Education as an Approach to Human Security in Afghanistan under the Taliban Regime

Yasushi Katsuma, Ph.D.
Programme Coordinator
UNICEF Office for Japan

Summary

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are the rights-holders whose right to education should be realized by the duty-bearers. In unstable situations where the duty-bearers have difficulties in fulfilling their obligations to respect and realize the child’s rights, the international humanitarian community often finds education as an excellent delivery point for measures to promote empowerment and protection of children. However, in practice, it is not always easy to reach the most vulnerable groups of children in humanitarian assistance, that is, the issue of coverage. In order to address the issue of coverage, situation assessment needs to be conducted, collecting data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. In this context, in 2000, a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was conducted in Afghanistan to improve data availability. According to the MICS data collected in the east of Afghanistan, Afghan girls had been deprived of their access to education. In response, the international humanitarian community strengthened its support to non-formal home-based schools, promoting the process of women’s empowerment. The home-based schools not only served as learning space but also provided girls in unstable situations with protection against various forms of threats. As Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994, the State is the ultimate duty-bearer to realize girls’ right to education. In spite of that, the Taliban government continued to enforce a discriminatory policy to prohibit girls from receiving education, and therefore the international humanitarian community decided not to support the Taliban formal schools. Instead, the capacities of the community level to run the home-based schools was build, which was in accordance with the principle of “non-discrimination.” In this context, the concept of human security helps us broaden our scope in advancing the security of children, expanding the range of actors beyond the state and enhancing human rights-based programming.
The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November in 1989. To date, all but one of the world’s eligible States Parties have already ratified the Convention: The U.S.A. has signed, but not yet ratified it. Afghanistan signed the Convention in 1990 and ratified it in March 1994. It was before the Taliban movement took over the control of Kabul. Nevertheless, the Convention obliges Afghanistan to undertake “all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation” in accordance with the international norms. The Convention also establishes ways in which its implementation will be monitored. For example, the Committee on the Rights of the Child examines reports from the States Parties, considers information submitted by United Nations agencies and NGOs, and makes recommendations.

The article 28 of the Convention establishes the child’s right to education. The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. The 1990 World Summit for Children set a goal: “By the year 2000… universal access to basic education and achievement of primary education by at least 80% of primary school-age children.” That goal has yet to be achieved in many countries, including Afghanistan. Also in 1990, a World Conference on Education for All was held in Jomtien, Thailand. The resulting World Declaration on Education for All asserts that basic education “is more than an end in itself. It is the foundation for lifelong learning and human development on which countries may build, systematically, further levels and types of education and training (article 1-4).” It states that “every person… shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet his basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools and the basic learning content required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning (article 1-1).” A decade later, in 2000, the World Education Forum, held in Dakar, set a Framework for Action, identifying goals and strategies for attaining them.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are the rights-holders whose right to education should be realized by the duty-bearers at the national, sub-national, community and household levels. In unstable situations where the duty-bearers have difficulties in fulfilling their obligations to respect and realize the child’s rights, the international humanitarian community often finds education as an excellent delivery point for measures to promote empowerment and protection of children living in especially difficult circumstances. As the Committee on the Rights of the Child made a comment in 2001, the basic aims of learning are “to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a culture
which is infused by appropriate human rights values. The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence.” At the same time, within the international humanitarian community, there are increasing calls for education to play a role in enhancing child protection in unstable situations. In this context, the concept of human security helps us broaden our scope in advancing the security of children.

**Coverage of Humanitarian Assistance**

The article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses that the right to education must be achieved on the basis of equal opportunity, reflecting the fact that vast numbers of children suffer discrimination in access to education. However, in practice, it is not always easy to reach the most vulnerable groups of children in humanitarian assistance, that is, the issue of coverage.

Before September 11 of 2001, the complex emergency in Afghanistan was almost forgotten by the international community, although the needs for humanitarian assistance were continuously generated by the armed conflict as well as by droughts. Given the limited resources available for Afghanistan, the challenge for the international humanitarian community was to reach the most vulnerable groups with relevant and appropriate humanitarian activities. However, the humanitarian actors, including United Nations agencies and NGOs, had to plan their interventions without access to basic statistical data of Afghanistan. More than 20 years of armed conflict made it practically impossible to conduct any national survey. The lack of reliable data often led to non-optimal allocation of the limited resources available for Afghanistan. In addition to the lack of disaggregated national data, humanitarian actors suffered from the gender and ethnic biases created by Taliban’s discriminatory policy and practice against Afghan women in general and non-Pashtun ethnic groups.

The coverage of certain vulnerable groups was inadequate in some cases. First, given that effective control was in the hands of the Taliban, it was necessary for humanitarian actors to work with the *de facto* government. First, it was difficult for humanitarian actors to reach Afghan women with appropriate assistance. As already documented well, the Taliban’s edicts imposed numerous restrictions on Afghan women’s mobility, discouraging women from directly participating in and benefiting from humanitarian assistance. Particularly, girls were prevented from receiving formal education. Second, as the Taliban is a predominantly Pashtun ethnic group, it was not easy to reach non-Pashtun vulnerable groups, particularly Hazara in the central region. This tendency was further strengthened by the dense concentration of humanitarian actors in the geographical areas close to Pakistan. The majority of international NGOs preferred to work in the eastern region, as the access
from Peshawar was relatively easy.

**Situation Assessment in Afghanistan**

In order to address the issue of coverage, situation assessment needs to be conducted, collecting data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. In 2000, a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was conducted in Afghanistan to improve data availability.

In Afghanistan, reliable national data disaggregated by geographical area, gender and ethnic groups were not available for a long time. Without such disaggregated data, it is extremely difficult to identify which problems exist, where the problems are occurring, who are most affected by them, and how widespread the problems are. In order to identify vulnerabilities leading to new problems as the situation changes, it was imperative for the humanitarian actors to collect basic data in Afghanistan.

In order to assess the current status of the rights of children and women and to develop common baseline data, facilitating monitoring and evaluation for future interventions, UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office decided in the year 2000 to implement a MICS in Afghanistan. This household survey was meant to fill gaps in the data necessary for reporting on the situation of children and women at the end of the millennium. This also was going to provide a baseline from which it would be possible to measure changes in the coming decade. The World Summit for Children, held in New York in September 1990, established the need for this assessment. In order to conduct this survey in Afghanistan, UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office invited experts from other United Nations agencies and NGOs working for Afghanistan to form a steering committee that would ensure consistency and avoid duplication with other surveys.

Technically, the process was smooth: the questionnaire was modified to suit the Afghan context, a stratified sampling strategy was adopted, and interviewers were trained. It soon became clear, however, that access to Afghan women in the survey, both as interviewers and interviewees, was a problem. Afghan women would not meet male strangers who knock on their door, so local female enumerators were needed. Yet, Taliban authorities did not allow Afghan women to be engaged in paid work, except in the health sector.

In June 2000, the Director of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) of the Taliban (the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) came to Islamabad to attend a meeting with UNICEF. In this meeting, the CSO Director verbally approved of the MICS. Therefore, we sent a survey team from Peshawar as
enumerators. This included Afghan men and women working in the health sector. In spite of obstacles, data collection was completed in 22 of 97 districts selected by random sampling. For the most part, the districts where data collection was successful were in the eastern (Nangarhar, Konar, Laghman), southeastern (Ghazni, Paktika, Paktya) and partial Central (Logar and Wardak) regions of the country. However, another Taliban edict was issued in July 2000, which prohibited Afghan women from working with the United Nations or foreign NGOs. Since Afghan women were an integral part of the survey team as enumerators, data collection was suspended in the central region of the country. Meanwhile, we argued that the MICS was health-related and should be exempt from the edict. Though the CSO Director agreed with us, and took the case to the Taliban Supreme Court, the Court denied our request and expressed concern regarding the security of Afghan women.

The CSO Director then asked the Taliban Council of Ministers to exempt the MICS from the edict. In response, the Council of Ministers appointed a subcommittee to review the request. After the review, the subcommittee recommended that the data collection should be allowed to continue. The Council of Ministers agreed with this recommendation and requested the Ministry of Justice to formally approve work on the survey. At the end of September 2000, however, the Minister of Justice rejected the request, citing that the survey was neither urgent nor curative. He also accused the humanitarian agencies of continually trying to find alternative employment opportunities for Afghan women.

On the other hand, in August 2000, we received a letter approving the work on the survey from the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (the "Northern Alliance"). Because of the escalation of fighting among factions in Afghanistan, though, we were not able to send a survey team to the northeastern region.

In spring 2001, I traveled to meet with the governor of Kandahar, the effective seat of the Taliban authorities. There was a breakthrough when the second-highest ranking member of the Taliban finally was convinced that the MICS was necessary. I was referred to the Director of Public Health, who promised to allow his female health workers to become interviewers for the survey. These women were trained, but events subsequent to the September terrorist attack on the World Trade Center buildings led to withdrawal of the survey team. With the data we were able to gather in the east of Afghanistan, we produced a report: “2000 Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey: Volume 1,” hoping that humanitarian and reconstruction assistance will have a better chance of success.

**Ensuring Girls’ Right to Education: A Process of Empowerment and Protection**

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The World Summit for Children estimated that two thirds of the world’s 100 million children without basic education were girls and set goals for increasing the education of female children. These goals were endorsed by the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing, which attributed the disproportionately low numbers of girls in education to “customary attitudes, child labour, early marriages, lack of funds and lack of adequate schooling facilities, teenage pregnancies and gender inequalities in society at large as well as in the family.” The Conference called for full implementation of the article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly held a special session to follow up the Beijing Conference. It noted some progress, but cited some remaining obstacles in improving the education of girls: lack of resources, insufficient political will, persisting gender discrimination and gender stereotyping, among others.

In 1998, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on the right to education. Her mandate is to report on the status of the right to education throughout the world and the difficulties in implementing this right, with particular attention to gender inequality. In 2001, the Special Rapporteur also reported on progress: “In the Arab States, gender disparity has actually increased in 1995-2000 with proportionately fewer girls having had access to schooling.”

It was clear that in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, girls lagged behind their male peers because of the discriminatory education policy. The MICS conducted in the east of Afghanistan also demonstrated that girls had been deprived of their access to formal education. The net attendance ratios at the primary education level were 47% for boys and 12% for girls. The girls responded positively were educated at non-formal home-based schools.

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<th>Region</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>Central (partial)</td>
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<tr>
<td>South-Eastern</td>
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<td>56.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total East</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Age (in years)</th>
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<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>23</td>
<td>15.4</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total East</td>
<td>510</td>
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<tr>
<th>Total East</th>
<th>Male</th>
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The international humanitarian community found the home-based school as an excellent delivery point for measures to promote empowerment and protection of children. The support to non-formal education at the community level promoted the process of women’s empowerment. First, the female teachers who were prohibited from working and excluded from the formal education sector started teaching children in their neighborhood. The international assistance community supported the female teachers’ initiative to start up their own home-based schools, building networks of female teachers. In 1999, there were at least 532 home-based schools supported by the international assistance community. Second, Afghan girls who were not allowed to study at formal schools controlled by the Taliban government were able to find alternative learning space at the home-based schools, developing their skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence.

The home-based schools not only served as learning space but also provided children in unstable situations with protection against various forms of threats. First, the home-based schools brought some elements of physical protection to girls, providing a safe place to play, offering an alternative to destructive behavior and providing regular adult supervision. Second, the home-based schools offered opportunities for self-expression and the chance to engage with peers, promoting psycho-social health. By gathering children together, it supported socialization and established peer networks. Being students also encouraged girls to regain some sense of identity and hope. Third, the instruction at the home-based schools transmitted vital basic skills to girls, including literacy, numeracy and life skills. Acquiring basic skills is not a luxury but essential for children in unstable situations to make decisions about what is in their best interests.

Building Capacities at the Community Level to Address the Issue of Insecurities of Girls

As discussed earlier, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994, and therefore the State is the ultimate duty-bearer to realize girls’ right to education. In spite of that, the Taliban government continued to enforce the discriminatory policy to prohibit girls from receiving education. The international humanitarian community made numerous advocacy efforts to change the discriminatory education policy. However, as the Taliban government kept disrespecting girls’ right to education, the international assistance community shifted its focus from the formal schools to the non-formal home-based schools. There was a conscious decision not to support the Taliban Ministry of Education, due to the discriminatory education policy and practice. Instead, the international assistance community decided to build capacities at the community level to run the home-based schools. The intervention at the community level was in accordance with the general
principle of “non-discrimination” established by the article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In case of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, the state failed to fulfill its obligations to respect and realize girls’ right to education. In response, the international assistance community tried to promote empowerment and protection of girls by supporting home-based schools at the community level. In this context, the concept of human security helps us broaden our scope in advancing the security of children. First, the process of empowering female teachers and girls at the community level encourages us to expand the range of actors beyond the state, strengthening the practice of human development. Second, promoting protection at the home-based schools allows us to address the issue of insecurities of girls in unstable situations, enhancing human rights-based programming.

Reference


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**Yasushi Katsuma, Ph.D.**

Programme Coordinator, UNICEF Office for Japan. Prior to the current assignment, he served for Afghanistan & Mexico. Before joining UNICEF, he served with Engineering Consulting Firms Association. He received his PhD from the Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, LLM & LLB from Osaka Univ., and BA from International Christian Univ., after working as a volunteer in Honduras and studying at the Univ. of California-San Diego.