The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack has named at least 74 countries – including Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic and Venezuela – as countries where violent attacks against education were committed from 2013 to 2017. Thousands of students and educators were killed or injured, with hundreds of schools and universities destroyed. Moreover, ongoing crises in Central America caused hundreds of deaths and injuries among the student population from 2018 to 2019.

These attacks limit access to education, diminish the quality of education and consequently obstruct development in these countries.

Millions of children and young people worldwide are victims of international and internal conflicts that are not only on the rise, but are also increasingly drawn out, affecting a greater number of people. New threats, like the proliferation of extremist and world terrorist groups, and armed conflicts related to natural resources, have emerged. The number of refugees and displaced persons who have been forced to leave their homes has continued to rise over the past decade to reach 68.5 million, 36 million of which are minors are under 18 years of age, and only 61% receive a primary education and less than 25% a secondary education.

The victims of these conflicts are schools and universities, students and teachers. Armed groups often use schools for their operations or simply attack them outright. Schools – not only places where children can learn, but also a crucial space for their protection – are destroyed. In some countries, children and young people, particularly girls, risk their lives to go to school and exercise their right to learn.

Much too often, the roads that women and girls take to school pose significant danger of sexual assault, keeping them and their families in a constant state of fear. Upward of 18 million adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are victims of sexual violence at school.

The result is an increase in school drop-outs, particularly among girls, a group already at risk because of their age. Not being able to attend school means that girls lose their human right to education, a future, and hope.

Students deserve respect and special protection. Their right to education is recognised in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. International humanitarian law also recognises the importance of the right to education during armed conflicts, focusing specifically on protecting schools.

The adoption of the Safe Schools Declaration, signed today by 84 countries, including Spain, is a significant step in the right direction, as are the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use
Entreculturas advocates for the defence of schools as safe spaces where students can receive an education that protects them against discrimination, guaranteeing a holistic learning experience that provides psychosocial support while also strengthening students’ capacity for resilience and recovery. Schools that are spaces for peace, for coming together, and for reconciliation.

A lost school year can have irreversible consequences. A lost and uneducated generation will never be able to contribute to the reconciliation and rebuilding of their country. Education is the cornerstone to modifying patterns of consumption that could contribute to fewer resource-related conflicts in the long run: education for peace plays a crucial role in post-conflict reconciliation. School is also an important place for protecting girls from gender-based violence, giving them the opportunity to learn skills and abilities that have a positive impact on their well-being and that of their families.

Entreculturas recommends that the Spanish government:

- Align their development and humanitarian aid policies with the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict, since they are a critical roadmap that the countries committed to the Declaration must adapt to different contexts at a national and local level. The Declaration is a tool that aligns the policies of different States and expresses their commitment to protecting education from attack.

- Design, support and implement policies and international development and humanitarian aid programmes that:

  Guarantee schools as safe, protective spaces that cannot be used for military purposes and give children the opportunity to fulfil their right to education and continue learning during situations of prolonged crisis, forced displacement and armed conflicts. To that end, it is essential that 0.7% of the National Income to Development Assistance (AOD) be allocated to this goal, and 10% of this amount earmarked for Humanitarian Aid, 4% of which must be dedicated to education in emergencies.

  Take into consideration the real or potential impact that conflicts have on the most vulnerable groups and focus on reducing future tensions and conflicts and increasing social cohesion. Schools play a crucial role as an element of protection, normalisation and as a place to build a culture of peace and reconciliation, a key tool for increasing the resilience and social cohesion of the affected populations.

  Contribute to making inclusive, equal and quality education a reality, without discriminating against displaced groups or increasing their vulnerability.

  Give specific consideration to vulnerable groups like girls who, because of their age and gender, are at twice the risk, and thus deserving of specific protection from threats like sexual assault, high dropout rates, early marriage and danger at or to/from school.

Entreculturas, along with its international allies Fe y Alegría and the Jesuit Refugee Service, is committed to education as a crucial element of protection, resilience and reconciliation. Which is why it is essential to ensure that schools are safe spaces that provide well-rounded, effective education aligned with the Safe Schools Declaration.