

Interview with Brendan O'Malley, author of the UNESCO study "Education under attack: A global study on targeted political and military violence against education staff, students, teachers, union and government officials and educational institutions"

What motivates people to attack students and teachers?

The reasons can vary. For instance, when an extremist Islamic group attacks a girls' school in Afghanistan or Pakistan, it might be against girls' education but it could also be an attempt to spread fear and undermine the rule of law. In Thailand, Muslim separatist groups may assassinate teachers because they are easy targets and symbols of the state and the dominant Buddhist-Thai culture. Academics in Iraq are targeted for different reasons by different groups – for having been either pro- or anti- Saddam Hussein's regime, for example, or because their university is in a Shia or Sunni area.

How does this targeted violence affect the availability of education?

Well in one sense, nobody knows the full impact because up to 30 million of the world's 75 million or so out-of-school children live in countries affected by conflict, and in many places the number of attacks especially targeted at education goes unreported. But what we do know is that in the countries worst-affected, according to the figures we have, the impact can be devastating. Take Iraq, where the escalation of incidents and deaths has brought the education system to the brink of collapse. Only 30 per cent of pupils now attend classes, compared to 75 per cent a year ago. If we are going to achieve Education for All – everywhere – we must address this problem of targeted violence.

What is being done to prevent attacks on education?

Typical tactics include providing armed guards, training teachers to use weapons, or sending in troops to counter general violence.

Other responses include mobilising local communities to confront attackers or switch classes into village houses where they are not visible, as happens in Afghanistan. Or you can allow academics to continue their research at home or even abroad if the technology and electricity supply is there, which is not always the case in war-torn or poor countries.

At the international level, the International Criminal Court can investigate attacks on educational institutions as a war crime. So far more has been done on protection of children in

armed conflicts than, say, teachers and a lot more could be done by widening the use of human rights laws.

What can the international community do?

First, extend the use of human rights instruments to bring people to account for attacks on education, and also lobby for an end to impunity for such attacks in the places where they occur. The International Criminal Court should be given more resources, for instance, to bring education-related cases to trial. This would widen its deterrent effect. Second, set up a global database to enable research into trends and underlying motives so that more can be learned about how to prevent attacks in the first place.

What can governments do?

They can start by recognizing that behind most attacks there is a perception that education is not neutral. It can even be a factor in conflict, particularly if it is denied to certain groups or thought to impose an alien culture or language. Education should be part of the solution to conflict, not a contributor to tension. This means creating child-friendly, inclusive schools with an ethos of peace and tolerance, greater transparency in the running of universities and a commitment to academic freedom. We need to work towards a point where schools and universities are not seen as owned by one side or another in a conflict, but instead become safe sanctuaries, or havens of learning, shielded from attacks.

Where do you situate acts of random violence such as the recent shootings in Virginia Tech University, USA?

This study doesn't include attacks like the one in Virginia, because it was not politically motivated. Such attacks appear also to be a modern phenomenon, and usually stem in some way from the personal troubles of the perpetrator. There is one link, however, and that is the easy availability of guns in the USA. The likelihood of attacks in conflict-affected countries most likely increases partly because more people with grievances have the weapons and therefore the means to carry out a violent attack.