

The Role of Education Indicators in Assessing Conflict Risk

Wednesday, November 18, 2009, 12:00 pm – 1:30 pm

[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

In recent years, the number of indices designed to help policymakers monitor conflict situations, and the risk of conflict, has multiplied. These include Brookings' [Index of State Weakness in the Developing World](#), the Center for Systemic Peace's [State Fragility Index](#), the Fund for Peace's [Failed States Index](#), and Vision for Humanity's [Global Peace Index](#), among others. While each of these indices measure slightly different risk factors for conflict and dimensions of state performance, all are intended to help policymakers design more effective policy interventions in, and policy strategies toward, countries that are at risk of or recently emerging from conflict. Most include one or more sector-specific indicators focusing on state performance in the area of education. The question of education's role in and after conflict has also gained attention, evidenced by a new global [Working Group on Education and Fragility](#) and the selection of violent conflict and education as the theme of UNESCO's 2011 Education for All Global Monitoring Report. If not properly structured or organized, education can contribute social exclusion and marginalization that fuel conflict, just as easily as it can promote social inclusion and mitigate conflict.

On November 18, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings convened a meeting to bring together scholars and practitioners who specialize in education policy in contexts of conflict, and members of the academic and policy communities concerned with measuring conflict risk and political stability. The meeting was co-hosted by Fellows [Corinne Graff](#) and [Rebecca Winthrop](#). Winthrop, co-director of CUE, opened the discussion by introducing several themes to guide the discussion. What is the best way to conceptualize the relationship between education and conflict? How do we measure education performance in conflict situations? What are the greatest challenges in attempting to quantify the impact of education on conflict and vice versa?

During the event, [Peter Buckland](#) of the World Bank maintained that while there is much research and analysis about the relationship between poverty and conflict, we know comparatively little about the way in which conflict impacts education systems, and even less about education's impact on conflict. He stated that it seems clear that the education community does not have the background or the necessary instruments to achieve this level of understanding and a multi-sector approach to analyzing the relationship is necessary.

[Alan Smith](#) of the University of Ulster encouraged the group to think of education beyond service delivery. While government provision of basic services like education is a key indicator of state stability, it is important to realize that such a focus underplays the role of education as an instrument for ideological development and the formation of ideas, values and identity, all of which are key to nation-building. Ulster proposed a few ideas to the group, including whether resources are being distributed equitably across education systems. Is the appointment of personnel politicized? Is exclusion of certain groups reproduced by the education system? What types of citizens do education systems produce?

[Yolande Miller-Grandvaux](#) of the U.S. Agency for International Development emphasized the need to look at indicators beyond the education sector in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of education systems. In situations of conflict, it is particularly important to consider the out-of-school population, those who are on the margins of the education system, and to analyze how these factors relate to the causes of conflict, she said. Also, identifying which groups are included excluded by the education system is critical, according to Miller-Grandvaux.

[Monty Marshall](#) of George Mason University stressed the connection between the absence of formal education and extremism, citing evidence that citizens with no formal training are more malleable and likely to be influenced by extremist ideologies. At the same time, it has been proven that terrorism and

insurgencies are organized by leaders who do have some educational background, yet lack employment opportunities. The leaders of extremist movements are often highly-educated individuals living in societies with a disjunction between the education system and economic opportunities. Thus, the poverty-violence link should not be interpreted in an organizational sense, but rather in terms of marginalization. Also, some evidence suggests that violence is often driven by emotive factors.

The discussion that followed these brief introductory comments expanded on many of the themes raised by the speakers. Additional concepts introduced during the debate included:

- 1) The level of security on the ground will dictate the level or specificity of education indicators that can be measured. In some places, simply measuring kids attending class is a sign of progress; however, in other places, it may be possible to look at each school's make-up, teacher backgrounds and educational content.
- 2) From a defense perspective, it is still a challenge to define what is indicative of progress in the development context. For example, when a country has enrollment at more than 50 percent, it is interpreted as meaning that less than 50 percent of the population is likely to join an insurgency. While this is a very narrow interpretation of the indicator, it is a way to measure progress as enrollment increases.
- 3) Furthermore, from a technical standpoint, there is a looming question about who is carrying out the data collection. On the whole, the military is reluctant to collect economic and development data. The diplomatic community needs to emphasize that quality education, more than just school attendance, plays a role in fostering sustainable peace.

The discussion of these points included information regarding the focus of the education and development communities on the notion that fixing education systems can help mitigate conflict. Yet, instead of looking first within the education system to analyze the relationship between conflict and education, it may be more important to look at the drivers of conflict and seek to understand their interaction with education systems. Furthermore, it is equally important to understand the drivers of peace. What social, political and economic characteristics correlate with an absence of violence? There is a tendency to conflate education and schooling; however, particularly in contexts of fragility, it is important to look at them separately. Education can come from many sources and in many forms, of which a local government school is one. Who controls the schools is hard to measure and quantify, but is centrally important.

Participants noted that from a conflict assessment perspective, it can be informative to look at the rate of educational change that may result from political transitions. For example, the rapid expansion of the secondary school or university system, or sudden changes in the male-female enrollment ratios could serve as proxies for instability. Looking at historical data on education indicators and incidence of conflict may indicate some of the accelerants of conflict (or peace), and help inform pro-active measure to prevent conflict when possible.

Further, in the context of fragile states, being able to measure the quality of education is particularly important. Until recently, indicators of quality have been focused on proxies of school quality, including persistence to grade 5 and ratio of textbooks to students, academic achievement, primarily literacy and numeracy. However, in defining the purpose of education, it often ranges beyond pure academic achievement to its impact on employment prospects. Broadening the discussion beyond years of schooling to include factors such as freedom of expression, critical thinking and cultural relevance may capture important dimensions of education quality.

In conclusion, participants agreed on the value of continuing the conversation between education specialists and conflict analysts. In particular, there was interest in discussing successful methods of working with data that integrate education into conflict models and sharing research and other resources that bridge the gaps between the two communities.