



DOCUMENTING EDUCATION UNDER ATTACK

FIVE KEY LESSONS FOR COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND JOURNALISTS

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Documenting the impact of conflict on education is a complex, time consuming and often dangerous process, whose consequences may be difficult to witness. In this context, the relationship between journalists and civil society organisations (CSOs) can be incredibly fruitful. They often share a common aim: to make the world aware of attacks on education and their immense costs to individuals, to communities, and across entire generations. Journalist-CSO partnerships can shed light on injustices, tell powerful human stories, and lead to redress and lasting change for those who have suffered. They can also have powerful mutual benefits: CSOs may receive reports of attacks on education or military use of facilities, while journalists can gain greater access to conflict zones and affected parties

Yet while there is much to be gained from collaborative working, it can also pose challenges. Difficulties arise in the form of understanding, aims and intentions - alongside the practical and logistic issues that conflict settings can engender. On 10 September 2021, following on from the second [UN International Day to Protect Education from Attack](#), the [Right to Education Initiative \(RTE\)](#) and the [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack \(GCPEA\)](#) held a roundtable event for journalists and civil society organisations. Our aim was to explore the possibilities and the problems of working together, and jointly constitute understandings of how to strengthen relationships.

Throughout our discussions, the power of collaboration to enhance both storytelling and the potential for long term change emerged as a key theme. Equally, both sides offered rich insights into how working relationships can be improved. The following points reflect core lessons emerging from our discussions, and synthesise the input and views of journalists and CSO representatives from across the globe.



1. DOCUMENTING ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IS A LONG TERM ENDEAVOUR - AND TIME SCALES OF THOSE INVOLVED MAY DIFFER

Documenting attacks on education is at once time sensitive and a long term endeavour. Both short and long term reporting play a vital role in raising awareness, but serve very different ends. However, it is not always possible to provide a quality analysis of education under attack in a short time frame. The impact of conflict on education extends far beyond immediate destruction to buildings or infrastructure or indeed physical damage and loss of life, and can take years to fully quantify.

Journalists' documentation of education under attack can provide both a strong body of work for CSOs and indeed an evidence base for advocacy, in addition to vital testimony about lived experience. However, some forms of journalism, particularly documentary or audiovisual, take the slow unfolding of consequences into account, and both sides need to consider time frames and objectives carefully.

With this in mind, when considering a partnership, CSOs should consider what kind of reporting they require - for instance, quick coverage or in depth study - and then identify what type of journalist is appropriate for the work they wish to carry out. Visual, text and documentary journalism carry different timelines, objectives and styles of working, and may be more or less suited to the project at hand.

Journalists, for their part, should consider these projects as medium term endeavours - deep documentation of events sought by CSOs cannot take place in a short burst or quick time frame, and the process for publication within a CSO may be slower than that which journalists and media outlets are accustomed to.



2. TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING ARE A TWO WAY STREET

While motivated by the same overall goal - to highlight injustices and make the world aware about rights violations - styles of working and understanding of projects can differ significantly between CSOs and journalists.

It is imperative that CSOs trust journalists to undertake their reporting, and that they are not enlisted for purely fundraising purposes under the guise of investigation. While a reality for the majority of CSOs is the need to secure funding, and public facing initiatives including journalist collaborations can provide a means of doing so, storytelling by journalists cannot be harnessed solely for income-generating ends. Objectivity, truth telling and the ability to cross lines and speak to all parties in a conflict cannot be prohibited.

Journalists, for their part, must understand the political sensitivities and the contexts in which CSOs function. Many CSOs must negotiate complex terrain, particularly when documenting in-country events in nations in which they operate, and some coverage could jeopardise an organisation's ability to continue offering assistance. Consequently, the objectives and potential risks to the organisation in question should be understood and carefully managed by those on the ground, and in their subsequent reporting.

In effect, this means that projects with journalists cannot be overly prescriptive, nor can they seek to promote the work of any particular organisation at the expense of truth telling. Consequently, when discussing a partnership both sides must be fully open about their objectives and share their concerns and the potential political sensitivities before going into the field. If clarity regarding goals and expectations exists from the outset, it is easier to reach common ground and avoid misunderstanding later down the line.



3. THOSE IN THE FIELD ARE OFTEN BEST PLACED TO TELL STORIES - BUT NEED THE TOOLS TO DO SO FROM A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

In today's digitalised world, citizen journalism is enabled by the proliferation of new technologies and our access to information is richer as a result. However, documenting attacks on education is a delicate endeavour which requires a comprehensive understanding of the issue, as well as of ethics and child protection.

Citizens and journalists residing in conflict-zones have deep knowledge of their areas and are uniquely positioned to give eyewitness testimony. But they must be enabled to do so safely and in a way which respects human rights.

Providing training to local journalists on how to document human rights violations in the field of education sits outside of the financial and practical capacity of many new outlets. Here, civil society organisations can play a key role - providing training or building funding for grant proposals, to enhance the capacities of local journalists to ensure those in the field can document and record eye witness testimony.



4. GOOD NETWORKS - BOTH IN THE FIELD AND WITH EDITORS - ARE ESSENTIAL

The impact of disruption to education systems through conflict takes over a generation to fully analyse. As a result, education can be a hard sell to many news outlets, for whom the fast-paced nature of online news generation makes slow-burn stories less attractive.

Given these complications, CSOs and journalists must carefully consider their networks - both in the field and with editors. Before engaging in in-field documentation of attacks on education, CSOs should cultivate strong contacts with editors and journalists, and regularly inform them about on-the-ground realities.

Good relationships don't come through press releases alone, and taking the time to get to know those media outlets and journalists who are interested in the region and issues in question is essential. While close and regular contacts with editors is essential, networks on the ground are also paramount, both for effective functioning of the project and as protective systems which guard against the dangers journalists can face.

Overall, the value of strong partnerships goes beyond the immediacy of the project - they reflect both parties committing to document history. Many CSOs can attest to the multiple uses of textual and visual data, including in legal efforts as evidence of rights violations, and as a tool in ongoing advocacy with state representatives to effect positive change and boost compliance with international legal frameworks and commitments. Establishing and nurturing good relationships between CSOs and journalists is thus essential for awareness raising and advocacy, and serves to strengthen the potential of developing a body of historical memory.

5. NOT ALL COVERAGE IS GOOD COVERAGE

Finally, while all stories deserve to be told, it may not always be strategic or in the best interests of the children, young people and communities affected to tell them to a public audience. CSOs refer to instances in which sudden media coverage was damaging both to survivors and judicial work to find those responsible for attacks. Similarly, the journalists present discussed points at which documentation of attacks has either sanitised the media at source - or has presented a degree of brutal sensationalism that does not protect victims' dignity.

The decision to highlight peoples' experiences, and often their traumas, is a complex one. It must take into account the specificities of political and social context, and should help highlight a situation that can lead to meaningful redress for injuries suffered, or progress on affecting change.



A school in eastern Ukraine, 2019. © Diego Ibarra Sánchez / RTE

These reflections are a snapshot of longer, in depth discussions that took place between civil society representatives and journalists spanning four continents. For more information about our work on education in conflict settings, see our monitoring guides for [civil society](#) and [journalists](#), and [GCPEA's Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education](#) and report on [Education Under Attack 2020](#).