The Right to Education for all Children

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we can look back at a number of milestones that have enhanced the dignity, well-being and development opportunities for children – especially with regard to the right to education.

Since 1989, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, extraordinary advances have taken place across the world, including in some of the poorest countries – most notably, towards the goal of providing universal primary education for all children. This has meant a new world of hope and opportunities for millions of children. The efforts undertaken by States to reach the Millennium Development Goals and the objectives of Education for All, led forward by UNESCO, have paid dividends across the world.
At the same time, these achievements cannot hide looming challenges and obstacles to fully realizing the right to education for all children. According the UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 58 million children are still out of school today, while 250 million more are unable to read, write and count even after 4 years of schooling. In this picture, girls and women are hit the hardest.

This global learning crisis violates basic human rights. It undermines social cohesion and threatens stability, throwing a shadow over the development of entire societies, condemning generations to despair. Tackling this challenge guides all of UNESCO’s work to help countries accelerate towards 2015 and to shape an ambitious new global education agenda to follow, where every child has access to quality education.

This goes especially for children caught in conflict situations. Over half of the children out of school today live in countries affected by conflict or fragility, representing 28 million girls and boys. From Iraq and Syria to South Sudan, as well as in many other war-torn countries, armed conflict forces children out of their homes and their schools – obliging them to struggle for life and a future. During conflicts, we see far too many schools being damaged by fighting, intentionally targeted and used for military purpose.

The education crisis in conflict-affected countries goes beyond bombarded buildings and damaged infrastructure. With education, children learn to think critically and independently. Education contributes to their personal growth and development. Promoting values of peace and tolerance, education teaches children to live together in society and become active citizens. In contrast, what we are seeing today in too many places is the hijacking of education to ferment hatred – schools are on the frontline.

It may seem out of place to speak of maintaining education when children and their families are fighting for their lives. However, the breakdown of education systems contributes to the breakdown of societies. Iraq, for instance, is paying for insufficient investment in education over the past 10 years -- illiteracy has risen to 20 percent of the population, undermining the mental and cultural defenses of people confronted with extremist discourses.
The cost of this failure must not be underestimated, neither in Iraq nor elsewhere. Those who would wage a war against schools know that they are places where the defenses against indoctrination are forged. And this is why they are in the line of fire -- in South Sudan, for instance, where warlords have raided schools to forcefully recruit child soldiers, or in Mali, where militants attempted to wipe out a thousand years of history and culture to deprive local populations of their past and their identity.

Children’s right to education has become a security issue. It must be vigorously defended and reinforced. In crises where identities, cultures and schools are under assault, military solutions alone will not suffice. The best and most enduring way to combat extremism is to combat the ignorance that nurtures it.

This means integrating education into all peacebuilding processes -- right from the start. It means properly training teachers. There is no point in building new schools if they become recruiting squares or targets. Yet, most of the scarce resources allocated to education, less than two percent of humanitarian aid, are spent on infrastructure – which is often quickly destroyed.

Realizing the right to education requires also far greater attention to the quality of teaching, to examine what children are learning. Forest Whitaker, a UNESCO Special Envoy, summed it up perfectly when he addressed the UN Security Council in September: "For so many of these children, war and violence are all they have ever known, and if we do not take upon ourselves to teach them something new, then they are just soldiers in waiting."

Peace and citizenship education should be included in every school syllabus, including in crisis situations. This is one of the three pillars of the UN Secretary General’s Global Education First Initiative, spearheaded by UNESCO. In a world of uncertainty, this has never been more important. Twenty five years after the groundbreaking Convention on the Rights of the Child, we must not relent in raising the flag for the right of every girl and boy to quality education – especially the most vulnerable.

Irina Bokova