

ALL IN SCHOOL

Out-of-School
Children Initiative

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BARRIERS TO EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AND POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

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1. Introduction

Exposure to conflict affects children in several ways, ranging from direct killings and injuries, to more subtle, yet persistent and irreversible effects on schooling, health, nutrition, future opportunities and well-being. Children's educational attainment is particularly compromised by exposure to violence. Conflict-affected countries include over 20% of all children of primary school age, but account for around half of all out-of-school children of primary school age (UNESCO, 2011, 2013). The likelihood of young children dropping out of school is also significantly higher in conflict-affected countries than elsewhere in the world: only 65% of children in these countries attend the last primary school grade, in comparison to 86% across low-income countries. Research has highlighted in particular the causal adverse impact of conflict exposure in terms of reducing the number of years children spend in school (Akresh and De Walque, 2008; Chamarbagwala and Moran, 2009; Merrouche, 2006; UNESCO 2010), and restricting grade progression (Akresh and De Walque, 2008; Alderman, Hoddinott and Kinsey, 2006; Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2013; Shemyakina, 2011). These effects have been shown in turn to affect considerably future life prospects of affected children, including access to labour market, earnings and health outcomes in adulthood (see review in Justino, 2011), which may aggravate risks associated with the outbreak or renewal of violent conflicts (Justino, Leone and Salardi 2013).

These findings call attention to the importance of reforming education systems in conflict-affected countries. This is, however, a major challenge for countries emerging from years and sometimes decades of armed violence. On the one hand, the destruction of infrastructure, social institutions and markets may create important barriers to the supply of schooling and the creation of enabling environments in which education systems can be rebuilt. On the other hand, changes in economic and social structures within families and communities, alongside persistent insecurity, may create demand-side barriers to children joining schools during and after violent conflicts. The objective of this paper is to build on this emerging body of research on the impact of violent conflict on child educational outcomes to (i) identify and examine key supply- and demand-side bottlenecks that may prevent the expansion of education in conflict-affected countries (sections 2 and 3), and (ii) suggest policy interventions (section 4) that may break barriers to the implementation and effectiveness of education systems that support positive social transformation in conflict-affected contexts.

2. The enabling environment and supply-side barriers

Violent conflicts have severe adverse effects on the education system overall and the supply of education in particular in three important ways. First, armed fighting is associated with the destruction of infrastructure and resources needed to maintain functioning education systems. Second, violent conflict leads to the breakdown of communities as a result of people fleeing (or being forced to flee) areas of violence, which affects how children are educated and under which circumstances. Third, violent conflicts often lead to distributional and equity effects in terms of who accesses which type of education that may prevent many from attending school. I discuss these three mechanisms in detail below.

Destruction of infrastructure and resources. Some of the most visible impacts of violent conflict include the destruction of infrastructure, as well as the collapse of government provision of goods and services, including schooling, due to lack of financial resources or the diversion of finances to military efforts (Stewart et al., 2001a, 2001b). Reports from several conflict-affected countries show that schools, teachers and students are often targeted by violent attacks (O'Malley, 2007, 2010; UNESCO 2011). Schools are visible symbols of state presence and teachers are often perceived as leaders in their community, making them easy and visible targets of violence by armed groups intended on controlling populations and territories. As a result, the decision is often made to close down schools in areas likely to be affected by violence (IANS, 2009; Mulkeen, 2007). In addition, heightened perceptions of violence and insecurity may affect the recruitment of teachers to some areas, and disrupt exam systems, the supply of teaching materials and the development and update of curricula (UNESCO 2011). These effects have been observed in several conflict-affected countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, DR Congo, Iraq, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Thailand and Zimbabwe, and severely constrain the supply of schooling and the recovery of education systems in conflict-affected areas (O'Malley, 2007, 2010; UNESCO 2011).

Displacement. The disruption of schools and teaching is compounded in many conflict-affected contexts by the displacement of households (and sometimes entire communities) from violence-affected areas, which severely disrupts the supply of education. While education is possible in some camps, this is often disorganised, temporary, under-resourced, overcrowded and limited to primary education (UNHCR/OSCE, 2002; Watkins, 2013). Accessing schools outside the camps may not be possible for reasons of security and restrictions to the movement of certain population groups. In addition to difficulties in the supply of schooling to displaced populations, displaced children may not attend school because their labour is needed to contribute to household income, as discussed below (Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2013; Rodriguez and Sanchez, 2009; UNICEF and UIS, 2012a, 2013a). Situations of displacement are sometimes temporary (as, for instance, in the case of Timor Leste) (Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2013), but can last decades (as in Colombia, Sudan, DR Congo and other cases) leaving whole generations without access to education and the important social structures provided by schools and teachers (Watkins, 2013).

Distributional effects. The combination of destruction and displacement results in severe constraints to the supply of schooling, the provision of quality education and the recovery of education systems in conflict-affected countries. It may also lead to important distributional effects along gender, ethnic, religious, economic or geographical dimensions that may affect not only the overall supply of education, but also shape inequalities in education access. During the conflict, certain individuals, households or groups may be prevented from accessing schooling (if at all available) due to restrictions to population movements, or the use of education and schools as a form of controlling populations and territories (by for instance limiting education to children of the 'right' ethnic or religious group, or by imposing certain languages or curricula in key areas). In many post-conflict settings, the winning side has been known to restrict access to education for the losers by limiting school enrolments for some population groups or by segregating schools along language (Timor Leste), racial (South Africa), ethnic (pre-1994 Rwanda) and religious lines (Northern Ireland) (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Shemyakina, 2011). For instance, the Colombia OOSCI study reports important disparities in out-of-school children across urban and rural areas, with the worst outcomes taking place among rural populations living in municipalities at risk of attacks by armed groups. Outcomes are also worse for internally displaced children. These effects may well aggravate existing economic disparities, which in

turn may exacerbate the risk of conflict in the future (UNICEF and UIS, 2012a, UNICEF 2007, 2009; Watkins, 2013).

Supply side effects in terms of destruction of schools and infrastructure, restriction of financial resources, the targeting of teachers and students, displacement and the aggravation of educational inequalities have profound implications for the education of children. Notably, children tend to miss important periods of education during their formative years, which is evidenced by the disproportionate large number of children in conflict-affected areas that repeat school years or attend grades below what would normally be age appropriate (see Akresh and De Walque, 2008; Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2013). Moreover, children that miss school during episodes of armed violence tend not to go back to school adding to the large numbers of out-of-school children observed in conflict-affected countries, which may potentially spur some risk factors that may feed into future conflicts (UNESCO, 2011). This situation is detrimental for children, not only due to drastic reductions in their potential to accumulate skills, but also because schools are also important means to help reducing the exposure of children to sexual exploitation, physical attacks and recruitment into armed groups, as well as providing safe heavens away from distressing situations (Norwegian Refugee Council et. al., 1999; ICWAC, 2000). These effects are further worsened by demand-side barriers to education.

3. Demand-side barriers

In addition to supply-side constraints, violent conflict may also affect adversely the incentives for education demand due to a myriad of factors including poverty, adverse health shocks, low returns to education, the threat of recruitment and the persistence of fear and insecurity.

Poverty. One important constraint to the provision and/or recovery of education in conflict-affected countries is poverty: exposure to violence often leads to severe economic losses and lack of access to important goods and services, condemning households to extreme situations of poverty and destitution. This has long-term implications for children and their families because the removal of children from school may affect adversely their accumulation of productive skills (see, for instance, Jacoby and Skoufias, 1997). The removal of children from school in conflict-affected countries to either replace lost household labour (due to recruitment, deaths or injuries) or to help with additional household burdens is widely documented (Akresh and de Walque, 2009; Merrouche, 2006; Shemyakina, 2011; Rodriguez and Sanchez, 2009). Child labour is identified as a major barrier to education in most OOSCI reports conducted in countries currently experiencing conflict or recently out of conflict, including Colombia (UNICEF and UIS, 2012a), DR Congo (UNICEF and UIS 2013d), Pakistan (UNICEF and UIS, 2013a), Sri Lanka (UNICEF and UIS, 2013b) and Tajikistan (UNICEF and UIS, 2013c). Poverty is a particularly important barrier to education among the most vulnerable populations – such as refugees and internally displaced people – that may not be able to cover the costs of education such as uniforms, school fees, school lunches, books and other materials, certificates, transportation and so forth (Shemyakina, 2011; UNICEF and UIS, 2012a). Displaced children and their families may lack documentation needed to access schools or certain assistance programmes, or may not have the language skills to participate in schools in new locations (Shemyakina 2011; UNESCO 2010). These adverse economic legacies of violent conflict become even more profound when we remember that data allows us to observe information only on those individuals who survive the conflict.

Adverse health shocks. In addition to poverty, poor individual health and the loss of family members may also create serious restraints on access to schooling. Evans and Miguel (2004) find that young children in rural Kenya are more likely to drop out of school after the parent's death. This effect is likely to be magnified by violent conflict, but to date no study has examined in detail these effects in areas affected by armed violence. What have been studied in more detail are the largely adverse effects of conflict on children's health and nutrition. Studies have found that children exposed to high levels of violence have lower height-for-age outcomes (an indicator of long-term nutritional status) when compared to children not exposed to violence (Akresh, Verwimp and Bundervoet, 2007; Alderman, Hoddinott and Kinsey, 2006; Bundervoet and Verwimp, 2005; Guerrero-Serdan, 2009). Similar evidence for the impact of mothers' exposure to conflict on children has been found in recent empirical studies. For example, it has been demonstrated that stress during pregnancy and limited access to health services in conflict-affected regions in Jammu and Kashmir (Parlow, 2012), Colombia (Camacho, 2008) and Nepal (Valente, 2011) resulted in children that are smaller at birth. This in turn reinforces other aspects of child development, especially educational attainment, as malnourished children are more likely to miss school, face illnesses, and have lower concentration levels. Over time, this may precipitate dropout and lower overall school completion, which may lower employment and wage-earning prospects in the future, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty.

Returns to education. Another related demand-side barrier to the education of children in conflict-affected contexts is the fact that it may no longer pay to send children to school in those areas. Notably, the destruction of industries, markets and infrastructure in conflict-affected countries may be so large that job opportunities for skilled labour become scarce. In these circumstances, returns to education (i.e. the additional income expected by households that invest in furthering the education of their children) may be low or even negative (Santos, 2014), reducing the incentives for child education either altogether or beyond primary levels (Shemyakina, 2011; Chamrbagwala and Moran, 2009). Evidence on how this mechanism operates across different conflict-affected contexts and across different population groups is, however, still scarce.

Recruitment of children. An additional demand-side barrier to education among children living in areas of armed violence is the threat of recruitment (forced or otherwise). The recruitment of children in armies and rebel factions is well-documented. Children are recruited as soldiers, but also as porters, messengers, cooks, helpers and as providers of sexual services (UNHCR, 2002; USAID, 2007). It is estimated that around 300,000 children under the age of 18 (boys and girls) are part of armed groups in active conflicts around the world (Blattman and Annan, 2009; World Bank, 2005). This figure is likely to under-represent the true extent of child soldiering (USAID, 2007). The recruitment of children into armed groups is typically associated with adverse effects in terms of accumulation of skills, productivity and earnings as these children have lower levels of education and are unlikely to return to school (Blattman and Annan, 2009). Children exposed to violence may also become depressed and socially withdrawn (Yule et al., 2003 cited in UNFPA, 2006), leading to lower schooling performance or to leave their studies prematurely once the war is over.

Fear and insecurity. A final key demand-side barrier to the education of children in areas of armed violence is related to perceptions of fear and insecurity. Attacks to schools, teachers and students, as discussed above, are common across conflict-affected areas. These result in parents removing their children from schools, for fear of violence, as well as rape and other sexual violence (IRIN, 2004). Perceptions of fear may remain high for several years after the end of violent conflicts, particular in contexts where conflict has lasted a long time and is

expected to reignite (Justino 2012). They may aggravate gender inequalities when perceptions of fear due to the conflict align to society attitudes to gender roles (UNICEF and UIS, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b). Related to increases in fear and insecurity, exposure to violent conflict may also result in deep psychological trauma and stress among children due to direct exposure to violence, and greater stress and insecurity among adult family members. These factors can have long-lasting effects on children's mental health and cognitive abilities, thereby limiting not only school attendance but also school performance and, consequently, future human development. These dangers can be particularly damaging in conflict-affected settings because of the lack of or the weak state of child protection systems within and outside the family.

4. Policies and strategies

Building formal education systems in the aftermath of violent conflicts is a task riddled with severe supply and demand side constraints. Countries during and emerging from destructive violence may not have the financial capacity to rebuild schools, and provide simultaneously for many other competing needs. At the same time, families may have limited incentives to send children to school during and immediately after conflict. However, education is critical for the economic recovery of households and countries affected by conflict.

Importantly, education is also key to achieving stability in conflict-affected countries. Lack of education and economic opportunities may lead to long-term poverty traps among households adversely affected by violence. Moreover, as discussed above, violent conflict may also lead to distributional effects during periods of violence (when different groups are targeted) and in the post-conflict period (when winning factions may limit access to education to certain population groups through language, curricula or other barriers) that may fuel further risks of violence (see also UNESCO 2011). The persistence of economic and other inequalities – which often manifest in low educational attainment and employment opportunities for large sections of children and young people – may in turn potentially be a critical trigger for violence in the future.

A dual prong approach is therefore necessary. On the one hand, formal education systems must address inequalities caused by the conflict in order to reduce potential risks associated with conflict re-ignition. On the other hand, formal education systems must include incentives to bring children affected by conflict and poverty shocks back to schools. This approach begs an important question: How can education systems be designed in order to support stability and economic resilience in conflict-affected countries?

Below I outline two broad strategies. The first is about educating children and young people as agents of positive social change. The second is about building the enabling environment for more effective education systems in conflict-affected countries by addressing specific poverty, vulnerabilities and aspirations of individuals and household affected by violence. This analysis is based on available evidence from policy programmes implemented in conflict-affected countries. This is, however, restricted by the fact that although significant national and international efforts have been directed at education recovery in conflict-affected countries, it is rare that programming or programme evaluation are directly linked to conflict processes and their distributional effects across population groups and geographical locations. I address these data shortcomings in the concluding section.

4.1. Educating children and young people as agents of positive social change

Limited attention has been given to the potential impact of children and young people's political views and activities, their role as political and social actors in the post-conflict period and their role in building forms of constructive citizenship during and after conflict. Children and young people are typically viewed only as victims of conflict. However, they may also constitute important agents of positive social change, and are central to how households and communities may create resilience to the effects of conflict and the legacy of violence. A relatively new body of research has shown the surprising result that the recruitment of children and young people into armed forces and armed groups and the exposure of individuals to violence may result in increased individual political participation and leadership amongst ex-fighters and those victimised by war once the conflict is over. Participation and leadership may take on several forms including increased community meeting attendance, voting, joining community and political groups, as found in Sierra Leone (Bellows and Miguel, 2009), to increased leadership in community-level activities and in political participation among former child soldiers in post-conflict Northern Uganda (Blattman, 2009). Another emerging line of research also indicates that children who have experienced violent conflict have a greater sense of fairness towards their community members, despite their exposure to traumatic experiences (Bauer et al., 2011). These examples point to the potential that exists in drawing children and young people into school – or complementary training activities – that support their future roles as responsible citizens.

Some of these results have led researchers and practitioners to advocate for the implementation of social training programmes and improved skills training among young people involved in violent conflicts. These programmes are outside the formal education sector but could well complement the acquisition of skills (normally provided by formal education) among young people that lost out on schooling due to conflict exposure but are now too old to return to school, have other family or economic responsibilities or are of school age but perceive returning to school as too late for them. One example is the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund and Youth Opportunities Program implemented by IPA (Blattman, Fiala and Martinez, 2013). This programme provides cash transfers (\$7,100) to groups of young adults (16-35) to be used in skills training and self-employment trades. The evaluation of the programme finds evidence that the cash was used to what it was supposed to. It finds also modest increases in social cohesion and no evidence of misuse of funds. A second example is the Ex-Combatant Reintegration in Liberia programme implemented by IPA and Landmine Action (Annan and Blattman, 2011). This is an agriculture training program that includes meals, clothing, basic medical care and personal items, with the additional benefit of participants receiving \$1,250 worth in tools and supplies. The evaluation of the programme reports increased engagement of youth in agriculture, less hours spent in illicit mining, increase in assets (but no change in incomes or savings), and no effect on aggressive behaviour but less interest in joining armed groups when there was an outbreak of violence in Cote d'Ivoire. These are important examples of how young people (most of which left school and formal education during conflict) can be supported in terms of building forms of constructive citizenship in the post-conflict period and hopefully avoid risks of violence re-ignition.

This emerging body of research, although in its infancy, suggests that there is great potential in engaging young people in constructive social activities, which can help promote social cooperation, overcome past prejudices and demonstrate the efficacy of the alternatives to violence in solving local problems and building a stronger social fabric. School curricula for younger children could also be adapted in similar ways in order to teach children about

tolerance for ethnic or other group differences, ways of working and living together and strategies for conflict resolution within and outside the family and immediate community (Bauer et al., 2011; UNESCO 2011). These strategies may not solve direct supply-side barriers to the implementation of education systems in conflict-affected countries, but may well create important enabling environments that will foster stability and therefore more positive conditions for furthering the education of children in areas prone to violence. These activities – conducted either within or in tandem with formal education systems – may also help breaking important demand-side barriers to education such as perceived negative returns to education and fear and insecurity as children and young people are made to feel valuable community members and are provided safe places to learn important individual and social skills. They may also help breaking supply-side barriers that stem from inequalities in education caused by the conflict by promoting equal access to schools and training across different population groups, as well as support for children and young people from different groups – including refugee and displaced people – to learn alongside each other.

4.2. Building the enabling environment for more effective education systems in conflict-affected countries

The reconstruction of schools on their own is unlikely to succeed in promoting positive social transformation without the recovery of complementary economic and social institutions. As discussed in the paper, education systems in conflict-affected countries depend on crucial supply-side efforts and more enabling environments, as well as on important demand-side constraints that keep children away from schools. Addressing these barriers requires that education systems are designed and implemented alongside economic and stability policies. Of particular importance are economic interventions to reduce poverty, food insecurity and the need for child labour, the inclusion of children's rights in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes and interventions that foster positive aspirations among children and young people affected by armed violence.

Interventions to reduce poverty, food insecurity and the need for child labour: Poverty is a central demand-side barrier to the education of children in many areas of the world, more so in conflict-affected countries. The contribution of children to household economic stability is in many circumstances central to help maintaining the economic and food security of the household during periods of distress. However, as discussed above, it may also lead to negative long-term effects to the children involved, and to their own families. Legislation to control child labour and harness children's rights may be helpful in many settings, but may well be ineffective in contexts of acute economic stress where more direct economic interventions may be required. Some scholars have suggested that the demand for schooling may be augmented by economic support interventions, including safety nets and cash transfer programmes. Examples of ongoing programmes include the food distribution programme in Afghanistan (Beath, Christia and Enikolopov, 2012), the Familias en Accion cash transfer programme in Colombia (Bozzoli and Wald, 2011; UNICEF and UIS, 2012a), the Punjab Education Voucher Scheme and the Benazir Income Support Programme in Pakistan (UNICEF and UIS, 2013a) and the Samurshi Poverty Alleviation Programme in Sri Lanka (UNICEF and UIS, 2013b). Results are so far mixed. The evaluation of the Afghanistan programme shows very limited results. The Colombia studies show that the programme attracts children to school particularly in conflict areas (Bozzoli and Wald, 2011) and reduces overall school absenteeism (UNICEF and UIS, 2012a). However, children in conflict areas do less homework and miss more days of school (Bozzoli and Wald, 2011). The complementary school feeding programme in Colombia partially counteracts this effect by keeping children in school (UNICEF and UIS, 2012a). The use and evaluation of safety net and cash transfer programmes among conflict-

affected populations is, however, only in its initial stages. These social policies should in addition be complemented by other important interventions that will reduce the economic burden of schooling such as the abolition of school fees, reduced costs of uniforms and other school materials, and the provision of school meals (UNESCO 2011). Wider and deeper evidence base is, however, urgently needed to inform the choice of programmes that can support child education in conflict-affected settings. In this, it is particularly important that the impact of policy interventions is evaluated with respect to levels of population exposure to conflict and violence, something that is currently rarely done.

Inclusion of child rights in demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes: DDR programmes aim at the demobilisation of combatants, including child soldiers, and reintegration into civilian life. These programmes focus on dismantling military structures, in exchange for the provision of money, social and psychological support and employment training for ex-combatants. The effectiveness of such programmes is at best mixed (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006), often because the motivations for why individuals join armed groups are not well understood (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008; Guichaoua, 2009), with considerable adverse implications for the design and implementation of DDR programmes. Information on children (boys and girls) that join and remain in armed forces is even scarcer. Armed groups expose children to extreme violence, but may also act as important social structures and safety nets in times and contexts of extreme instability (Blattman and Annan, 2009; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). These considerations are often absent from DDR programmes, which continue to focus on narrow objectives to do with the dismantling of military structures, as well as from education programming in conflict-affected countries. For instance, none of the recent OOSCI studies conducted in countries currently or recently affected by armed conflict addresses the issue of child soldiers in their analysis of barriers to education. As a result, there is currently limited understanding of how children can be reintegrated back in society – including going back to school – after committing, witnessing or experiencing atrocities, losing family members, relatives and friends and missing crucial years of schooling which could lead to permanent dropout or lower attainment (Bjørkhaug, 2010). By focusing more research and inquiry into this area, it would be possible to assess the best practical strategies to reintegrate children into what is typically a changed social milieu including, for instance, through the design of more inclusive education systems, or better training of teachers in managing the specific needs of these children. Addressing the needs of ex-child combatants and other children closely involved with armed groups will also be important in terms of reducing conflict-induced inequalities, which may affect these children disproportionately.

Fostering aspirations. Exposure to violent conflict can have a drastic effect on children's mental health and cognitive growth. Sexual violence against children, which is often committed during war, can especially lead to heightened levels of stress and insecurity. Unaddressed, these effects are likely to fester and inhibit children's development processes. Governments and development agencies must recognise children's mental health as an issue of vital concern, and initiate interventions that identify and support children who suffer from mental health problems brought upon by exposure to violence. As discussed earlier, it is important to engage children and young people in social, political and development activities to channel their energies towards productive ends and to strengthen social cooperation. Such activities may have the added benefit of providing children with a sense of normalcy following war, eventually promoting their return to school and instilling a sense of confidence and aspiration which can play a critical role in children's personal development. More positive aspirations of children, young people and their families may in turn break important barriers to school attendance and performance, including improvements in perceptions of returns to education and improved cognitive and health outcomes that will facilitate learning.

In summary, education systems in conflict-affected countries can play important roles in supporting stability and economic resilience when children and young people are educated or trained to support positive social change, and when they work in tandem with interventions aimed at addressing specific poverty, vulnerabilities and aspirations of individuals and household affected by violence. On the one hand, educating and training young people to act as constructive and productive citizens may reduce important risks of conflict re-ignition (such as, for example, exclusion, lack of conflict resolution skills or resentment). Addressing vulnerabilities at the level of families and communities may, on the other hand, break important economic and social barriers that keep children out-of-school.

There remains, however, one important constraint to the implementation or scaling-up of some of the policies discussed above: a lack of evidence on what works and does not work in education recovery in conflict-affected countries. This is largely because the design and implementation of programmes is rarely linked to specific distributional effects of the conflict. In the literature review I conducted for this paper, including a number of OOSCI studies carried out in countries currently or recently affected by conflict, only rarely did I find explicit links being made between policy interventions, education outcomes and variation and intensity of conflict and violence and education outcomes. Conflict is rarely mentioned in the design, implementation or evaluation of development policies (including education policies) implemented in post-conflict countries, even though its economic, political and economic legacies are wide and lasting. Exposure to armed conflict has also very specific distributional effects on education (to do with who is target and who is affected across different regions and violence intensity) that need to be specifically addressed in the design, implementation and evaluation of education interventions in areas previously affected by armed conflict. Failing to acknowledge the specific effects of conflict on different population groups, or not identifying those effects in rigorous ways, creates an omitted variable problem that may distort our understanding of what policies will work in addressing specific needs of people differently affected by conflict and violence, including supporting children's education.

This is partially due to political pressures to move on from the conflict, and partially due to reliable data on conflict processes at disaggregated levels of analysis. The DHS datasets – one of the most reliable and comparable datasets on child welfare characteristics – often miss areas affected by conflict and violence. For instance, the Sri Lanka OOSCI study mentions that the DHS Sri Lanka does not contain information on five districts in the conflict-affected northern areas of the country, therefore misrepresenting the true impact of conflict on education (UNICEF and UIS, 2013a). There have been recent improvements in data availability and methods for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data in contexts affected by political violence (Justino, Brück and Verwimp 2013). This new body of research has formed the basis for the evidence discussed in the sections above. Research remains however sparse, scattered and lacking in comparability, while policy interventions in conflict-affected contexts are very rarely evaluated or monitored using rigorous analytical methods.

Given the large and lasting adverse effects of violent conflict on children and future generations, any meaningful efforts at building sustainable education systems and reducing the number of out-of-school children in conflict-affected countries must be reflected in a commitment for better data and rigorous analysis. Lack of rigorous analysis of violent conflict as a key determinant of education outcomes in conflict-affected countries is in itself a serious barrier to the recovery of education systems and the creation of incentives to keep some of the most vulnerable children in the world in school.

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