

Sri Lanka
State of the Economy Report 2010

Chapter 15
**Protecting the Education Rights of Conflict-
affected Children**

by
Priyanka Jayawardena

15. Protecting the Education Rights of Conflict-affected Children

15.1 Introduction

In a crisis, providing even the most basic educational services to school going age children who have dropped out of school is an enormous challenge. In Sri Lanka, the disruption to the education of thousands of children ended with the termination of a prolonged military conflict in the country. Education was disrupted through displacement, loss of family members, psychological impact, loss of school materials as well as the destruction of school buildings and infrastructure. In these circumstances, simply providing basic service delivery of education is often a major challenge. But there is a need to move beyond that; education competencies appropriate for particular ages are an essential component of reintegrating into the regular school curriculum. Effective provision of education can also serve to deliver stability and long lasting peace. Therefore, protecting the education rights of conflict-affected children should be a key part of programming and planning under post-conflict development.

School going children of returnee internally displaced persons (IDPs) and conflict-affected families are in need of humanitarian assistance. The UNICEF estimates that more than 48,000 school-going children have returned to their home towns by February, 2010.¹ These children need substantial educational assistance to offset the long term consequences of missed education. Further, there are still thousands of children still remaining in IDP camps. For instance, in the largest IDP camp alone (Menik Farm), there are

more than 25,000 registered students to be found.²

While the government has taken several measures to establish or restore the basic education facilities in resettled areas as well as temporary learning centres in IDP camps, there are complex areas to be considered. For instance, there are several issues which could arise in service delivery of education in emergencies - reintegrating to school curriculum, dealing with ex-child-combatants, providing educational infrastructure, ensuring adequate human resources (such as qualified teachers, teaching and learning kits, transport, etc.,) along with provision of accelerated education programmes and psychosocial support for war affected children. This policy brief discusses common issues and possible implications for protecting the education rights of conflict-affected children in Sri Lanka's post-conflict development.

15.2 Difficulties of Restoring Education in Post-conflict Situations

Conflict has a devastating impact on education, in terms of school-going aged pupils dropping out, as well as deterioration of the education system and its infrastructure. Therefore, major challenges have to be overcome to restore education systems in post-conflict situations.

Reintegrating school drop-outs is an important issue. Generally, during periods of intensified conflict, school enrolment declines at all levels. In periods of conflict, children

¹ <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportId=88218> (accessed on April 20, 2010).

² *Ibid.*

might be internally displaced, become refugees, be orphaned, become separated from their parents, or be traumatized by violence. Additionally, students closer to conscription age are frequently recruited as armed combatants, with obvious detrimental consequences on their education.

One major issue of post-conflict education is failure to reintegrate children whose education was interrupted or not begun during the conflict into mainstream national education systems. Sometimes, returnees may have to re-enter the system at lower levels in the last grade they completed and this creates problems as they feel the humiliation of studying with younger children. Further,

as a consequence of decades of conflict, there can be large numbers of conflict-affected school-going age children, ex-combatants and young people who have not even completed basic education.

Another common experience of reintegrating school drop-outs in post-conflict situations is one of exclusion. Stigmatization and rejection from teachers and other students contribute to school absenteeism and school drop-outs, especially for ex-child-combatants. Therefore, in post-conflict situations, repetition, absenteeism, and over-age students can constrain improvements to long term enrolment rates.

Box 15.1

Accelerated Learning Programme in Iraq: School Drop-outs Get a Second Chance

The Purpose

Accelerated learning programme is a USAID funded pilot intervention for Iraqi children who have dropped out from school. The programme aims to give a second chance to out-of-school children aged 6-14 years by bringing them into the mainstream school system. Different teaching methods and condense learning materials are employed to accelerate teaching - two years of schooling in only one school year.

Compressing the Syllabus:

The programme is delivered using well-designed, relevant lessons and activities. A booklet was produced compressing the syllabus of two years into one. Related special-purpose teaching materials, charts and maps were also developed as needed.

Training the Teachers:

Accelerated learning focuses on upgrading teachers' skills and teaching methods through pre-service education. The programme conducts continuous in-service training and mentoring as needed. Teachers are trained in both a central location and in their regional localities.

Conducting the Programme:

- Around 100-150 students in each location are grouped for 4-6 classes, with 2-3 Iraqi teachers in each class. Grades are combined and classes are conducted along grade 1-2, grade 3-4, grade 5-6, and grade 7-8.
- A master trainer is assigned in each location to assist a team of 8-14 teachers.
- Community outreach staff are deployed in each location to encourage attendance and prevent drop-outs.

Source: USAID, 2004, "School Drop-outs Get a Second Chance - Accelerated Learning Programme", www.usaid.gov/iraq/.

Ex-child-combatants pose another problem. In a post-conflict environment, educating child soldiers constitute a special challenge for education systems. School-going age children are often recruited by armed combatants. Child combatants might have engaged in atrocities, and sometimes been influenced by administering of narcotics, etc. Even as ex-child-combatants are demobilized under post-conflict conditions, they are likely to have known only violence and become socially isolated. Mainstreaming these ex-combatants into the education system poses many difficulties. For instance, if they are re-admitted to school, they can continue to feel excluded and rejected by other students and teachers. Some schools refuse to admit ex-child-combatants for fear of violence that could arise.

Special needs of children of conflict-affected situations have also to be addressed. Children caught up in violent conflicts have special needs, including the need for counseling. In post-conflict situations, it can be difficult to create an atmosphere which is conducive to learning. Most of the conflict-affected children are physically and psychologically damaged, and might have experienced maltreatment and/or massacre of their family members.

Another common issue is financial constraints. Although education services in Sri Lanka are provided by the government free of charge, other expenses - stationery, uniforms, etc., - often prevent children from attending school. Further, many have to work after school or quit school altogether to contribute to the family income or to look after their younger siblings. In many instances, these children are lacking adequate health care and suffer from malnutrition. Children in IDP camps in particular might be at a higher risk of malnutrition and ill health. Their health problems can be exacerbated by generally poorer living conditions in tempo-

rary shelters, such as adequate access to food, sanitary facilities or drinking water. Children, suffering from hunger or ill health, are less assiduous in school.

The damage to schools and associated infrastructure during conflicts poses another set of problems. Often, a major challenge in restoring the educational system is the reality that there are not enough schools in conflict-affected areas to absorb the great influx of school-going age children. Most of the functioning schools are concentrated in town areas, overcrowded, and have very limited capacity to take new entrants. The destruction of educational infrastructure and buildings is one of the most serious set-backs that a country can face. Other than the direct damage caused by violent conflict, school infrastructure may also suffer damage as public buildings are often commandeered as barracks, IDP camps, storage points, etc. Further, some schools will not be usable as a result of long neglect over a period of time during the conflict, or as a result of having been prohibited and flagged as no-go areas due to landmines and unexploded devices in these areas. Therefore, post-conflict reconstruction invariably requires extensive capital investment to restore educational physical infrastructure. In post-conflict situations, countries often face difficulties in funding reconstruction, as many do not have sufficient domestic revenue buoyancy to generate additional resources.

Another major challenge in restoring education is the chronic shortages of qualified teachers in previous conflict-affected areas. Many may have fled or vacated the post. Even existing teachers in conflicted-affected areas are affected by the violence, with little or no knowledge on how to overcome the difficulties. The challenge is not always the recruitment of new teachers, but improving the quality of the teaching force in terms of qualifications, experience, and competence.

The quality of education also suffers in conflict times. Indeed, the most profound and lasting impact of conflict on education is on quality, rather than on access. Quality of education tends to deteriorate as qualified teachers disperse, as learning materials become unavailable and school curricula are shortened to overcome the missed education of school drop-outs. Therefore, inappropriate curricula, unqualified teachers, collapsed monitoring and supervision services continue to undermine the quality of education for many years even after the issues of access have been addressed.

There can also be significant coordination and planning challenges. Instability and disruption created during conflict periods have very serious impacts on planning and service delivery in education. The decline and collapse of civil administration in conflict-affected areas results in large gaps in planning education. This creates a problem in planning for the future in the absence of reliable data on the numbers of schools, teachers and students. Further, as education involves donor agencies and humanitarian action, there is often a coordination problem. Poor record keeping, corruption and lack of transparency lead to serious set-backs in education governance in post-conflict situations.

15.3 Post-Conflict Education in Sri Lanka

15.3.1 Measures for a Second Chance in Education

Restoring schools is a priority need. According to the school census of 2008, there were 877 functioning schools in the Northern Province.³ However, with the intensifica-

tion of fighting in the Northern Province, most of these schools were damaged or gradually shut down. At present, many of these schools lack essential materials such as furniture, and teaching and learning aids. In the Northern Province, 392 schools and 10 Divisional and Zonal Education Offices are estimated to be in need of fairly extensive repairs and rehabilitation.⁴

The government has initiated measures to provide the basic needs of service delivery in education under its post-conflict development programmes. Schools have been re-opened in resettlement areas to service the education needs of school-going age children in the previous conflict-affected areas. According to the Northern Province Department of Education, 115 schools out of the 326 existing schools are estimated to have been re-opened as of end March 2010. Some children stay in boarding schools in the Vavuniya, Mannar or Jaffna town areas where schools are considered to be better. Approximately 19,000 students out of 82,800 students recorded in 2008, have returned to their areas of origin, while 7,385 students who are in host family accommodation, attend in-community schools.⁵ Transport difficulties, engagement in household economic activities, as well as the care of younger siblings are also attributed for the relatively low enrolment.

The provision of education in IDP camps is proceeding. Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) have been established in camps to service the education needs of displaced children. For instance, in Vavuniya and Mannar districts, a total of 21 TLCs are providing

³ Ministry of Education, 2008, School Census 2008, Ministry of Education.

⁴ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN036_100102-100115-SL-IA-Sitreps-External-Joint_Humanitarian_Update-17.pdf.

⁵ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN041_100312-100326-SL-IA-Sitreps-External-Joint_Humanitarian_Update-22.pdf.

continual education services for IDP students. As of April 2010, 26,749 students were reported to be present in the IDP camps.⁶

Schools may be potential targets for recruitment activities by armed groups. Therefore, measures must be taken to prevent the cycle of violence and retribution in schools and ensure that schooling helps towards peace building. Most of the IDP camps were shifted from schools which had been used to house IDPs suspected of affiliation with armed groups. However, nine schools (students and staff) continue to share premises and facilities within such camps, guarded by the armed forces.⁷ This kind of arrangement is not conducive to learning and can have an adverse impact, including concerns regarding the safety of students and teachers.

Deploying teachers in the previous conflict-affected areas also poses problems. Some teachers find it difficult to commute to schools in the resettled areas due to various reasons, such as the inability to commute daily, pregnancy, etc. Teacher shortages have a serious impact on the provision of education in IDP camps.⁸ For instance, there are only 308 teachers for the 23,695 remaining students in Menik Farm and Tharmapuram camps. The problem of service delivery in education for those remaining in the camps worsens as more teachers return to their areas of origin. Although teachers are advised to travel from Vavuniya due to irregular transport availability, late arrivals and early departures hinder service delivery.⁹ Further, the quality of education is also compromised in instances due to the lack of teachers for key subjects such as English, mathematics and science. There-

fore, issues of both teacher shortages and teacher training need to be addressed.

The government has deployed additional buses to cater to the needs of school children and teachers in Vavuniya and Mannar areas to address the difficulties that teachers in the Northern Province encounter. Further, free season tickets have been approved for teachers to travel from Vavuniya and Jaffna to their schools in Kilinochchi, Thunukkai, Madhu and Mulankavil. Furthermore, line ministries have been requested to enhance and develop zonal and district level education activities.

Gaps in education of children in previously conflict-affected regions have also emerged. The prolonged conflict affected the school attendance of a considerable number of school-going children directly and indirectly. If programmes to bridge such educational gaps are not introduced, there is a risk that affected children may permanently leave the school system, leading to future social problems. The re-integration of these children in the school system in grades that are appropriate for their ages require special education programmes.

Catch-up education (CUE) in Sri Lanka is a programme which provides extra support or help to school-going children in order to enable them to join the mainstream school system (see Box 15.2). The necessity and the importance of CUE were identified during 1989-1990, in the midst of social unrest in the country.¹⁰ These CUE programmes were introduced in the Northern and East-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN040_100227-100312%20-%20SL%20-%20IA%20-%20Sitreps%20-%20Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202021.pdf

⁸ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN036_100102-100115-SL-IA-Sitreps-External-Joint_Humanitarian_Update-17.pdf

⁹ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN038_100130-100212%20-%20SL%20-%20IA%20-%20Sitreps%20-%20External%20-%20Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update-19.pdf

¹⁰ UNICEF, 2003, "Catch-up Education in Sri Lanka: A Review".

ern Provinces to help children who missed schooling on account of the conflict.

Psychological impact and life risks that arise out of conflict need to be addressed as well. Education in an emergency must be more than a stop-gap education and should be designed to address the needs of conflict-

affected children. In order to address the psychological impact of prolonged periods of stress on such children, a psycho-social component should be added to education. Further, children are especially at risk of landmines, fleeing into unknown territory to play in nearby fields and paths. Sometimes, children may not recognize warning signs

Box 15.2 **Catch-up Education (CUE) Programmes in Sri Lanka**

Purpose

CUE provides extra support to school drop-outs to help them reintegrate with the education system.

Target group:

The programme targets students in the compulsory age group (5-14 years) who are not in school - i.e., those who have dropped out or have missed some part of their education.

Curriculum and learning material:

In 2004, the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education and the North-East Provincial Department of Education initiated the development of standardized material to use for CUE. This includes a curriculum and related teachers' guides and student work books for mathematics and both languages (Sinhala and Tamil).

Programme functioning:

Since 2007, implementation of CUE programmes has come under the purview of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) unit of the Ministry of Education, with the support of UNICEF, Save the Children of Sri Lanka and other national and international NGOs.

Programme outcome:

There are a variety of CUE programmes, which have varying levels of effectiveness. Some key issues of CUE programmes are as follows.

- There is no national vision or plan for CUE programme. Provision is made independently by partners.
- Most of the CUE classes are under-resourced and lack the basic requirements needed to provide good quality service to children.
- The qualifications and training programmes for instructors are inadequate for the task of preparing them for teaching children from a variety of age groups.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak in all programmes.
- There is no sound evidence to show that CUE classes help school drop-outs to go back into the school system.
- CUE material is not systematically used by most of the CUE programmes.

Source: Arunatilake, N, P. Jayawardena, C. Dharmadasa and D. Hirimuthugodage, 2009, "Catch-up Education in Sri Lanka", IPS, mimeo.

around mined areas. Therefore, psycho-social support and landmine awareness should be integrated into the curriculum of education programmes under emergencies. At present, in 7 schools of Vavuniya-North DS division, psycho-social projects are supported by education partners for students and IDP children.¹¹

15.3.2 Some Issues and Challenges Ahead

Mainstreaming school drop-outs is important. Reintegrating different types of school drop-outs affected by the conflict - ex-child-combatants, IDPs, orphans, disabled, etc. into the mainstream education system poses challenges under the existing education system. It does not have the required capacity to handle this additional burden and respond adequately.

Programmes have also to be effectively coordinated. There should be proper coordination among the different entities involved in conducting CUE classes, teacher training and in reintegrating children within formal schools. In some cases, while donor humanitarian interventions commenced, these interventions have not been sustained, especially once the immediate emergency is over. A part of the problem is that donors typically reduce their aid after their initial humanitarian support. Decreasing funds impact the expected outcome of these programmes.

Proper needs assessments have also to be carried out. Although much effort has been made in restoring education in previously conflict-affected areas, there has been insufficient coherent analysis of children's needs in giving a second chance to education. For instance, surveys on school-going children, access to schools, registered teachers, need

for catch-up classes - especially for resettled children - along with the psycho-social support and need for additional class rooms, furniture, learning materials, stationery kits, transport, etc., have not been carried out coherently. Therefore, needs assessments on resettled students and temporary learning centres in camps should be conducted to identify the key problems prevailing in service delivery in emergencies.

Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation have also to be put in place. Supervision and monitoring of education services is a challenge in an emergency situation. There are different entities involved in providing education services. However, little evidence exists of children's learning achievements, progress of conducting classes, and reintegrating children to the formal school system.

15.4 Conclusion and Policy Implications

In conflict situations, displacement makes it difficult to obtain information on whether children have access to even basic services - food, shelter, as well as psycho-social support. Therefore, in an emergency situation schools can help monitor the status of displaced children and protect their rights. School systems should be encouraged to keep track of the needs of students and facilitate screening for children who need special assistance. Implications for education priorities under the post-conflict development in Sri Lanka include many of these aspects.

An area of urgent attention is the reintegration of different types of school drop-outs affected by the conflict - such as ex-child-combatants, IDPs, orphans, disabled, etc., - into mainstream education systems. There is a need to strengthen institutional capacity

¹¹ http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka_hpsl/Files/Situation%20Reports/joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN042_100327-100409%20-%20SL%20-%20IA%20-%20Sitreps%20-%20Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202023.pdf.

within the Ministry of Education, and other local and international authorities to develop a comprehensive policy and strategy for inclusion of school drop-outs into the mainstream school system.

An initial step is to establish 'learning spaces' - i.e., safe and healthy places to teach, even if such accommodation is temporary, while steps are taken to reconstruct schools. Other initiatives should tackle the delivery of whatever useful materials are available for teachers and students, while taking steps to ensure procurement and distribution of student and teacher textbooks. Curriculum reforms, teaching methods and new approaches to address the gaps in education should also be undertaken.

Teachers should be deployed from among the displaced population to assist in organizing schooling. An immediate roll-out of basic teacher training workshops and building a teacher training system is helpful. Teachers should be trained to make them competent in adopting the curriculum according to the student's standard. Special training could be given to teachers so that they would be able to recognize the signs of psychological needs of children. Schools can serve as entry points for psycho-social pro-

gramming and to provide a sense of security. Schools and temporary learning centres in camps for IDPs should be encouraged to provide services and protection for displaced children. Schools can also ensure nutritional needs by serving meals to students.

Education in emergencies can give the support and guidance children need to be proactive within their communities. For instance, landmine awareness, child rights, life skills and emergency skills should be integrated into education programmes in post-conflict conditions. Girls in particular should also be made aware of the risks of abuse, exploitation and sexual violence.

Monitoring and evaluation of programmes are essential to analyse the impact of the programmes. Comprehensive evaluating systems should be carried out to evaluate student's performance and mainstream them to formal schools. For many of the activities discussed above, the Ministry of Education should be provided with technical assistance in planning and assessing the availability of funds and other resources. Encouraging private sector participation with relevant measures to coordinate the programmes and projects can also be useful.