Forty percent of school-aged children in Africa do not attend primary school and 46 million African children have never set foot in a classroom.
The impact of armed conflict on education has been widely neglected. This hidden crisis is reinforcing poverty, undermining economic growth and holding back the progress of nations. The 2011 EFA Global Monitoring Report documents the scale of the crisis, traces its underlying causes and sets out an agenda for change.
Today’s armed conflicts are fought overwhelmingly within countries. Out of the thirty-five countries that were affected by armed conflict from 1999 to 2008, fifteen are in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the intensity, scale and geographic extent of the violence vary, protracted armed conflicts are common.

Children and schools are on the front line of armed conflicts, with classrooms, teachers and pupils seen as legitimate targets. For example, most of Sierra Leone’s education infrastructure was destroyed in its civil war, and three years after the end of the war, 60% of primary schools still required rehabilitation. In 2009, sixty schools were closed in Mogadishu, Somalia, while at least ten were occupied by armed forces.
Physical trauma and stigmatization faced by children are sources of profound and lasting disadvantage in education. Evidence from Sierra Leone points to conflict-related post-traumatic stress disorder as a frequent source of impaired learning and poor achievement in school.
The use of child soldiers is reported in twenty-four countries in the world, including the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia. The recruitment of child soldiers from schools is common. In 2007, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo reported that hundreds of children were serving on the front line in North Kivu province. Many were forcibly recruited from classrooms, leading to the schools’ closure in some cases.
Rape and other acts of sexual violence were widely used as instruments of war in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as during the genocide in Rwanda. More recently, it has been identified as a serious concern in Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Insecurity and fear associated with sexual violence keep young girls, in particular, out of school.
Armed conflict also undermines economic growth, reinforces poverty and diverts national resources from productive investment in classrooms into unproductive military spending.

Many of the poorest countries spend significantly more on arms than on basic education. Chad, which has some of the world’s worst education indicators, spends four times as much on arms as on primary schools.

If the twelve countries in sub-Saharan Africa spending more on the military than on primary schooling were to cut military spending by just 10%, they could put 2.7 million more children in school – over one-quarter of their out-of-school population.
Diversion of national resources to the military and loss of government revenue means that armed conflict shifts responsibility for education financing from governments to households. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, households pay fees not only for schools but also for the administration and management of the whole system.

Education is seldom a primary cause of conflict. Yet it is often an underlying element in the political dynamic pushing countries towards violence. Intra-state armed conflict is often associated with grievances and perceived injustices linked to identity, faith, ethnicity and region. Education can make a difference in all these areas, tipping the balance in favour of peace – or conflict.
- Limited or poor quality provision leads to unemployment and poverty.

When large numbers of young people are denied access to decent quality basic education, the resulting poverty, unemployment and sense of hopelessness can act as forceful recruiting agents for armed militia. One survey of former combattants and non-combattant militia members in Sierra Leone found that almost 80% had left school before joining a rebel group, in many cases because their schools had been damaged.

- A ‘youth bulge’ adds to the urgency of building a bridge from education to employment.

Over 60% of the population in some countries, including Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, is under 25, compared with less than 25% in many OECD countries. In Rwanda, unemployed, undereducated rural male youth figured prominently among the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide.
Unequal access generates grievances and a sense of injustice.

Inequalities in education, interacting with wider disparities, heighten the risk of conflict. As Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission recognized, limiting educational opportunities through political and social systems based on privilege, patronage and politicization was a potent source of violence. In Côte d’Ivoire, resentment over the poor state of education in northern areas figured in the political mobilization leading up to the 2002–2004 civil war. School attendance levels in the north and north-west in 2006 were less than half as high as in the south.

Inappropriate use of school systems reinforces prejudice and intolerance.

In several armed conflicts, education has been actively used to reinforce political domination, the subordination of marginalized groups, and ethnic and linguistic segregation. After Rwanda’s independence, Hutu political leaders aimed to overturn what they saw as unfair education advantages inherited by Tutsis from the colonial era. An ethnic quota policy was used to enforce discriminatory practices, including a mass purge of Tutsis from universities and public posts. The use of schools to ethnically ‘label’ children and enforce rigid group identity rules enabled the Interahamwe militia responsible for the genocide to identify Tutsi children from school registers.
Making Education a Force For Peace

Conflict-sensitive planning in education is about recognizing that any policy decision will have consequences for peace building – and for the prospect of averting a return to violence. There are many channels through which education can influence prospects for peace, including:
 Withdraw school fees
 Build on community initiatives
 Rehabilitate schools and classrooms
 Recognize returnees’ educational attainment
 Provide accelerated learning programmes
 Strengthen education and skills training in disarmament,
 demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes
- Provide psychosocial support
- Recruit teachers
- Strengthened national planning
- Development of information systems
- Financial commitments
- Inclusive education
- Language of instruction
- The curriculum: Curriculum
- Devolution of education governance
- Making schools non-violent environments
Post conflict reconstruction in education poses and immense challenge. Yet success in education can help build government legitimacy and set societies on course for more peaceful futures.