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Policy Brief No.1/18

Making schools safe for children

Executive Summary

This policy brief deals with the issue of making schools, pupils and teachers safe from exposure to political violence during elections. The brief builds upon previous research carried out by RAU, and the recent (related) decision by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission to protect children from attending political meetings.

The brief outlines the risks for children and teachers and recommends that the Zimbabwe Government declare all schools as *safe zones*, free from any political activity, during the forthcoming elections and beyond. Additionally, the brief recommends that the Government endorse, with 74 other countries, the *Safe Schools Declaration* of the Global Campaign to Protect Schools under Attack.

Introduction

Zimbabwe has an unenviable reputation in the SADC region for holding violent elections. One of the lesser known consequences of the electoral violence is the exposure of young children to political violence, both as victims and witnesses. This was described in a series of reports by [RAU](#) in the aftermath of the violent elections in 2008. The study revealed that 25% of the teachers interviewed had experienced some form of political violence at school and during working hours. With so many schools being primary schools, this meant that young children were being exposed to violence.

This finding is not unique to Zimbabwe, and the international community, aware of the deleterious consequences to children of political violence and war when schools are not protected, launched [*the Global Campaign to Protect Education under Attack*](#) (GCPEA).

This is the focus of this policy brief.

Key Findings

As Zimbabwe approaches perhaps the most important election since 1980, and in the aftermath of a military-assisted transition, the stakes for this election are extremely high. It is encouraging to

note that the principles of political parties are publicly preaching peace in the run up to elections. The previous elections have been marred by politically motivated violence which has left communities in fear and affecting the education sector especially in rural areas. As the *Safe Schools Declaration* of the GCPEA requires, every effort should be made to ensure that schools, pupils and teachers are proactively protected when political violence is taking place or can be anticipated.

Zimbabwe has already experience of the effects of political violence at schools. Research carried out by RAU and MPOI revealed the following in the aftermath of the 2008 elections:

- 56% of teachers stated that the attacks they witnessed were because teachers were suspected to be members or sympathised with the opposition parties;
- 14% of teachers stated that the attacks they witnessed were because teachers are deemed influential in society and accused of influencing people to vote for the opposition political parties;

51% of teachers reported that they had directly experienced political violence of one form or another, and 55% stated that they had been forced to vote for a particular political party because of violence or threats of violence, with the worst election for such intimidation being June 2008. 68% stated that they had experienced violence in the June 2008 election, but high percentages also reported direct experience of violence in 2000 and also the March 2008 election.

The most frequent violations directly experienced were as follows:

- 79% reported having been forced to attend political meetings;
- 77% reported threats;
- 41% reported some form of extortion;
- 33% reported being assaulted;
- 31% reported being tortured;
- 30% reported having been disqualified from voting;
- 24% reported having been forcibly displaced from their work station and community.

47% of those witnessing violence reported that the violation *took place at school and during working hours*, and a further 15% reported that the violation took place at home, which means that over 60% of the violations could easily have been witnessed by children.

There is therefore strong evidence that political violence has taken place at schools, affecting both pupils and teachers, and, of course, the wider community around the schools.

Conclusions

Whilst it is clear from the available evidence that political violence directed against teachers, and occurring at schools, is only a subset of the overall political violence, it can be argued that the effects of this political violence has much broader impact than that directed at other groups. For a start, political violence taking place at schools will affect a very large population of potential

witnesses, and it is well-known that witnessing of violence can have serious mental health consequences.

Furthermore, the effects of the direct experience or the indirect experience, through witnessing, of political violence have yet to be determined in Zimbabwe. For children, there are three possible experiences: being a direct victim, being an indirect victim through witnessing, and, thirdly, living in a situation of “political terror”. This last describes a context where political violence is common and has been shown to have detrimental effects on mental health. Experiences of political violence also breed a culture of violence in the long run.

The effects of political violence at and around schools, affecting both teachers and pupils, and with the effect of disrupting the education of children, have become a serious cause for concern in the international community in recent years. The understanding of the need to protect children and to protect schools has been addressed by an international campaign, the *Global Campaign to Protect Education from Attack* (Appendix 1). This very important initiative has now been by 74 countries, including 20 African countries.

The issue has also been given current attention through a decision of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission¹ in respect of the need to protect school children from human rights violations during elections has very important implications for the forthcoming poll.

Recommendations

Our recommendations fall into two time periods: actions that can be taken in the short-term and those that can be applied in the long-term. Here we would point out the recommendations given by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and reiterate other recommendations previously made.

Short-term actions

Since elections will take place within months, the urgent steps that need to be taken are several:

- Following the ZHRC’s recent decision, that the government give immediate effect to these recommendations, and declare all schools zones of peace and free from political activity of any kind;
- Again, all political parties adopt a Code of Conduct as recommended by the ZHRC.

Long-term actions

In the long-term, and in line with both the ZHRC decision and the *Safe Schools Declaration*, the government should undertake the following:

- Endorse the [*Safe Schools Declaration*](#) and ensure that this made available to all schools and universities in the country;

¹ [ZHRC/CI/0069/17, Teachers Unions vs. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education & ZANU-PF](#)

- Implement a programme in line with both the ZHRC decision and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*.

Appendix 1

Global Campaign to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA).

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) was established in 2010, and is now governed by a steering committee composed of nine organisations: CARA (Council for At-Risk Academics), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Institute of International Education/ IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), Save the Children, UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNHCR. In 2015, the Safe Schools Declaration was developed through a series of consultations, and endorsed by 37 countries at its initial launch.

The scope of the campaign can be seen from the range of concerns covered by the campaign. These cover the perpetrators, the educational system and the parties involved in the education system as follows:

Attacks on education may be perpetrated by:

- *State security forces, including armed forces, law enforcement, paramilitary, and militia forces acting on behalf of the state.*
- *Non-state armed groups.*

Attacks on education include attacks on:

- *Students of all ages.*
- *Educators, including school teachers, academics, other education personnel, members of teacher unions, and education aid workers.*
- *Education institutions: any site used for the purposes of education, including all levels of education and non-formal education facilities, and buildings dedicated to the work of ministries of education and other education administration.*

Attacks on students and educators include:

- *Attacks directed at students and educators at education institutions, including abduction, recruitment into armed groups, forced labor, sexual violence, targeted killings, threats and harassment, and other violations.*
- *Attacks while going to or coming from an education institution or elsewhere because of their status as students or educators.*
- *Attacks on pro-education activists, including teacher unions or any teaching group, because of their activism.*
- *Attacks on education personnel, such as administrators and maintenance workers, and education aid workers.*