and instability. It's our role as a humanitarian, as upholder of IHL, and with the aim of reducing future conflict to support and protect safe access to education.

I'd like to end the conversation by talking about two specific groups. I know that the GCPEA has focused on girls' access to education. So, Michel, I would really love to hear from you first about some of the priorities that your organizations have outlined to this end.

Michel: Indeed, the GCPEA has a gender lens for all its work, its activities and that's something which is absolutely key. I mean, Mark was highlighting this point right now, but girls education is not only about girls having access to education. You can see that a girl who is better educated or a mother who is better educated has a direct correlation with child malnutrition, child mortality and so on and so forth. So, the benefit of girl's education for society is absolutely tremendous.

What we have seen from the GCPEA is that they are definitely, in some context, a huge dimension regarding the attacks on education. The GCPEA report of 2022, we identified 11 countries where girls and women were targeted because of their gender. So, there was a direct correlation between the gender and the attacks on education for different reasons. It could be because some NSAGs, for example, maybe oppose to girls having access to education for ideological reasons or different reasons. We have seen also attacks on education happening because NSAGs would kidnap girls, sexual exploiting them, forcing them to marry, forcing cooperation in NSAGs. So, there's also this dimension as well of targeting girls for these reasons.

The impact of this is huge in the sense that in any circumstance, unfortunately, in a lot of countries there is already a gender dimension regarding access to education where girls may have less access to education than boys. But then this threat against girls, the attacks against girls, means that in a lot of these contexts, girls no longer go to school at all, which has a huge impact obviously, on the girls themselves, but also, as Mark was highlighting, on the overall society. That's the reason why we think that in all contexts we need to have very strong gender analysis of the protection of education from attacks, trying to identify the specific risks girls face.

And back to you, Mark, for a second group with specific vulnerabilities, and that would be children with disabilities. Yes, I think the latest statistics are one in six persons on the planet are living with a disability. What is the protection work that must go towards accessibility and inclusive assistance to this population?

Mark: Yeah, thank you. And I think with ICRC's work, particularly in conflict zones, are physical rehabilitation programs (PRP), prosthetics and orthotic centers that work with children, young people to support them, children, young people who've been injured during conflict and crisis. We support them to

get replacement limbs or supports fitted. And in these cases, they may be patients in these PRP centers for months at a time.

And when they're there, we try to ensure they have access to education. Either we have a teacher on site, or we work with local authorities to ensure a teacher can come in. And as well as that, we have mental health and psychosocial support specialists there to help the children deal with the trauma they have experienced through being injured during conflict and hostilities.

In some cases, as well, we support these children when they've left the centers to have continued access to education, either through transport or through tutorial schemes, depending on the context. So that's an area where we work very closely with children, with the specific vulnerability that we're working with through some of our other programs as well.

More generally, where we do rehabilitation of centers, education centers or schools, we try to endeavor to make sure they're accessible for children with physical disabilities, so for wheelchair users, etc., including latrines and sanitary facilities. Then also through direct cash assistance for families where there are children or adults with disabilities, we recognize they have additional vulnerabilities and, in many cases, additional barriers to accessing safe education.

So, we may give extra assistance to those families and to those children to make sure that they don't face these barriers and they can access safe education in conflict and crisis.

I will ask one last question, as this recording today is just before the International Day for the Protection of Education from attack on September 9th, but I believe we'll release it just afterwards.

What would be the one key message to for our listeners to take away?

Mark: I would say that education first and foremost is a protective service, and education must be protected. If education isn't protected in these countries, you really risk short-term damage to children and young people, and long-term damage to the stability and the future of those countries.

Michel: Even in conflict situation, we can see that children want to go to school, want to have access to quality education, and under no circumstances can we tolerate attacks on schools, attacks on education. That's a tragedy. That's the life of children which basically end in the sense that the access to education, unfortunately and therefore we no longer see any future for them and that's something which is also in turn can fuel conflict. So therefore, the protection of education is more necessary than ever. And we should all work together to ensure that all children in conflict situations have access to safe and quality education.

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