

PROTECTING AND ENSURING SAFE ACCESS TO EDUCATION

THE ICRC'S EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH
IN ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER SITUATIONS
OF VIOLENCE



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INTRODUCTION

Armed conflict and other violence have a devastating impact on education. One in three of the world's school-aged children lives in a country affected by conflict or disasters.¹ Between 2015 and 2022, there were 16,000 reports around the world of attacks on education or military use of educational facilities, harming over 31,000 students, teachers and other education personnel.² Education is particularly vulnerable to shocks; beside the damage done by attacks, threats of violence will often cause schools to close, with teachers, children and families afraid for their safety. When education services are disrupted or close down, the long-term consequences for the communities' development and future stability are devastating.

This report provides an overview of what the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) does to protect and ensure safe access to education in places affected by armed conflict and other violence. Six years have passed since we adopted our Framework for Access to Education.³ The Framework consolidated for the first time our overall approach to access to education, based on a range of previous experiences and practices which had emerged organically in our work over time. This report documents the approaches we have taken to integrate access to education into our broader humanitarian response and the key take-aways from the organization's experiences so far. The report draws on the findings of an internal review into our education-related work carried out in 2020.

The report has two objectives: First, to give a humanitarian perspective on the many ways in which conflict and other violence disrupts learning and to pay tribute to the perseverance and resourcefulness of children, young adults, teachers, parents and entire communities who ensure that schooling can continue in spite of war. Second, to familiarize governments, donors and peer organizations with the ICRC's approach to protecting and ensuring safe access to education during armed conflict and other violence.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *A Future Stolen: Young and Out-of-School*, UNICEF, New York, 2018.

² Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education under Attack – 2022*, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, New York, 2022.

³ ICRC, *Framework for Access to Education*, ICRC, Geneva, 2017.

1. WHY IS ACCESS TO EDUCATION PART OF THE ICRC'S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE?

Education in emergencies is a firmly established area of humanitarian aid (see p. 11, “The ICRC’s role in the education-in-emergencies community and global processes to protect education”, below). The development of the first ICRC Framework on Access to Education, in 2017, involved a reflection on the link between education and the ICRC’s mission and mandate, as well as our past engagement in the area. In short, why should education be part of our work?

This reflection crystallized in the run-up to the ICRC’s Institutional Strategy 2019–2024, which emphasized investing in sustainable impacts and longer-term needs alongside our immediate humanitarian response. While the ICRC is not meant to be a major provider of education in emergencies, addressing education-related needs is an example of how we can protect and support an essential service during conflict and ensure continuity and stability once the fighting has stopped. Four more key factors explain the link between access to education and our mission and mandate: the perspective of people affected by armed conflict and other violence, the place of education in international humanitarian law (IHL), the place of education in the broader International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the importance of access and proximity to people affected by conflict.

THE VIEW OF PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CONFLICT

Education is one of the top priorities expressed by people who are affected by armed conflict and other violence, especially children. According to Save the Children, of 8,749 children surveyed in 17 different emergencies, ranging from conflict to protracted crises and disasters, 99 per cent saw education as a priority.⁴ In a Gallup International/Opinion Research Business International opinion survey in 2020, education was identified as the number one concern for households in Syria, followed by poverty, access to health care and care for orphans.⁵ In our work, we also hear repeated calls to support education from the children and adults we speak with in areas affected by armed conflict and other violence, including in communities on the front lines.

Access to education and safe schools is a key protective factor in the daily lives of children and communities caught up in conflict. A lack of access to education has direct negative impacts on children’s well-being and development. Children who are out of school can face greater child protection risks.⁶ Schools are often epicentres of community life, and they are important conduits for critical information and support relating to health, nutrition, hygiene and the risks posed by unexploded ordnance, child recruitment, sexual violence, and so forth. When schools close, children lose the protection they offer and are exposed to risks such as exploitation, abuse, child labour and child recruitment. There are also gendered implications in fragile countries affected by violence: a higher proportion of out-of-school girls in such countries experience domestic and other gender-based violence through early marriages, teenage pregnancies, etc. Because conflicts can stretch on for years, ensuring access to education becomes a particularly urgent need in order to avoid a generation-wide education gap.

Finally, the ICRC takes a people-centric approach and is invested in ensuring our accountability to people affected by conflict. We have an ethical duty to respond to their call for support in the area of education.⁷

⁴ Save the Children, *What Do Children Want in Times of Emergency and Crisis? They Want an Education*, Save the Children, London 2015: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/what-do-children-want.pdf>, all web addresses accessed December 2023.

⁵ The survey is available at: <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/not-just-numbers-survey-findings>.

⁶ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (The Alliance), *The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, 2019 Edition, The Alliance, New York, 2019.

⁷ ICRC, *Accountability to Affected People: Institutional Framework*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019.

THE PROTECTION OF EDUCATION IN IHL

IHL does not establish a right to education as such, but many rules of IHL aim to ensure that education continues and that students, education personnel, schools and other educational facilities are protected in international and non-international armed conflict. The express protection extended to education by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols reminds us that, even in the crisis of war, states have committed to ensuring that education can continue.

The rules of IHL that protect access to education include the following:

- **Special protection of children:** Under customary law, children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection, which can cover *access to education* (Rule 135 of the ICRC's study on customary IHL).
- **Conduct of hostilities:** Schools are normally dedicated to civilian use and as such are civilian objects which must not be attacked. Schools lose their protection against attack when they become a military objective; this may be the case when they are used as army barracks or weapon depots, for example. But even in such cases, warring parties must take all feasible precautions when attacking such a military objective to avoid or at least minimize incidental harm to civilian students and educational personnel, and attacks expected to cause excessive incidental harm are prohibited.
- **Fundamental guarantees:** Parties to a non-international armed conflict must provide children with the care and aid that they require. In particular, *children must receive an education*, including religious and moral education, in keeping with the wishes of their parents or, in the absence of parents, of those responsible for their care (Article 4.3(a), Additional Protocol II).
- **Cultural property:** In most relevant international treaties, educational institutions are not listed as cultural property. However, state practice indicates that educational buildings can be considered cultural property. Special care must be taken in military operations to avoid damage to buildings dedicated to education unless they are military objectives (Rule 38 of the ICRC's study on customary IHL).
- **Occupation:** In an occupation, the occupying power *must facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children* (Article 50, Fourth Geneva Convention). In addition, in such situations IHL protects immovable property (such as public buildings dedicated to education) from destruction or seizure except in cases of absolute military necessity (Rule 51 of the ICRC's study on customary IHL, Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 55 of the Hague Regulations).
- **Children under 15 who have been orphaned or separated from their families as a result of war:** Parties to an international armed conflict must take necessary measures to ensure that children under 15 who are orphaned or separated from their families as a result of the conflict are not left to their own resources and that *their education is facilitated in all circumstances*. As far as possible, their education must be entrusted to people of a similar cultural tradition (Article 24, Fourth Geneva Convention).
- **Prisoners of war:** In international armed conflicts, detaining powers are obliged to *encourage the practice of intellectual, educational and recreational pursuits among prisoners of war* and must take the measures necessary to ensure the exercise of those pursuits by providing them with adequate premises and necessary equipment (Article 38, Third Geneva Convention).
- **Civilian internment:** In cases of internment in international armed conflicts, detaining powers must *encourage intellectual, educational and recreational pursuits among internees*, while leaving them free to take part or not. Detaining powers must take all practicable measures to ensure the exercise of those pursuits, in particular by providing suitable premises and necessary materials. All possible facilities must be granted to internees to continue their studies or to take up new subjects. The education of children and young people must be ensured; they must be allowed to attend school either within the place of internment or outside (Article 94, Fourth Geneva Convention).

EDUCATION AND THE CONDUCT OF HOSTILITIES: THREE KEY LEGAL CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

In its 2019 report *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, the ICRC examined three legal challenges around protecting education during hostilities:⁸

When education is a contested stake in a conflict and educational facilities, students and teachers are deliberately targeted: This includes situations in which education is directly targeted because the language, history or value system taught in schools is, or is perceived to be, a vehicle for recruitment or generator of community support for one party to the conflict. The legal question here is whether such educational facilities can be considered military objectives. The definition of a military objective under IHL requires that the educational facility in question make an effective contribution to military action – by its nature, location, purpose or use. That requirement is not met if an educational facility merely generates support for a party to the conflict. This differentiation is crucial. For example, when the content of education provided at a school reflects an ideology that increases the level of community support for one party to the conflict, this does not make an effective contribution to *military* action, even if it strengthens political commitment or encourages recruitment or support for an enemy party's war effort. As a result, such a school would not qualify as a military objective and would remain protected under IHL from attack.

When belligerents do not assign sufficient value to the expected civilian harm from attacks affecting educational facilities or personnel: This value is part of the assessment required by the prohibition against attacks causing excessive civilian harm. The value of civilian objects is linked to their usefulness to civilians; accordingly, schools should be ascribed high civilian value. This is particularly important given the longterm consequences of attacking a school, which may include the total loss of access to education for children in that community.

The military use of schools: While there is no specific treaty or customary IHL rule prohibiting the use of schools or other educational facilities for military purposes, such use does not occur in a legal vacuum. Military use of a particular school must be assessed in light of the obligations of parties to the conflict, as applicable, to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks by an opposing party; to afford children special respect and protection; to comply with IHL rules on cultural property, as applicable to buildings dedicated to education; and to facilitate access to education. The lawfulness of the military use of a school is determined by applying these rules to the specifics of a given case. See also p. 13, "*The ICRC's position on the Safe Schools Declaration*".

⁸ ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019, pp. 44–46. The report is produced every four years for the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

THE PLACE OF EDUCATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

For the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, support for education is anchored in the Movement's mission to alleviate human suffering and promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace. For almost five years now, the Movement has developed a common approach towards education and has increasingly focused on education in emergencies. There are many points of intersection between the education sphere and the work of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. A global survey of National Societies' education-related work over the past two decades, carried out by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) in 2019, revealed that National Societies make a significant contribution to ensuring access to and provision of education.⁹

Education is also an important field for the work of IFRC itself, particularly in relation to global initiatives to strengthen disaster risk reduction. The IFRC and National Societies are heavily involved in promoting and implementing the Comprehensive School Safety Framework, which is aimed at reducing risks from disaster-related hazards and threats, building the resilience of the education sector, and leveraging education to promote risk-reduction measures among students and communities in disaster-prone locations.¹⁰

HUMANITARIAN EDUCATION

Since 2008, the IFRC has spearheaded a global humanitarian education programme to promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace by equipping people with skills such as active listening, empathy, critical thinking, non-judgement, non-violent communication and mediation. The initiative has now over 3,000 trained peer educators from 135 National Societies. In 2017, the IFRC together with the ICRC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the University of Teacher Education Zug and Save the Children launched a Master of Advanced Studies in pedagogical approaches for education in humanitarian principles and values. The degree programme is aimed at fostering the integration of humanitarian principles and values into formal and non-formal education systems and curricula. The ICRC was involved in the early stages of this programme by developing the Exploring Humanitarian Law¹¹ materials and our teams continue to use some aspects of the programme when working with children and youth in areas affected by violence. See also p. 16, "*Reducing the disruptions to education in violence-affected areas in Brazil*".

Efforts to develop a joint Movement approach to education are underway, notably through the periodic Statutory Meetings of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Introduced in 2017, the first-ever Council of Delegates resolution on education was adopted, recognizing the common aim of all Movement components to intensify their efforts to address education-related needs in the humanitarian field.¹² Two years later, in 2019 the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent saw the IFRC and ICRC present a draft common Movement approach in a side event, together with a joint education pledge. The aim was to further scale up joint Movement efforts in support of education.¹³ In 2022 a new [conceptual framework for education in the Movement](#) was adopted during a joint ICRC-IFRC workshop at the Council of Delegates.¹⁴

⁹ IFRC, *Strategic Framework on Education 2020–2030*, IFRC, Geneva, 2020.

¹⁰ The framework was developed by the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector, of which the IFRC is a steering committee member.

¹¹ For the Exploring Humanitarian Law resource pack, go to: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/exploring-humanitarian-law-ehl-resource-pack>

¹² Resolution of the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, "Education: Related humanitarian needs", CD/17R6, Antalya, Turkey, November 2017.

¹³ IFRC and ICRC, "Addressing education-related humanitarian needs" (IFRC-ICRC pledge), 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, December 2019: <https://rcrcconference.org/pledge/addressing-education-related-humanitarian-needs>.

¹⁴ International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, *The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement Approach to Education*, ICRC, Geneva, 2022: <https://shop.icrc.org/the-international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement-approach-to-education-pdf-en.html>.

Drawing from field experience, a structured Movement approach to education has been piloted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine since 2021, drawing on the different strengths and approaches of the Movement components to better address the complex education issues in each country. We are currently learning from these experiences to help further refine the concept and practice of a joint Movement approach to education.

MOVEMENT FOR EDUCATION: HOW COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ICRC AND THE ARMENIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY IS MOVING EDUCATION FORWARD



The ICRC organizes interactive sessions for students in Armenia on hygiene and a healthy lifestyle.

For several years the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict disrupted education for many children and young people, necessitating a concerted humanitarian response. Through the adoption of [Resolution 6 of the 2017 Council of Delegates](#), the Movement committed itself for the first time to addressing education-related needs, especially in armed conflicts, disasters and other emergencies.

Together with the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) and in cooperation with the Norwegian Red Cross, the ICRC has successfully launched a pilot of the [Movement approach to education](#), which aims to build the ARCS's capacities in order to ensure equitable, continuous access to education; protect education and maintain safe and supportive learning environment, thus strengthening the resilience of education systems and communities.

In 2022, as part of a trilateral agreement with the Armenian ministry of education, we helped the ARCS to deliver a certified first-aid training course for teachers in the Armenian general education system. Alongside this, we helped 25 educational facilities along the international border to improve their emergency preparedness, including by developing evacuation plans, providing necessary equipment to schools and running training in risk awareness and safer behaviour.

As part of the pilot, the ARCS created ten child-friendly spaces, called "Smiley Clubs", in temporary shelters for displaced people in five cities and in the schools of five conflict-affected villages. In the Smiley Clubs, children take part in extracurricular learning and psychosocial activities organized by volunteers. Throughout 2022 children attending the Smiley Clubs and volunteers also take part in summer camps, social events and training courses on humanitarian values.

The lessons learned from the project have led to the development of standard operating procedures to ensure children have access to education during armed conflict and natural disasters and to build capacities in education in emergencies for the ARCS's staff and volunteers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS AND PROXIMITY TO WEAPON BEARERS AND PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CONFLICT

Around the world, there are populations and places that are difficult to reach. This may include communities close to front lines, rural areas, areas controlled by non-state armed groups and people held in places of detention. During consultations to inform the Framework on Access to Education, peer organizations highlighted the ICRC's access and proximity to affected people as adding real value to broader efforts to support education in areas affected by armed conflict and violence.

Our access and proximity to affected people is a significant benefit when it comes to access to education in two ways. First, it relies on and allows for a regular dialogue with armed groups who play a key role – both negatively and positively – on the protection and continuity of education in areas affected by violence. Second, we often help people who face specific risks and vulnerabilities over relatively long periods of time, including through transitions and challenging life circumstances in which they face numerous obstacles to accessing education. For instance, people deprived of liberty, displaced people, unaccompanied children, children with missing family members, children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, and disabled people. Our direct engagement with affected communities also gives us and the broader Movement a unique insight into the day-to-day impact of conflict and other violence on access to education and its consequences for the lives of affected people, their families and communities.



Children associated with armed forces and armed groups need support to reintegrate into civilian life. The Red Cross Society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the ICRC work together to organize sessions, like this one in North Kivu, so that children can play together and relearn what it means to be a child.

2. HOW DOES THE ICRC SUPPORT ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN AREAS AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER VIOLENCE?

We see education as a learning process that enables children and adults to acquire skills they use to develop socially and professionally. Through education, people develop their resilience, ability to keep themselves safe and their appreciation of humanitarian values – all of which are essential, lifelong skills. This applies not only to formal education but also to non-formal education and informal learning.¹⁵

The ICRC is not an education provider *per se*: our focus is to *safeguard, facilitate or restore* safe and equal access to education for children and people particularly at risk during armed conflict and other violence. To this end, we have embedded access to education into our protection and assistance work. Concretely, this means:

- examining the impact of conflict on access to education in our assessments and documentation
- where appropriate and relevant, addressing education issues in our dialogue with weapon bearers, for instance in relation to attacks on or incidental damage to educational infrastructure, military use of educational facilities, security risks on the way to and from schools and risks arising from proximity of military positions to schools
- widening the circle of the people and organizations we work with to include education authorities, education providers and education experts
- designing tailored responses drawing on our teams' broad range of expertise, notably in protection, IHL, engagement with weapon bearers, weapon contamination, infrastructure, economic security, and mental health and psychosocial support
- advocating for access to education for the particularly at-risk individuals and groups that we traditionally work with, including detainees, displaced people, unaccompanied children, children of missing people, children with disabilities, children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, and people living under the control of non-state armed groups.



Marawi City, Philippines. A teacher who continued giving classes despite the ongoing conflict.

¹⁵ ICRC, *Framework for Access to Education*, p. 3.

While protecting education is routinely included in our dialogue with weapon bearers and authorities, we follow a set of criteria to determine how and when to provide direct assistance to ensure safe access to education. We step in when:

- education is directly impacted by armed conflict or other violence and thus falls under our protection approach linked to our mandate
- few or no other organizations can protect or restore access to education in an area we are operating in
- protecting education forms part of our response on behalf of particularly vulnerable groups entitled to protection under IHL, including children with disabilities, children associated with armed forces and armed groups, unaccompanied children and children separated from their families, children of the missing, children related to foreign fighters, internally displaced people and refugees.

THE ICRC'S ROLE IN THE EDUCATION-IN-EMERGENCIES COMMUNITY AND GLOBAL PROCESSES TO PROTECT EDUCATION

Over the past 15 years, education has become an integral aspect of the humanitarian response to conflict and disaster, alongside food, water, shelter and health care, with a robust and well organized global community of experts and practitioners.¹⁶ Important global initiatives have also taken shape over the past 15 years between states and international organizations to strengthen awareness, evidence and action on the protection of education from attack. Initiatives include: the creation of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) in 2010; GCPEA's periodic publication of *Education under Attack* with data and trend analysis on attacks and threats against educational facilities, learners and personnel; the adoption of a number of United Nations Security Council Resolutions addressing the issue of attacks on education;¹⁷ and the adoption in 2015 of the Safe Schools Declaration with a set of concrete commitments to protect and ensure the continuity of education during conflict.

Our engagement with the education-in-emergencies community and global processes to protect education from attack pre-dates the adoption of the ICRC Framework on Access to Education. For many years, we have regularly responded to states' requests for advice on IHL, particularly in the context of multilateral negotiations on resolutions, as well as requests from international organizations involved in awareness-raising efforts. While developing the framework in 2016 and 2017, we also prioritized consultation with education-in-emergencies experts and practitioners to identify our added value in the field.

At global level, between 2017 and 2018 we joined the Global Education Cluster as an observer and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, bringing our expertise working in conflicts to these forums and, importantly, drawing on their existing tools, knowledge and expertise to improve our own programmes and tools relating to access to education. We work with the GCPEA in Geneva and on the delegation level, where we cooperate on supporting states' endorsement the Safe Schools Declaration. Together with the IFRC, we were part of the UNESCO Global Education Coalition for responding to COVID-19, and we are a founding member of the Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, launched in 2021.

At the national level, we are expanding our engagement with education-in-emergencies practitioners and coordinators in places where we carry out activities around access to education in order to ensure complementarity, and to enable referrals and collaboration on education service delivery.

¹⁶ Key landmarks in this process include: the creation of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies following the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar and the creation of an education cluster within the coordination structure of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2007, which consolidated a professional and coordination structure for the work on education in emergencies; the adoption of a resolution on the right to education in emergencies at the 2010 United Nations General Assembly, which provided important political recognition to the issue (A/RES/64/290); and the establishment of Education Cannot Wait in 2016, the first fund dedicated to education in emergencies.

¹⁷ For instance, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1998 (2011) on attacks on schools and hospitals and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2143 (2014).

PROTECTING SCHOOLS, LEARNERS AND EDUCATION PERSONNEL IN AREAS AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER VIOLENCE

EDUCATION AND THE ICRC'S DIALOGUE WITH PARTIES TO CONFLICTS

Parties to a conflict must take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects during attacks, which includes schoolchildren, education personnel and educational facilities (unless and for such time that they have lost protection from attack). The military use of schools, while not necessarily prohibited under IHL, can also disrupt access to education by barring or constraining pupils' and teachers' access to schools, exposing schools to the risk of attacks and raising the risk of harm due to unexploded ordnance in and around schools.

*“The most dangerous place is the road to the school.
I always walk with my son to the school and bring him
home again. If shooting or shelling starts, I can cover him
with my body. We do worry about our children,
but we have nowhere to go – the whole family is here.
School is the only thing which keeps us going.”*

Tatiana, mother of a pupil in the Donetsk region, Ukraine (2020)

Part of our more focused and structured approach to access to education since 2017 has been a more systematic inclusion of education-related concerns in our dialogue with weapon bearers. To support this dialogue, our military experts developed a toolkit to guide staff on engaging weapon bearers on education. Access to education is a regular feature of the dialogue we maintain on behalf of people protected under IHL, whether carried out by ICRC military experts or by protection staff.



Members of the Congolese army attend an ICRC training session to learn about international humanitarian law at a Military Staff School in Kinshasa.

THE ICRC'S POSITION ON THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION: KEY POINTS¹⁸

The Safe Schools Declaration, launched in Oslo in May 2015, outlines a set of commitments to strengthen the protection of education and ensure its continuity during armed conflict.¹⁹ The first of these commitments is the implementation of the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict, which propose a set of actions to reduce the military use of schools and universities and minimize the negative impact such use may have on students' safety and education.²⁰

We welcome the aim of the Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines of better protecting education in armed conflict. By implementing the Guidelines, armed forces and non-state armed groups may limit the effect of armed conflict on students, teachers, educational facilities and education. We have actively distributed the Guidelines among relevant delegations to be used, when appropriate, as a reference tool in the protection dialogue with parties to a conflict.

The Safe Schools Guidelines, in themselves, are not legally binding rules, and they do not purport to change existing international law.

We understand the Guidelines as being intended to shift behaviour in practice, to ultimately reduce the military use of schools and universities. Though the Guidelines recommend actions that go beyond what is required under IHL, this endeavour is in line with IHL's protective aims. Avoiding that educational facilities become military objectives, and therefore liable to attack, goes a long way in ensuring civilians' safety – that of both students and education personnel – and in preserving schools' civilian character and corresponding protection from attack. In this way, schools can continue to operate safely during armed conflict.

We respect states' diversity of views on the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines and stand ready to offer our legal reading of the Guidelines and to provide technical advice to all interested parties on how best to implement them in specific contexts, regardless of whether they have already endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration or are simply considering it.

PASSIVE SECURITY AND RISK-MANAGEMENT MEASURES IN SCHOOLS

Many schools continue to operate in places affected by armed conflict and other violence, but they are exposed to security risks owing to their location (e.g. relatively close to a front line) or to the fluid daily dynamics of the fighting. In parallel to our direct dialogue with parties to conflicts (see above), we work with school communities and local authorities in some areas to put in place passive security and risk-management measures in schools. The aim is to address children's and teachers' exposure to and ability to respond to security risks in and around schools. We have carried out these types of activities along front lines, such as in Ukraine (see below), Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in areas experiencing occasional or frequent violence or clashes, for instance in Iraq and in some urban areas in Brazil (see example below).

Passive security measures include establishing or reinforcing protective infrastructure in schools. Specifically, this includes protective walls, anti-blast film on windows, shelters and safe evacuation pathways; it also includes evacuation protocols and drills. These are proven ways of protecting people who may be exposed to physical harm owing to their proximity to areas with active or sporadic fighting. At the same time, it is important to avoid increasing stress or creating a false sense of security with these measures. It is therefore of paramount importance that children, teachers and parents from front line communities are involved in the design and choice of which measures to put in place.

¹⁸ The ICRC's full position on the Safe Schools Declaration is available on our website: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/safe-schools-declaration-and-guidelines-protecting-schools-and-universities-military-use>.

¹⁹ The Safe Schools Declaration and the status of endorsements can be found on the website of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/development-cooperation/safeschools_declaration/id2460245/.

²⁰ The Guidelines are available here: https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_guidelines_en.pdf.



Shchastia, Ukraine. The ICRC trains teachers and children how to stay safe if their school comes under artillery fire.

Educational facilities such as kindergartens, schools and universities in eastern Ukraine were severely affected by the armed conflict that erupted in 2014. Many facilities on both sides of the front line were not operational because they were too close to areas of active hostilities or were damaged by the fighting. In some places, children and young people spent large parts of the 2014–2015 academic year attending classes remotely using whatever resources were available, including phones and other devices from home.

We raised the question of protecting educational facilities in our dialogue with parties to the conflict and advocated that military positions that were too close to schools be moved further away. In 2015 and 2016, we responded to a request from education authorities to assess the situation of over 50 schools and kindergartens located along the front line. Tailor-made protective measures were identified following discussions with parents, teachers, school administrators and local authorities. These included: improving and equipping shelters, installing anti-blast film, improved evacuation protocols and drills and awareness-raising sessions on unexploded ordnance for children, first-aid training and a course for teachers on psychological support. The measures were implemented by drawing on our teams' wide range of expertise in such fields as protection, weapon contamination, water and habitat, and health.

Up to February 2022, we further invested in improving access to education on both sides of the front line for particularly vulnerable children (e.g. equipping classrooms for disabled children). We also worked to provide a more tailored approach to build children's and communities' abilities and risk awareness around preventing harm from mines and explosive remnants of war (e.g. putting on theatre plays directed at children and establishing safer play areas). Additionally, we renovated educational facilities to improve the conditions under which children learn (e.g. building kitchens, improving classrooms and insulating educational facilities).

RISK AWARENESS AND SAFE BEHAVIOUR

Generalized insecurity can routinely disrupt public services that involve the movement of people and user-provider contact, such as education, health care and social services. Schools, clinics and welfare offices may be closed temporarily owing to a surge of violence and then remain closed for prolonged periods either because the risk remains high or because there is no clear protocol for assessing the nature and evolution of security risks. In many instances, people are exposed to danger owing to a lack of proper risk awareness and safe behaviour.

Risk awareness and safe behaviour are critical soft components of the broader effort to reduce school-children's and teachers' exposure to risk in areas affected by armed conflict and other violence. They complement the measures outlined above. Activities around risk awareness and safe behaviour activities include training and sensitization sessions to help children and teachers recognize explosive remnants of war and know what to do if they see them. More broadly, they help people identify and systematically adopt safe behaviour adapted to the risks specific to their location, e.g. unexploded ordnance, shootings, stray bullets, checkpoints or the presence of weapon bearers.

Here again, a tailor-made approach is key. For instance, in the context of activities promoting access to education, our safe-behaviour training course in Iraq focuses on risks arising from shootings and explosive remnants of war on school routes. Our safe-behaviour course in Venezuela and Colombia focuses on understanding and managing the risks faced by students whose movements cross the invisible lines between gangs or other armed groups. In Brazil, we focused on developing and piloting risk-management protocols to reduce the length of school closures in an area where shootings are frequent (see example below). Interestingly, the baseline analysis required to inform risk-management protocols shined a different light on the daily cost of violence – not only in terms of death and injuries, but in terms of disruption to access to services, including education, as well as harm to people's mental health.

The Safer Access programme (see next page) has had promising results, significantly reducing the number of days schools are closed owing to armed violence and improving access to education for children and young people. More than 39,000 professionals have been trained in safer access and safer behaviour, and more than 800 schools are adopting measures to protect professionals, students and school communities dealing with the impact of armed violence.



The ICRC talks to school children in Sinjar, Golat village in Iraq about the dangers of unexploded weapons and mines in the areas surrounding the villages where they live. Raising awareness is important to help keep communities safe.

REDUCING DISRUPTIONS TO EDUCATION IN VIOLENCE-AFFECTED AREAS IN BRAZIL



The Herminia Caldas da Silva Municipal School in Brazil takes part in the ICRC's Safer Access programme, which aims to maintain and improve access to essential services for communities affected by armed violence in cities.

Since 2009, we have worked with municipalities in several cities in Brazil affected by urban violence to expand safe access to public services, including schools. The project started in Rio de Janeiro and has since expanded to other municipalities in seven different Brazilian states, involving multiple partnerships with local authorities and service providers.

To help authorities, service providers and communities deal with these disruptions, we developed a risk-management methodology, the Safer Access Framework, inspired by our work in insecure environments and harmonized with the international standard on risk management, ISO 31000. The methodology includes a risk-analysis step which provided eye-opening evidence of the high number of classes being disrupted or cancelled every day owing to police operations or confrontations between rival gangs. The analysis also revealed that a high percentage of residents were suffering from mental health disorders because of their daily exposure to violence. This evidence enabled the government to better grasp the impact of violence beyond homicide rates and adapt its policies accordingly.²¹

We then worked with the municipality and service providers, including headmasters and schoolteachers, to implement the Safer Access Framework in order to manage disruptions caused by daily violence. This included crisis management measures and protocols which provided predictability and clear lines of responsibility in the event of a flare-up of violence. It also included measures to reduce schoolchildren's, teachers' and parents' exposure to violence, for instance adjusting school schedules to known daily patterns of violence.

The programme did not reduce violence, but it reduced the impact of violence on everyday life and helped to strengthen the education system's reliability in a challenging environment. Evaluation of the programme confirmed this, both in the testimonies of those involved and in the statistics: despite the number of shootings in 2018 rising by over 36 per cent compared to 2017, the number of school closures dropped by over 46 per cent in the same period.

In 2016, we created the Safer Access Network, bringing together officials and practitioners from the municipalities where the Safer Access Framework has been or is being implemented. The objective of this initiative is to provide a platform for learning and for promoting the replication of the Safer Access Framework approach in other areas of the country and its integration in public policies.

By mid-2022 this initiative has positively impacted schools, children, families and professionals in seven Brazilian states, including communities in Duque de Caxias, Fortaleza, Florianopolis, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Vila Velha.

²¹ ICRC, *Safer Access to Essential Public Services. Evaluating the Results of the Safer Access Methodology: A Summary*, ICRC, Brazil, 2023: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/evaluation-access-essential-services-programme-brazil>.

MATERIAL AND INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT TO RESTORE OR SAFEGUARD ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND BOOST RESILIENCE

Where there are few other organizations able to address material barriers to education in the places we work, we may intervene in a multidisciplinary, targeted way to address key protection risks.

REBUILDING SCHOOLS AND CONSTRUCTING TEMPORARY LEARNING SPACES

Issues related to damaged or destroyed school infrastructure have surfaced more often in ICRC needs assessments over the past few years as we started to examine needs around access to education more proactively and systematically in our engagement with conflict-affected communities. Rebuilding infrastructure is not uncommon in our activities, e.g. in health-care facilities, prisons and around water and sanitation systems.

Our involvement in rehabilitating school infrastructure ranges from small-scale repairs to structural work. The latter usually concerns places that sustained heavy damage during hostilities (e.g. in Syria or Iraq) or countries affected by a combination of long-standing conflict and chronic poverty (e.g. South Sudan). Our support for temporary learning spaces ranges from construction from scratch (relatively rare) to ad hoc solutions using existing facilities; all spaces include water and sanitation facilities. For example, in Baghdad, we repurposed caravans left behind in camps for internally displaced people as classrooms for 1,200 primary and secondary students.

Where appropriate, we integrate a cash-for-work component into such infrastructure activities to create temporary employment opportunities for community members. By working with the community, we can also identify suitable materials and technologies (non-structural mud bricks, grass thatch, timber walls, etc.) that mean community members can contribute to and maintain school infrastructure in a sustainable way.



Building a new school in Ngo Ku, South Sudan. The area is controlled by a non-state armed group. The ICRC is one of the only organizations that is allowed to enter and work in the area. The new school will be able to teach 1,200 children in two shifts.



The old school was run-down and too small, so classes were taking place in temporary classrooms made of wooden poles and tarpaulin.

LIFTING FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO EDUCATION THROUGH ECONOMIC SUPPORT TO VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS

Economic hardship poses significant challenges to access to education in countries affected by armed conflict and other violence. Whether it is the cost of school materials and transportation, or the need to work to provide for a family, financial considerations often leave people with no other choice than to interrupt their or their children's education, even when education services are available and safe to access.

Financial barriers hampering access to education surface in household surveys carried out by the ICRC's economic security teams, alongside a wide range of other basic needs. With the exception of distributing school kits, our efforts to lift financial barriers to education and encourage school attendance are built into our broader livelihood support for vulnerable households, which is aimed at easing the economic hardship they face. This can range from food and seed distribution to cash and voucher assistance to meet basic needs or microeconomic initiatives.²²

Economic challenges can have other effects on education systems, for instance on the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. We address this by working with communities to increase their ability to support teachers and to retain them by providing food from community gardens or livestock or agricultural initiatives.



Homs, Syria. The ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent work together to support education in the conflict-affected areas of the governorates of Hama and Homs. The ICRC distributes a wide range of supplies, such as notepads, school bags and pencils, to pupils and teachers in 12 schools there.

²² Families have used parts of multipurpose cash grants provided by the ICRC to cover education costs. While cash and voucher assistance can support access to education, that assistance alone is unlikely to achieve meaningful long-term education outcomes unless it is embedded in more holistic programming encompassing social safety nets, livelihood support through microeconomic initiatives, and employment and training schemes.

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND RESILIENCE IN AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

We work with affected communities to build knowledge, skills and resilience and to avoid the depletion of critical human capital by providing technical and vocational education and training. This often focuses on agronomics or livestock management but also encompasses basic skills and other vocational areas such as baking, building, mechanics or hairdressing. Our economic security teams deliver training directly or through local partners and often combine it with microeconomic initiatives and other support for people's livelihoods and income generation.

Alongside technical and vocational education, we also provide support for higher and further education, especially relating to medical expertise around prosthetics and orthotics. We train or sponsor the training of students from affected communities so they may complete their education at university level, building up the capacities of important local institutions so that people affected by crisis or conflict benefit from improved services.

ACCESS TO WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATION? KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ICRC

We are acutely aware that access to education does not equal access to quality education and have noted the progressive and ongoing shift of focus in the education-in-emergencies community from access to *access and learning*. Providing material support to restore or safeguard access to education inevitably raises the question of the quality and content of the education that we are facilitating access to.

Our focus is on *safe access* to education, and we do not engage in pedagogy, teacher training, curriculum development or assessment of learning outcomes. However, the quality and content of education are nonetheless relevant considerations for the ICRC in three main ways.

First, we may be able to improve the quality of the education provided in schools by distributing learning and teaching materials, improving school infrastructure and, more importantly, helping to build a secure and safe educational environment for children and teachers, which may include psychosocial support and in some cases nutrition and health services. Children who feel safe, have eaten and are healthy learn better. Teachers who feel supported work better. An appropriate monitoring and evaluation system is key for capturing and measuring any qualitative outcomes that result from measures aimed primarily at enhancing access to education.²³

Second, there are well established minimum standards and requirements regarding accessibility, acceptability and adaptability for education, which enable an organization focused on access to education services to have a basic level of insight into the quality of an education. These standards are useful points of reference when we explore partnerships with education providers.

Third, there are considerations related to humanitarian principles, particularly that of neutrality. We need to make sure that our role in facilitating access to educational facilities is not perceived as taking sides or favouring one community over another. These are questions which can only be addressed on a case-by-case basis, based on a context- and time-specific analysis and most importantly on the views expressed by the communities themselves. This too, involves consideration of educational content.

²³ Through our engagement with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies from 2018 to 2021, we were actively involved in a workstream that examined this issue. See: Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, *Measuring School-Based Security Interventions to Protect from External Threats of Conflict and Violence: A Mapping of Measurement Frameworks and Tools*, Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, New York, 2021.

ADVOCATING FOR AND FACILITATING ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR SPECIFIC VULNERABLE AND HARD-TO-REACH GROUPS

We traditionally help specific vulnerable groups in areas affected by armed conflict and other violence, including detainees, displaced people, unaccompanied children, children of missing people, children with disabilities, children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, and people living under the control of non-state armed groups. For this reason, our investment in embedding access to education across our programmes has translated into a diverse set of activities that are specific to particular groups of people who are experiencing practical, administrative or identity-based challenges in their efforts to pursue an education.



Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Shamsullah, 14, lost both his legs to a landmine in 2015. He was treated at a Physical Rehabilitation Centre run by the ICRC. With the help of prostheses and two crutches, he was soon able to walk again. The ICRC supports children with disabilities, like Shamsullah, so they can attend school. When he grows up, he wants to be a doctor.

Some examples:

- **Facilitating transfer of school certificates:** In Uganda in 2019, we facilitated the transfer of 261 primary-school certificates for South Sudanese refugees based in Uganda so that they could continue their education.
- **Improving access to education for children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups:** Access to education is a lifeline for these children – mentally, socially and materially. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Uganda, we facilitated referrals to local vocational training centres for these children and provided financial or material support, when appropriate.
- **Improving access to education for children with disabilities:** In around ten countries, the ICRC's Physical Rehabilitation Programme has provided support to disabled schoolchildren through scholarships, transport to school or accessibility improvements to school infrastructure.
- **Improving access to education in prisons:** In South Sudan, we supported the construction of the Juvenile Reformatory Centre in the Juba Central Prison. In Myanmar, we built a vocational training centre where youth can receive a formal school education or skills training.
- **Improving access to education for students from areas controlled by non-state armed groups:** Students living in areas outside of government control face particular challenges in pursuing education: education services may be limited, state exams may not be conducted in the area, and school certificates may not be recognized across front lines. As a humanitarian organization engaging with populations and parties from all sides of a conflict, the ICRC is often well positioned to help students overcome these obstacles (see example below).

FACILITATING ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS FROM AREAS OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT CONTROL IN SYRIA AND MYANMAR

In Syria, there are two certificate exams, at the ninth and 12th grade, which last for about three weeks. Areas out of governmental control do not hold these exams, so students living in those areas need to travel to areas under government control to take them and receive certificates. In 2021, we provided support to dozens of accommodation centres in Syria to enable students from areas outside of government control to take their exams.

In Myanmar, we supported boarding centres and local families hosting students coming from areas controlled by non-state armed groups where secondary education was not available. This was done in collaboration with the Myanmar Red Cross Society.

3. WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

The ICRC makes a valuable contribution to the education-in-emergencies sector. Our ability to engage parties to a conflict in dialogue, and to work in areas affected by conflict and violence that other agencies cannot access, enables us to protect and ensure safe access to education for often underserved communities.

Small-scale approaches have strategic value. Our experience tells us that small-scale, localized activities can have a catalysing effect and lead to the replication and codification of measures to protect and improve access to education and foster a safer learning environment. This requires: a) working closely with affected communities themselves; b) investing in a critical mass of small-scale activities; c) documenting, evaluating and learning from these experiences as a whole; and d) prioritizing engagement with education authorities from the local to the national level.

We have a large number of transferable skills that can be put to good use in support of access to education. The relevance of our work in support of access to education stems less from an increased technical knowledge on education (though this remains a worthwhile investment) than from well-established skills and expertise across our protection, assistance and legal teams and long-standing experience operating in volatile environments and managing security risks. We recognize that we need to invest in expanding our capacity to support our ambitions in these areas, particularly as regards internal and external coordination.

Dialogue is an approach that works. While attacks on and threats to educational facilities, learners and teachers remain a concerning feature of many contemporary conflicts, our experience shows that there is room for dialogue on the protection of education with a range of weapon bearers. There are also very practical measures which weapon bearers can take to reduce risks to schoolchildren and teachers. Our dialogue with weapon bearers and our efforts to foster an environment conducive to respect for IHL remain a cornerstone of our work on access to education and have significant added value for the wider education-in-emergencies sector.

Partnerships with local organizations, specifically National Societies, are key. Through partnerships we can benefit from complementary capacities to address education needs, build closer relationships with, and foster our acceptance by, school communities, and help ensure the longer-term sustainability of any initiatives.

It is possible to support access to education, even in polarized contexts, while remaining neutral, impartial and independent. By focusing our education response on targeted protection initiatives and community-based initiatives, rather than on providing education services, we have been able to be proactive in the field of education while preserving our impartiality, neutrality and independence. Context-specific analysis and decisions are key in this regard.

4. OUR CALL TO STATES, DONORS AND PRACTITIONERS

Engage with the ICRC to implement and promote respect for IHL rules related to education. IHL contains a number of rules that aim to ensure that education continues and that students, educational personnel, schools and other educational facilities are protected in situations of armed conflict. We stand ready to provide legal and technical advice on implementing IHL rules related to access to education.

Address the education needs of front line and marginalized communities. Enormous strides have been made in places affected by armed conflict to support education in relatively safe and accessible areas (e.g. UN-managed camps, urban areas and refugee camps). But communities on the front lines and those that are marginalized owing to the political dynamics of conflict cannot be forgotten.

Invest in preparedness and risk management to reduce the disruption to education during armed conflict and other violence, ensuring policies, plans and resources are in place for emergency education. It is important that practitioners and policymakers understand the daily consequences of protracted and pervasive insecurity on education and take steps to manage and mitigate those consequences as a matter of policy, not as a temporary crisis response. At the school level, risk-management measures and protocols can go a long way in sustainably reducing exposure to safety and security risks in and around schools and the stress associated with it, and in helping to shorten school closures. At the systems level, efforts to restore and ensure the continuity of education need to incorporate remote learning, temporary learning spaces, secure record keeping and child-friendly messaging around risk awareness.²⁴ Special attention should be given to areas and population groups that may be left behind owing to the political and military dynamics of conflict.

Strengthen and protect education staff in countries affected by armed conflict and other violence. Too often, teachers go without pay for years owing to fighting and are left with no other choice but to find an alternative source of income. The availability of education personnel is of paramount importance if we are to facilitate access to education, bringing to bear the value of our dialogue with armed groups and our direct engagement with communities facing tremendous risks and challenges. But more importantly, it is a massive blow to affected countries and communities when teachers stop teaching. Strengthening and safeguarding education capacity is already a challenge in resource-poor countries affected by long-standing conflicts. But in many places we also witness the atrophy of existing capacity. Safeguarding existing education capacity is key both from a humanitarian perspective and a longer-term development perspective.

²⁴ Drawn from ICRC, *Childhood in Rubble: The Humanitarian Consequences of Urban Warfare for Children*, ICRC, Geneva, 2023.

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The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

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