Impact of conflict in Africa

by Kathryn Touré

Since independence, few African countries have been spared violence and armed conflict. Two West African research networks recently organised an international colloquium to assess the impact and develop linkages between education, peace and democracy.

Conflict is a major obstacle to the development of education in Africa and is a problem that deserves to be more clearly identified. There is only limited literature. We urgently need more research and wider understanding of the role of education in generating conflict, the impact of conflict on education systems and the careers of learners and how to work towards non-violent schools which can promote a culture of peace.

The initiative to hold a colloquium in Yaoundé, Cameroon in March 2006 was spearheaded by the Education Research Network for West and Central Africa/Réseau Ouest et Centre Africain de Recherche en Education (ERNWACA/ROCARE) headquartered in Bamako, Mali and the Family and Schooling in Africa/Famille et Scolarisation en Afrique (FASAF) network[1], based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The event was hosted by the Cameroonian Ministry of Higher Education and UNESCO and funded by Plan International[2], Diakonia[3], the Centre for Population and Development (CEPED)[4] and the Institute for Research for Development (IRD).[5] It was attended by decision makers, civil society, researchers, education practitioners and young people. Participants from 24 countries sought to develop strategies to better understand conflict and to promote conflict prevention via research, research-based programming and listening to children's voices. The meeting has generated momentum to encourage partnership between practitioners and researchers.

Papers and discussions dealt with the sources, forms and consequences of violence, especially relating to children (and girls in particular) and to vulnerable groups such as refugees and other displaced persons. Physical, psychological and social consequences of violence and conflict were discussed and the effectiveness of response interventions assessed.

The case studies analysed:

- causes of conflict and violence in Sierra Leone
- the impact of conflict on girls in Côte d'Ivoire
- education for Togolese refugees in Benin
- increasing in-school violence in Burkina Faso
- realising the right to education for young refugees in Cameroon
- the impact of restrictions on school enrolment in creating and sustaining conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- the disastrous impact of Zimbabwe's 'Operation Clean Up' (the Mugabe regime's forced eviction of 'illegal' rural inhabitants) on school enrolment
- post-conflict peace education in Burundi
- violence in Koranic schools in Niger
- sexual harassment in schools in Cameroon and Congo
- the role of life skills education
- education for demobilised child soldiers in Congo
- the impact of lack of in-school sanitation on pupils, especially girls
- HIV/AIDS education in Ugandan primary schools.

As part of the colloquium, the University of Yaoundé I organised a roundtable discussion at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (teaching training college) on the reality of sexual harassment in educational institutions. The issue of gender-based symbolic and sexual violence within schools and the impact of sexist stereotypes in school textbooks remain little documented.

Participants insisted on a holistic approach, because violence in schools is not made up of isolated cases of violence but rather flows from society and the family.

The impact of crisis situations on educational systems is significant and of a variety of kinds. Violence and conflict have become a part of everyday life and threaten education and societal development on the African continent. Studies and actions should therefore be included as part of prevention and reconciliation, and in the framework of peace building leading toward attainment of quality Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Growing levels of violence and conflict in homes, schools and communities require research-based and community-supported action. As more and more initiatives are undertaken to institute democratic values, African researchers must also study how tradition promotes conflict and the value of traditional practices in conflict prevention and resolution. As rules and institutional mediation are not sufficient for peace we need to use ethnographic and other qualitative approaches to study lived experience. Above all, we need to value teachers as the most critical resource in education reconstruction and we need to listen to young people – for their voices are often silenced by those of adults.

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1. www.fasaf.org
2. www.plan-international.org
3. www.diakonia-world.org
4. http://ceped.cirad.fr
5. www.ird.fr