



## Education and disability in a conflict affected context: Are children with disabilities less likely to learn and be protected in Darfur?



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### ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goal four aims at ensuring inclusive, free and equitable quality education. In a conflict setting such as Western Darfur, the education system has been destroyed, leaving millions of children out of schools. Various stakeholders, namely UNICEF and non-governmental organizations, have taken initiatives to rebuild schools and include all children since the beginning of the conflict in 2003. However, very little evidence is available to date on the education of children with disabilities living in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Between the 1st of October 2008 and the 28th of February 2009, we carried out a household survey in all localities and settlements in the rural council of Um Kher, part of the locality of Wadi Salih in the state of West Darfur, Sudan. We interviewed 11,089 heads of household about activity limitations and functioning difficulties associated with a health problem among all family members using a validated screening instruments, as well as 1436 children on various aspects of access to education, learning outcomes and psychological wellbeing. We found that in a context of protracted conflict, all children are at high risk of being excluded from schools and not learning when in school. We also found that children with disabilities were at higher risk of poorer psychological wellbeing, particularly those children with behavioral and mood disorders, as well as associated disabilities.

In a context of conflict and protracted crisis such as Darfur, promoting education requires a lot of external effort to ensure access and positive learning outcomes for all children, including children with disabilities. Our study shows poor basic cognitive learning outcomes for all children and the limited effectiveness of the protection of children in schools. Improving learning outcomes and mental wellbeing of vulnerable children in conflict, crisis and protracted crisis contexts require multilevel and multi-pronged interventions within and outside schools.

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### 1. Introduction

In contexts of emergency, conflicts and disaster, national education systems are often dismantled and schools are destroyed. In 2015 alone, 75 million children living in such contexts did not have access to schools (Nicolai, Hine, & Wales, 2016). Onsets of conflict and disaster invariably damage schools, displace populations and disrupt economic activities. As a result, poverty rates, early marriage for girls and child labor all increase, compounding impediments that prevent vulnerable children from accessing quality education. UNICEF's protective environment framework outlines

eight components working at different levels to establish a protective environment for children that enhance post-conflict recovery and development (Landgren, 2005, 2013). Among these, free access to inclusive, safe school systems with active and trained teachers are paramount in order to re-build peaceful societies. However, in the long term, this requires a strong commitment from the State for securing resources and setting-up mechanisms that prioritize promoting and respecting children's rights.

The conflict in Darfur, a state in the western part of Sudan situated at the boarder of Chad has resulted in a "protracted crisis" or a situation of complete disruption of the livelihoods of communities over a long period of time (over five years) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2008). The length of the conflict in Darfur has created the conditions for an entire generation of children being uneducated. Darfur has been in a state of ongoing

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conflict since 2003 with West Darfur at the center. The conflict originated when two tribes of Darfur rebelled against the Central Government when they were left out of the peace negotiations between the North and the South and excluded from investments made by the Central Government in Khartoum (Ager, Boothby, & Bremer, 2009). The Government of Sudan (GoS) responded by arming and supporting Janjaweed militias; the militias have been instrumentalized for decades in the conflict with South Sudan and have instigated a series of attacks against the non-Arab civilian population in villages dominated by major rebel tribes. However, the root of the Darfur conflict remains complex and its continuation was exacerbated by a lack of interest of the GoS in Darfur, access to scarce water and quality land in a context of progressive desertification, ethnic hostility and the rivalry between Chad and Libya (De Juan, 2015; Olsson, 2010; Prunier, 2008).

Regardless of root cause(s), the civilian population has been subjected to forced displacement, violence, rape, with children being most at risk from violence in comparable armed conflict, including abductions, forced labor, sexual slavery and combat (Kaiser & Hagan, 2015). Evidence clearly shows that violence against, and the exploitation of, children in contexts of conflict lead to a wide range of dire and sometime long-term health and mental health, social and economic consequences (Betancourt et al., 2013; Newnham, Pearson, Stein, & Betancourt, 2015; Panter-Brick, Grimon, & Eggerman, 2014). In absence of support programs and interventions that have shown to be able to improve their mental health status (Brown, de Graaff, Annan, & Betancourt, 2017), children who have been exposed to armed conflict may face social and emotional difficulties which jeopardize the acquisition of knowledge, life skills and competencies to become productive citizens of their country (Attanayake et al., 2009; Slone & Mann, 2016). Vulnerable children including girls, poor children, children from minority, ethnic or religious groups, as well as children with disabilities, face the additional risk of exclusion from education in emergencies, particularly conflict. However, data pertaining to education of children with disabilities in conflict and post-conflict is crucially lacking (Burde, Guven, Kelcey, Lahmann, & Al-Abbadi, 2015). In turn, this lack of evidence is creating a major impediment to achieve the new Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG4) (United Nations, 2015), that calls for a refocus on questions of not just access but of quality of education for vulnerable children. In this paper, using data from a large-scale household case control survey carried out in West Darfur in 2009, we examine access to school, acquisition of basic learning outcomes like reading, writing and counting as well as considerations of experienced wellbeing.

Following the introduction, section two of the present paper explores the literature on education in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Section three introduces data sources used in this study and methods of measurement of access to school, learning outcomes and psychological wellbeing. Section four provides results related to those outcomes of interest. Finally, section five presents conclusions and further discussions.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The role of education

UNESCO spearheaded the Education for All (EFA) movement in the 1990's to promote a rights based approach to education that enables the flourishing of children and advance learning and the building of peaceful societies (UNESCO, 2000). The EFA goals included a specific focus on questions of quality (Goal 6). In 2000, access to primary education was identified as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG). However, experts

concede that the EFA goals as well as MDG 2 for 2015 have not been met: 69 million children of school-going age are not in school and over 750 million adults have no literacy skills; education is failing the most vulnerable groups by falling short on promises of equity and social justice (Trani, Kett, Bakhshi, & Bailey, 2011; UNESCO, 2014; Unterhalter, 2012, 2014).

In international policy and programs, education is tasked with breaching the void between two visions of EFA. A functional view of education focuses on questions of access to learning systems and places the priority upon providing children with the basic and minimal learning competences (literacy and numeracy) that constitute the foundational steps towards survival and income-generation. However, education also aims at enhancing abilities to reduce vulnerability to risk, increasing potentiality to fight poverty in the long-term, and providing the knowledge and skills with regards to broader issues such as health, communication technologies and civic engagement. Focusing on the quality of education also entails enhancing social cohesion, equipping individuals to play a role as participating members of their community and building peaceful and prosperous societies. This dichotomy in perspectives is evident in the distinction put forth by the Human Development and Capabilities Approach that recognizes the instrumental role that education plays in achieving various other capabilities (such as finding employment) but also states the importance of the intrinsic value of education as holding inherent value to improve Human life. Education fulfills an *instrumental social role* in that critical literacy, for example, fosters public debate and dialogue about social and political arrangements. "It has an *instrumental process role* by expanding the people one comes into contact with, broadening our horizons [...] It has an *empowering and distributive role* in facilitating the ability of the disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded to organize politically" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007) p. 8. Re-conciliating the considerations of access/enrolment/basic learning with broader considerations of education as a fundamental human right and a process that fights inequality and exclusion is vital in situations of crisis such as conflicts. However, in numbers of Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) and conflict contexts, educational achievement is most often viewed in terms of access and completion, with little attention to considerations of inclusion and equality.

Outlining the main characteristics of education for the 21st century, the Delors Commission Report (Burnett, 2008) identified four pillars of education to fight inequality and allow education for life-long learning: (i) Learning to know that entails understanding the world (critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, decision making skills, etc.); (ii) Learning to be which focuses on autonomy and judgment, personal responsibility for our collective destiny (skills for internal locus of control, skills for managing stress, skills for managing feelings etc.); (iii) Learning to live together that promotes participation of the learner in the wider environment (communication skills, negotiation skills, refusal skills, assertiveness skills, interpersonal skills, cooperation skills, empathy skills, etc.); (iv) Learning to do for turning knowledge and understanding into useful action (the manual skills needed to carry out the desired behavior). Addressing the four pillars concurrently would thus allow for focusing on intrinsic as well as instrumental aspects of what constitutes education of quality.

### 2.2. Quality education for children with disabilities

Provision of education for children with disabilities has been shaped over the past decades by international conventions and frameworks, namely the Salamanca Declaration and the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), that have established it as a basic human right. The article 24 of the UNCRPD emphasizes the principle of the right to "an

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