

Education that protects

by Susan Nicolai

Education should be available for all children and should be responsive to the risks they face.

A group of young girls, exercise books in hand, crowd the lamp-lit passageway between tents. They tentatively use the English they've learned in school: "I walked five kilometres tonight"; "We are studying for school in the morning"; "I'd rather sleep at home, but am scared of soldiers". They are among the 50,000 children and adolescents in northern Uganda who commute to urban centres each night for fear of abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army. Tonight the group is preparing for examinations. Amazingly, despite the dangers of travelling between home, schools and the night commuting centres, lack of time for study and the burden of poverty, the girls continue to struggle to gain an education.

Sadly, many of their peers do not have that choice. UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report for 2003-04 estimated that half of the 104 million children out of school globally live in countries affected by or recovering from conflict.

Education in emergencies has only hit the humanitarian agenda in the last decade – first raised as an urgent issue by Mozambique's former first lady, Graça Machel.¹ Although emergency education's status as a humanitarian concern has increasingly gained legitimacy, there are still those who see it as a task best left to those concerned with development. Emergency staff often view education as a luxury and consider evidence of its impact as anecdotal. During the past few years, much progress has been made in designing models of education response that address access and quality. However, it is only recently that efforts have been made to enable education to concretely further the aims of child protection.

As part of our emergencies work, Save the Children has been exploring

the practical connections between education and protection in several conflict-affected countries. These experiences have shown that parents feel safer if children are in school rather than out. Education lessens the chance that the child will be recruited, exploited or exposed to other risks. In practical terms, education structures can play a more protective role in children's lives through:

- raising communities' awareness and ability to systematically respond to threats faced by children, through working with parent-teacher associations or school management committees to address these issues
- enhancing educational access and child development opportunities for more vulnerable children – particularly separated children, demobilised child soldiers and child survivors of gender-based violence
- deterring a cycle of violence through introducing child-friendly pedagogy, learning content that promotes peace, and positive methods of discipline
- involving teachers in delivering protection-related information to children and their families, and better equipping them to monitor protection issues and respond, when appropriate, to individual cases
- mobilising children to initiate activities to protect themselves and their communities.

Linking education and protection aims

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, discussion of education for former children associated with the fighting forces (CAFF) has primarily been limited to debate around whether agencies should pay school fees for these children. Ways of overcoming non-economic obstacles to their reintegration into schools or how to adapt basic education structures to support reintegration processes have not been addressed. Education

has been devastated as schools have been destroyed or used as barracks by armed groups. No education financing from the state reaches the conflict-affected eastern provinces, leaving parents and communities having to choose which children should go to school. Vulnerable young people – especially girls, orphans or ex-combatants – are at great risk of being excluded. During the past year Save the Children has worked through its community child protection networks in Masisi, North Kivu, to identify and explore education barriers for former CAFF and other vulnerable children. The findings have been used to work with parent-teacher associations to identify ways to strengthen support for those children who cannot afford school fees. Save the Children is also training teachers to be more aware of child protection concerns and exploring ways to increase non-formal education opportunities.

In the occupied Palestinian Territories the outbreak of the *Al Aqsa Intifada* in September 2000 has had a considerable impact on children's right to quality education and protection. Military incursions and movement restrictions regularly prevent children and teachers from reaching schools. Even when able to attend school, children face a difficult learning environment. Tensions, violence and disruption within schools affect relationships, concentration and opportunities for play.

In 2003 Save the Children carried out a participatory research project to look specifically at the issues of children's right to education and protection. This work found that while children viewed school as the one place where they could feel safe from military actions, there was an increasing atmosphere of violence in school – both in terms of corporal punishment and child-to-child violence. The conclusions of this research were presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights in March 2004.² Building from this work, Save the Children is working with its partners, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and a local NGO (the Tamer Institute), to support children's participation in

identifying and acting on localised protection risks. Children's committees have been established in a number of schools to implement their own protection activities. Initiatives range from promoting physical protection by building a wall around the school to instituting a non-violent school environment to promoting classmates as a source of peer support.

As we learn more about linkages between education and child protection, those concerned with planning education in conflict-affected countries need to ask a number of questions:

Children's rights: What particular threats to their rights and well-being do children face and how have these been exacerbated due to the emergency?

Analysing systems: What are the protective and endangering elements of education? Is education protective for some groups more than others? What changes are necessary in the classroom, in the school and among teachers or school supervisors to make learning conducive for girls, minorities and other marginalised groups? Have the former national curriculum and/or teaching methodologies contributed to the conflict? What kind of psychosocial support is available in the learning environment?

Role of children: What role do children play in protecting themselves and identifying and raising local protection issues? What systems are in place for them to report abuses?

Role of community: Are there ways in which the local community could strengthen the role of education in protecting their children? What is the current means for community participation in schools and does this reach those most likely to experience violation of their rights?

Resourcing: How can schools or non-formal educational environments be made more physically safe for children? In what ways can the national education authority take responsibility for protecting children's rights and well-being? What are the human and/or financial resource implications of improving education's role in protecting children? What level of support does education have within



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the overall humanitarian aid or reconstruction packages – and is it adequate?

Leading to lessons

While it is too early to draw substantiated lessons, one commonality stands out. Each of the projects, in its own way, has emphasised participation as the mechanism for improving the practical protection of children on the ground. Whether the focus is on participation of children, parents or teachers, the involvement and leadership of these various groups is seen as the missing link to make the Convention of the Rights of the Child more than just words on a page.

Education structures are the one community mechanism that strives – even if it does not always succeed – in reaching all children. Like the girls in Uganda, children will make extraordinary sacrifices to access education. Protecting children and their rights means making sure that education opportunities are available and, just as importantly, that education is responsive to the risks faced by children in their daily lives.

All those involved in emergency and post-conflict programming need to realise that:

- Child protection should be an integral part of emergency education activities and a fundamental criterion in the approval of a programme by NGO staff, host governments and donors.
- Protection issues should be reflected in national education

policies and response strategies; curricula which have perpetuated divisions and fuelled conflict must be revised.

- Schools and educational facilities must be designated as 'safe areas' and protagonists warned that the International Criminal Court to prosecute as war criminals those who target schools and educational facilities.
- Child-friendly spaces should be created for conflict-affected children: reconstruction must include providing adequate safe play spaces.
- A code of conduct may be one mechanism to ensure teachers do not abuse children and use corporal punishment.

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The themes discussed in this article are more widely explored in a Humanitarian Practice Network Paper, 'The role of education in protecting children in conflict' (available online at: www.odihpn.org/pdfbin/networkpaper042.pdf), written by Susan Nicolai and Carl Triplehorn of Save the Children US (email CTriplehorn@dc.savechildren.org).

1. Graça Machel, *The UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, Department of Information, UN, New York, 1996. www.unicef.org/graca/graight.htm

2. See *Living behind barriers: Palestinian children speak out* at www.savethechildren.org.uk/temp/scuk/cache/cmsattach/1383_CHR.pdf