



Images by Mats Lignell  
courtesy Save the Children

# Schools provide hope in conflict

*In the face of huge challenges, education remains a priority in Afghanistan*

It makes an odd kind of sense: if you're looking for a soft target, they don't come much softer than schools and children.

And in confirmation, more and more schools in places like Afghanistan, the Congo and Nepal are being targeted directly by armed groups.

The statistics are horrifying, in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2009, there have been 2450 attacks on schools. Recently, 50 schoolgirls in northern Afghanistan were reportedly left unconscious and sick after poison gas attacks by the Taliban.

But like Mike Penrose the Emergency Programs Director at Save the Children (STC) says, education is a right, even in conflict zones.

"We see war as being a temporary situation which shouldn't impact on a child's whole life, so education is prioritised at STC, along with food and shelter.

"Their schooling is crucial not only for their personal health and development but for the future peace of their communities – with every additional year of formal schooling, a boy's risk of becoming involved with conflict falls by 20 per cent," Penrose says.

There has been some progress in Afghanistan. Around 4000 schools were reconstructed or built between 2003 and 2009 and here was a six-fold increase in the number of teachers between 2001 and 2008.

There are obvious challenges though, not



the least being that many of the children are traumatised.

Girls face further challenges. In 2001, girls' enrolment in many provinces was almost zero following a Taliban campaign to close all girls' schools in the areas they controlled.

More than half of all girls (58 per cent) are still not enrolled at primary school and their







education remains a hotly, often violently contested issue.

At home, many girls encounter family pressure not to go to school. When families have to choose for only some of their children to go to school, the boys are usually picked, since they will not leave the household once they are married.

In a survey, 38 per cent of children said they felt that “girls are not welcome” in schools. Only 28 per cent of teachers are female; just 1 per cent of teachers are women in Uruzgan province.

Children also report that older girls face harassment and intimidation on their way to school and girls’ schools are particular targets for attack by groups who believe girls’ education should be forbidden.

There are still not enough schools or trained teachers. Half of all schooling occurs in tents or open spaces. Only 22 per cent of teachers have completed secondary school and have some basic teacher training. 1.8 million children in Afghanistan are out of school, two-thirds of them girls.

In rural provinces like Uruzgan, Helmand and Badghis enrolment is below 20 per cent (compared with almost 90 per cent in the capital, Kabul).

STC’s program has two main components: accelerated training for teachers and school building. STC provides both primary and secondary education, drawing the teaching staff from the local population.

“The situation is too dangerous for volunteers from the west to get involved, but once an area has stabilised we will look to improve the quality of the education provided and pursue excellence,” Penrose says.

