

ECOSOC SPECIAL EVENT: FACE-TO-FACE DEBATE

“Education, human rights and conflict”

BACKGROUND

As part of the 2011 Session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) held from July 4th to July 29th in Geneva, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organized a substantive dialogue on “Education, human rights and conflict,” as part of the “Face-to-Face” debate series. The debate, which was streamlined on the ECOSOC Facebook page, focused on the critical need to protect all human rights, including the right to education, paying particular attention to the devastating impact of violence on education in conflict settings.

Education is a human right. As such, it must be protected and provided to all people. With an estimated 67 million primary school age children still out of school and 4 years before the 2015 deadline established by the Millennium Declaration, achieving universal access to primary education (MDG 2) remains a serious challenge. This shocking figure is further aggravated by the rising number of conflicts around the world. Out of the 67 million children lacking access to education, 30 million live in conflict-affected countries. Making matters even worse, too many of them have instead been kidnapped, abused or recruited as child soldiers.

Ensuring access to quality education during conflicts, as well as in post-conflict contexts is imperative in order to prevent the vicious cycle of violence from continuing.

DEBATE

Violence cripples school systems, while often leaving them paralyzed for the entire duration of a conflict. Education cannot wait for peace to return. Instead, education must be seen as the catalyst for a peaceful resolution of conflicts and as the precondition to a society’s ability to rebuild and maintain peace. It is **imperative to recognize the critical role of education in the prevention of war, during war and in post-conflict contexts.**

There is **serious concern in regards to the growing number of deliberate attacks on schools, teachers, students and public sector workers in war-torn areas.** These intentional attacks have a tremendously devastating impact on the quest to reach universal access to education. This disturbing trend cannot be tolerated and efforts to secure educational institutions must be strengthened.

It is of particular importance to emphasize that **governments have the primary responsibility to provide education for all** and should spare no effort in ensuring the

maintenance of education even in high-risk situations and armed conflict. Violence and conflict do not relieve the State of its obligation to protect and promote the right to quality education and the enjoyment of all human rights.

Although conflict does pose some significant challenges to the maintenance of education, it should not discourage investment in human and financial resources for this sector. On the contrary, governments shall spare no effort in safeguarding education throughout these situations in order to help communities navigate out of conflict and into development, peace and security.

Furthermore, it is crucial to regard access to education during conflicts as a necessary service; and not allow it to be neglected following the misconception that armed conflict is only temporary. With the growing number of wars and violence around the globe, it has become clear that this is not simply the case. **The average conflict now lasts 12 years, an equivalent of 3 generations of primary school children.** One effect of this disturbing fact is that internally displaced children, refugees, child soldiers and others directly affected by conflict might spend the entirety of their school years in a displacement camp or in the battlefield, causing a society to lose the benefits of formal education from an entire generation of children.

PEACE

Quality comprehensive education is the antidote to violence, repressive policies and discriminatory ideologies. Considering that most modern conflicts are fueled by lack of inter-cultural dialogue, intolerance and discrimination, education is a powerful tool for peace building and peace keeping processes. By promoting not only literacy and important life skills, but also human rights, respect for diversity and tolerance, education can cleanse a society in conflict of the inequalities and stereotypes that are often exploited by those who propagate violence. Thus, **quality pluralistic education fosters a culture of peace, celebrates diversity and instills principles such as negotiation and dialogue in order to settle differences and overcome social, religious, ethnic and cultural divisions.** Educational policy must place great emphasis on the development of pluralistic, inclusive and tolerant curricula, aligned with the promotion and respect for human rights.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT/ REINTEGRATION

Violence has also taken a horrific toll on the psychological wellbeing of children in high-risk societies. In this regard, the role of education as a means of returning some normalcy to children who have been traumatized and isolated by war and violence must be recognized and highlighted.

Schools have the power of creating a social environment crucial for the integration of generations born and raised in conflict settings. This is particularly relevant for the effective rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers, IDPs, refugees and other affected populations.

GENDER

Settings in which one sector of society is not interested in educating their female population are also a major impediment to the realization of universal primary education. Societies in which **access to education for the girl child has been made particularly difficult by certain ideologies** have not only severely hindered progress in reaching MDG 2, but they also continue to pose a grave threat to the stable and peaceful development of regions emerging from conflict. An estimated 57% of the primary school age children not enrolled in primary school are girls, with the percentage being significantly higher in areas where female attendance to school remains a taboo.

Providing quality education goes further than building a school. Comprehensive curricula must be developed in order to eradicate taboos and stereotypes leading to conflict and discrimination. **Education will prepare the next generations to contest the ideologies preventing marginalized groups from participating fully and equally in the social, cultural and economic development of their society.**

FUNDING

While funding education in conflict areas is indeed more costly and more risky than other investments, it is absolutely necessary. **The education sector is still far behind other social sectors in mobilizing development aid and humanitarian assistance.** This has to change. It is imperative to increase the national and international financial resources to ensure that quality education is available for all children, especially in regards to children and adolescents in conflict areas. It is through education that the affected communities will be able to make a stable and inclusive transition to peace; and **it is indeed those educated children who will be tasked with constructing a tolerant society capable of fostering sustainable, inclusive and stable economic development.**

COOPERATION

The tremendous efforts made everyday by parents at the community level to keep their children in school, the vital contribution from the local NGOs to keep the schools running and the partnerships established with the private sector to safeguard education in times of conflict must be recognized. Educational policy must build on and continue to encourage this multi-sectoral approach. **Cooperation and collaboration in this area must encompass both funding and the development of curricula,** in order to ensure that education systems have the necessary resources to function effectively and that children are learning skills attractive for employers, while enriching their minds and gaining a firm understanding of their rights and fundamental freedoms.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **States, NGOs and the private sector should partner up to raise awareness of the crucial role played by education** in the development and stability of a society, particularly in a conflict and post-conflict contexts, while

acknowledging that the primary responsibility to provide education lies with the government.

- Governments must make **access to education and the safeguarding of schools, teachers and students** a priority in order to avoid further deliberate attacks, especially during conflict situations.
- **Peace negotiations and agreements should include the voices and perspectives of women and children**, and highlight the importance of education for a culture of peace. This is crucial for the reconciliation of a society torn by war.
- Governments must send a clear **message of zero tolerance for discrimination on any base, including gender, ethnicity and religion**, in all sectors of society, including the educational system.
- Funding for education must increase. In particular, **access to education must be incorporated as a key component of humanitarian and development aid**, while raising awareness of the importance of maintaining education during times of conflict.
- Funding for education in conflict areas should take ground-level limitations into account. **Flexible grant programs should be developed with the aim of ensuring that the necessary financial resources reach community initiatives.**
- The development of **teacher training modules and school curricula should follow a multi-stakeholder approach**, resulting in increased collaboration between governments, civil society and the private sector. This will result in curricula based on relevant life skills and the principles of social inclusion, human rights, gender equality, tolerance and pluralistic values.
- **Education, including sports and arts programs, is critical for creating a safe and stable environment** suitable for the rehabilitation and reintegration of all victims of violence, including IPDs, refugees and child soldiers.
- Added emphasis needs to be placed on **access to education for the girl child**, especially in regions where this group has been marginalized and excluded from entering school as a result of discriminatory policies and ideologies.
- **We must all express our collective concern with the state of education around the globe** and reaffirm our commitment to promoting the right to education and all human rights.

PARTICIPANTS

MODERATOR: Ms. Imogen Foulkes

BBC Correspondent, Geneva

PANELISTS: H.E. Mr. Lazarous Kapambwe
ECOSOC President 2011
Permanent Representative of Zambia to the United Nations
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