Child Labour and Education in Conflict and Emergencies

Around the world, as many as 168 million children between the ages of 5 to 17 are child labourers. At least 85 million are in very hazardous work – forced labour, trafficking, and bonded labour.¹ Children who work are often separated from their families; exposed to dangerous substances and harsh working conditions; and are at higher risk of mistreatment, violence, physical and psychological abuse.²

Many child labourers never go to school or drop out. Lack of access to education perpetuates a cycle of exploitation, illiteracy and poverty, thereby limiting future options and forcing children to accept low wage work as adults and raise their own children in poverty. Despite these consequences, there are still 46 countries that do not legally protect children under the age of 18 from performing hazardous work.³

Of the 59 million children out of school globally, more than one third live in conflict and emergency settings.⁴ In these areas the key drivers of child labour – poverty, discrimination and marginalization – become far greater threats and the number of children in child labour rises dramatically.

Child Labour Rises in Conflict and Emergencies

Conflict destroys economies and increases poverty; it devastates assets, transportation and opportunities for well-paid work for adults. This narrows the financial paths for survival and increases the need for all members of the household to find some way to contribute to basic needs. Conflict also decreases basic protections and increases the potential for children to be engaged in harmful work, such as soldiering.⁵ Beginning to earn an income is also perceived as the best use of a child’s time during a crisis, as without education systems and other future options, work prepares children for the lives they are expected to lead.⁶ Additional legal and social barriers to employment faced by refugees in host countries often contribute to increased child labour rates, and the temporary status of refugees can reduce the risks of legal penalties for exploitive employers.⁷

The most abusive forms of child labour become more widespread in conflict and emergency situations. Children, especially boys, are abducted and forcefully recruited as child soldiers or domestic servants for militant groups. Girls are forced into sex slavery as ‘wives’ for militants, or pushed into prostitution or transactional sex as a means of survival. In Niger, 29% of Plan International survey participants reported knowing girls who had turned to prostitution during times of crisis. In Iraq, one third of refugee children have been approached by armed groups for recruitment.⁸

Children are also sold into bonded or forced labour in the hopes that resources gained will enable other family members to survive. Child slavery in the form of domestic labour nearly doubled in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake.⁹ Girls living in emergency situations also face an increased risk of being married off as children – a form of sexual slavery. Since the earthquake in Nepal in May 2015, a dramatic increase in child marriage has been documented as criminals prey on orphans and vulnerable parents who – lured by the promise of a dowry or financial payment – offer their young daughters in marriage. In these dire circumstances, this may be a sacrifice of one child to save the rest, but for many it can often be perceived as the only option to protect a girls ‘honour’ and secure her a more stable economic situation.¹⁰

It is no coincidence that the countries with the highest numbers of child labourers – Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan – have been affected by longstanding conflict and emergency situations and are also the countries with the highest out-of-school populations.¹¹ With the average refugee now spending
seventeen years in exile, many to never return home, children face prolonged exposure to crisis with a lifetime of consequences.\textsuperscript{12}

The true prevalence of child labour in situations of emergency is likely to be much higher than the reported figures. Because child labour is illegal in many countries, families and employers often hide the practice for fear of legal consequences. Jobs that children take in conflict settings also make it difficult to identify them, many working irregularly, performing short-term jobs that change daily or in illicit high-risk or unpaid work. Refugee populations are dispersed throughout rural and urban settings and are often mobile, further complicating tracking the occurrence of child labour.

**Education prevents child labour, offers hope**

Education is a proven strategy to reduce and eliminate child labour. During emergencies, schools and other safe learning settings can provide physical protection and serve as a place to share lifesaving information that children and families can use to protect themselves. Children who have access to education can break the cycle of poverty at the root of child labour. Families know this. In a recent survey, over 30\% of adults in crisis-affected South Sudan,\textsuperscript{13} the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia\textsuperscript{14} prioritized the delivery of education for their children over food, water and shelter acknowledging the power of education for the future of their children.

Despite this, funding to provide education in emergencies and conflict and reduce child labour is completely inadequate

- Donor countries spent an average of $124 million annually to fight modern slavery, including child labour between 2002 and 2012,\textsuperscript{15} while exploiters earned $150 billion in profits in 2012.\textsuperscript{16}
- In 2014, only 2\% of global humanitarian funding was allocated to education in emergencies – representing less than $0.02 spent per child per day – unacceptable by any standard.\textsuperscript{17}
- Education sector appeals in emergency after emergency are left unfunded, leaving millions of children already living in the direst of circumstances without any hope for their future. Current education sector appeals for Yemen and Niger are 0\% funded and just 3.2\% of the education appeal has been funded, as of 2 June, after 4 years of war in Syria.\textsuperscript{18}

At a minimum, the [commitments made at the July 2015 Oslo Summit](#) to set up a Global Humanitarian Platform and Fund for Education in Emergencies must be fulfilled to prioritize and coordinate an effective, rapid education response to prevent losing the potential of entire generations of children. The announcement of a High-Level International Commission on the Financing of Global Education Opportunities is also expected to accelerate progress in this area.

In the past year alone, prolonged conflict in Syria and the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa have meant that more than 8 million of children were out of school. Many became pregnant, married as children or recruited into child labour. Many will never return to the classroom. Many still do not have a chance.
Child Labour and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria in March 2011, an estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes, leaving more than 3 million Syrian children out of school – many now living as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Having left their homes with little or nothing, refugee families in the region face extraordinary financial pressures to make ends meet, sometimes resorting to the use of child labour. Surveys conducted in Syria and neighbouring countries indicate that the primary reason children are in labour is to assist their families economically.

Further compounding the use of child labour in the region are:

- **Lack of Employment Opportunities for Adults:** Social and legal barriers in host countries prevent adults from working. Government policy in Lebanon mandates that Syrian refugees sign a pledge not to work in an effort to protect domestic jobs. Those refugees that are able to find work – often in the informal sector and without any legal protections – are paid nearly 40% less than their Lebanese colleagues. As the penalties for children who are caught working are less severe, refugee families increasingly look to children to generate income.

- **Loss of Earned Income:** Tens of thousands of Syrian refugee families have lost family members in the war who were primary or partial wage earners.

- **Rising Number of Orphans:** Tens of thousands of Syrian children have been orphaned, forcing children to work to survive and support themselves.

- **Rising Costs:** Prices in the region are soaring, with some host communities capitalizing on refugee populations who have little choice. In Jordan, prices for rent have increased by one third in the past year alone. Fees associated with schools such as transport, books and materials can be prohibitive for parents who wish to send provide an education for their children.

- **Accumulating Debt:** Unable to work and forced to pay above market prices, refugee families fall deeper into debt and poverty. In Jordan, 90% of refugee families live in debt to landlords, shopkeepers or neighbours, whom they rely upon to provide basic and fundamental needs like shelter and food in the absence of steady work or income. An interagency survey found that money earned by child labourers in Lebanon was primarily used to pay for rent and food.

As a result, dramatic increases in the number of children engaged in work are reflected across the region, with one in ten Syrian refugee children now estimated to be engaged in child labour.

- **In Jordan**, there has been a four-fold increase in the number of children working since the beginning of the crisis. At least 47% of Jordanian households rely partially or entirely on the income generated by a child.

- **In Lebanon**, 70 to 80% of children out of school are estimated to be involved in child labour, some 300,000 to 400,000 children.

- **In Turkey**, 70% of children outside of refugee camps are out of school, many engaged in labour. An estimated 900,000 children are working countrywide.

**Education in the Syrian Crisis**

Plans to put Syrian refugee children in school have been made and agreed upon by host governments, but as in most emergencies, funding is in short supply. In Lebanon, where one in four children is now a Syrian refugee, the government has generously agreed to open its public schools to 200,000 Syrian refugee children in an extended day double-shift system developed with the international community. However, as in most emergencies, financial support from the international community has fallen short.
If funding gaps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon were eliminated an additional 1 million Syrian refugee children could be in school this year. Additional donors must contribute more, now, or the potential of an entire generation of children will be squandered.

### Child Labour and the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa

As in many emergencies, education was one of the first sacrifices of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, forcing nearly 5 million children out of school in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea for nearly a year. Locked out of school, rates of child labour in the affected countries have risen dramatically, compounded by:

- **Loss of Earned Income**: An estimated 16,000 children in the affected countries having lost one or both caretakers.
- **Rising Costs**: Market prices for food and transport have skyrocketed. In Sierra Leone, food prices are roughly 50% higher than they were prior to the crisis.
- **Rising Number of Orphans**: The number of homeless youth living on the streets of Freetown has more than doubled since the advent of the outbreak.

Child labour in the Ebola affected countries includes a surge in transactional or survival sex among girls that has resulted in a dramatic increase in teenage pregnancies. Girls in Sierra Leone who have become pregnant have been banned from returning to school. Children are also employed in very hazardous labour like grave digging and mining.

Even though schools have recently resumed in all three countries, child labour is still pervasive as children have yet to return to school at pre-Ebola attendance rates and families seek to cope with added economic stresses.

- **In Sierra Leone**, over 50% of children are now involved in labour.
- **In Guinea**, 95% of respondents to a recent survey had observed an increase in child labour.

### Education in the Ebola Crisis

In Sierra Leone, just 10% of children returned for the first day of school in Freetown. The headmaster at Kroo Bay Community Primary School noted that “Most [parents] complain that they don’t have the money to send kids to school.” This is the norm for many families. Moiforay, a 14 year old who has been working as a construction worker, explains, “my father doesn’t have money...I want to go to school this year but my dad says I must wait till next year.”

Students like Moiforay who fall behind for a year or more are significantly more at risk of dropping out of school and this increased risk of drop out, coupled with the trauma of loss and greater poverty, could mean that large numbers of children will never return to the classroom in the Ebola affected countries.

Barriers to accessing education faced by those like Moiforay and pregnant girls in Sierra Leone are avoidable, unnecessary, and detrimental to both individuals and society in the short and long-term. Education must be prioritised as the first line of defence in a crisis, not the first sacrifice. Governments must be held accountable for providing education that is free and inclusive and investment from the international community must be reflective of the promise made through the MDGs. Without urgent action to remove barriers and invest in education in emergencies, the livelihoods, hopes and dreams of millions of children are at great risk.

24 September 2015
Sources

18. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
44. Ibid.