

FORUM

Discussing international education

DEVELOPING THE UNIVERSITIES OF A NEWBORN STATE
EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CONFLICT
IN CONVERSATION WITH JAUME PAGÈS
WHAT INTERNATIONALISATION? THE NEW PHASE





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EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

Education constitutes the very foundation of a socially cohesive society, yet this basic human right is often denied or ignored within conflict-stricken countries during periods of volatility. This report explores both the challenges that exist for education in war-torn countries, and the opportunities which can arise when peace is restored.

“Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained.” —James A. Garfield

Garfield spoke from experience, having lived and fought during the American civil war and having supported the abolition of slavery. Civil war, internal strife and conflict have been constants throughout the 20th century, although popular education – when successfully provided – has performed a key function in holding together society and providing freedom and justice for the citizens of countries. However, what happens to education when conflict strikes?

According to the University of Heidelberg Conflict Barometer, since 1990 there have been on average 30 highly violent conflicts per year, although some years the figure has been more than 50. The majority of these conflicts have been internal, with different parties within a nation fighting for supremacy due to religious or political ideology, to control natural resources, or for regional autonomy. For educators and students in many parts of the world, taking part in education in times of conflict is an everyday reality.

THE COSTS OF CONFLICT

One of the first results of conflict is the displacement of people due to fighting. They may be displaced internally or externally, but in general, the majority of people are displaced internally. The average time for internal displacement is around 20 years;¹ therefore many children grow up knowing nothing other than their displaced situation. These children have the fundamental human right to education. Moreover, it is recognised that “the right to education also enables the delivery of life-saving messages,

provides a sense of normality and absorbs energies of adolescents whose alternative options might include recruitment and violence.”² That said, internally displaced people are often discriminated against.

The obligation on the state to provide education is often ignored, or the state itself is unable to make that provision. In such cases, international aid agencies often step in to fill the void. Education, therefore, may be brought in from another country and whilst there are increasing attempts to standardise the quality of this provision, it is still very much work in progress.

The effect on education systems due to the displacement of the civil population is not the only current challenge; attacks on educational establishments are now a common feature of internal conflict. Even though this is considered to be a war crime under international law, the potential damage – both physical and psychological – that can be inflicted upon another ethnic/political group by attacking its education system (and children) leads them to be considered a viable target. Examples of such actions abound: the attack by separatists on the school in Breslan, and the harassment and murder of teachers (nearly 300 in the period 2000–2003) by paramilitary groups in Colombia, are two particularly graphic examples.

The end of hostilities may also bring in weak and myopic governments who see the reform of education as an opportunity to develop education to suit their political purposes. All too often, education systems have been used to exclude ethnic or social groups or to blanket learners’ minds with a particular brand of nationalistic ideology. This process, in turn, often leads inexorably to further conflict. A well-documented example of this is the discrimination in terms of content and access (to education) in the treatment of the Hutu majority by the Tutsi minority in post-colonial Rwanda.

In colonial times, only Tutsis were allowed to enter the civil service and were therefore given greater access and better quality education. This process continued even after independence in 1962. Changes then led to a reverse in society with the Tutsis being barred from education and government. This is widely considered to be one of the principal factors behind the 1994 genocide.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

Whilst conflict and displacement do have dire consequences for education, the end of physical hostilities can often bring about genuine opportunities for change and development. The political space created by the end of a former regime may allow for previously impossible developments; examples of which include Afghanistan, where the end of Taliban control led to a 700% increase in primary enrolment; or in Cambodia, following the end of the Khmer Rouge, with an increase in primary enrolment of 1.4 million students.

Many higher education professionals who read this article work on the receiving end of students and process requests for support from students in conflict-affected countries. It is essential for us to remember that education is a human right and a powerful tool for social cohesion, peace and development. As such, when receiving students’ applications or requests, we must demonstrate an understanding of the contexts in which they have been educated, thus allowing us to make fair and justified decisions about their rights and ability to access our educational institutions and systems. **E**

Interested in learning more about countries affected by current crises? Join us at the EAIE Academy this November for the course ‘Education in times of conflict’. For more information, visit www.eaie.org/academy.

1. Learning in Displacement (2010). Norwegian Refugee Council.

2. UNESCO (2003). *Education in Situations of Emergency, Crisis, and Reconstruction*.