

Practical Impact of the *Safe Schools Declaration*

Fact Sheet, Second Edition | May 2025

The ***Safe Schools Declaration*** (the *Declaration*)¹ and its accompanying ***Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*** (the *Guidelines*)² have been instrumental in elevating global awareness of attacks on students, educators, and educational institutions, as well as the military use of schools and universities. Together, they represent a unified international political commitment to addressing these critical threats and their impacts. Since its launch in May 2015, the *Declaration* has garnered the endorsement of **121 countries**,³ demonstrating widespread recognition of the urgent need to safeguard education in conflict settings.

This fact sheet – a second edition update of the 2022 publication of the same name⁴ – seeks to demonstrate progress made at the national, regional and international levels on implementing the *Declaration* and its *Guidelines* to better safeguard education and showcase the practical impact of this political framework to protect students, teachers, schools and universities on the ground.

Increased Protection of Education in National Policies and Practices

- **Denmark**,⁵ **Ecuador**,⁶ **New Zealand**,⁷ and **Switzerland**⁸ have updated their military manuals including explicit protections for schools from military use. The **United Kingdom**⁹ and **Norway**¹⁰ have updated their military policies to reflect their commitments. Following a Chief of Defense Staff directive for the implementation of the *Declaration* in May 2017, **Canada**¹¹ has integrated the *Declaration* into the Armed Forces operations and training.
- At least 10 countries, including **Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, and Ukraine**, have established national and/or regional technical committees to follow up on the implementation of the *Declaration*, composed of relevant ministries, UN agencies and civil society representatives. Most of these committees have adopted action plans to guide and monitor implementation of the *Declaration*. Some of these action plans, such as in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ukraine also include actions to facilitate exchanges of experiences on the implementation of the *Declaration*, one of the key commitments of the *Declaration*.
- **Burkina Faso** established a technical committee to follow up on the implementation of the *Declaration* in August 2023, composed of one national and five regional committees, whose members were trained on the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines*. The operationalization of the regional committees has enabled the creation of surveillance and early-warning committees in areas with high security challenges. The Education in Emergency Technical Secretariat (ST-ESU), a structure of the Ministry of Education, monitors the situation of schools in the country. It collects data on closing, reopening, and delocalization of schools and on enrollment of students displaced due to the security context, producing monthly reports in collaboration with the General Directorate for Sectoral Studies and Statistics. The ST-ESU has disseminated the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* among the armed forces, education actors, and the community and has provided training on peace education and risks associated with mines and remnants of war.
- During an exchange of experiences between **Burkina Faso** and **Mali** in Bamako in July 2024, Burkina Faso's Ministry of Education committed to incorporate the *Declaration* into the country's Education in Emergencies Strategy. The *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* were subsequently taken into account in the development of a three-year action plan for the National Strategy in April 2025.¹²

- In **Cameroon**, a training on the *Guidelines* was held in February 2024, for defense and security forces from the national level and from the North-West and Far-North regions. In December 2024, Cameroon's Ministry of Secondary Education led the adoption of a national *Safe Schools Declaration* "roadmap" and the establishment of a national technical committee to follow up on its implementation.¹³
- In 2020, the **Central African Republic** promulgated the **Child Protection Code**, which criminalizes attacks on schools and their occupation.¹⁴ This is the first piece of legislation in Africa banning or criminalizing military use of schools. The content of the Code was disseminated among children, parents, communities, and child protection actors, and its provisions were integrated into school curricula, as a rare example of convergence of human rights education, peace education, and access to justice.¹⁵ According to GCPEA's research, the Central African Republic has experienced a decrease in the military use of educational facilities in 2022 and 2023 compared with previous years analyzed by the Coalition.
- In **Colombia**, following the endorsement of the *Declaration* in 2022, the government developed an action plan to implement the *Declaration* for 2022-2026 and established an interinstitutional committee composed of relevant ministries and agencies to monitor implementation. The plan incorporates activities to disseminate the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* among the security and defense forces, the educational community, and non-State armed groups. Also part of the plan are mine risk education and prevention and the incorporation of the *Guidelines* in the operational framework of all relevant institutions in charge of the protection of education. Moreover, specific measures are foreseen to provide victims of attacks on education and military use of educational institutions with reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence.
- Also in **Colombia**, attacks on education were included in the early warning system of the Office of the Ombudsman. In February 2024, Colombia's Constitutional Court ordered the public forces to refrain from carrying out civic-military activities directed or involving children living in areas of armed conflict, including in schools. The court considered that these activities put children at risk, threatening their fundamental rights to life, integrity, and the prohibition of participating in armed conflict.¹⁶
- In **Mali** in early 2019, the education ministry established a National Technical Committee for operationalizing the *Declaration*, including representatives from the Ministry of Defense. Nine regional and four local technical committees with a similar composition have since been established. In May 2020, the Ministry of Education issued a letter to the Ministry of Defense asking them to respect the spirit of the *Guidelines* while schools were closed due to the pandemic, and not use schools for military purposes. Capacity building and training of stakeholders led to a change in the conduct of the defense and security forces: they ceased occupying schools and started to use prefabricated military buildings instead.¹⁷
- **Mali** is also working on a draft law on protecting schools during armed conflicts.
- **México** has incorporated the *Declaration* in the permanent training for armed forces, as well as in annual International Humanitarian Law training.¹⁸
- In **Niger**, four regional technical *Safe Schools Declaration* committees have been established and adopted action plans. In Tillabery, at the end of 2023, a strategy for the reopening of closed schools was adopted. The Ministry of Education committed, among others, to strengthen its emergency management system, develop a national digital strategy to provide distance education, harmonise data collection tools at decentralised levels, and strengthen coordination between relevant ministries in charge of protecting education.¹⁹
- In **Nigeria**, the Federal Ministry of Education in 2021 released its National Policy for Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools, which incorporates the *Declaration* commitments.²⁰ The same year, the Nigerian Ministry of Defence, in collaboration with the Education in Emergencies Working Group, released the *Safe Schools Declaration* Trainer's Guide and Participants' Manual for Nigerian Security Agencies and Human Rights Institutions, which includes a focus on mainstreaming gender and vulnerable groups in the implementation of the *Declaration*.²¹ In December 2022, the Ministry of Finance launched the National Plan for Financing Safe Schools (2023-2026) which provides funding for various policies and initiatives to protect schools, learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff from attack.²² As part of the plan's implementation, a National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre was established with the mandate to ensure that schools across the country are secure, coordinating the response of security agencies to attacks on education.²³ Security personnel were trained for this purpose across Nigeria's 36 states and the federal capital. Safe Schools Squads have been established in the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps and the Nigeria Police Force.

- Also in **Nigeria**, the National Human Rights Commission is leading the work on a draft law on the protection of education from attack.
- In **Somalia**, the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* are part of the training on children and armed conflict provided to the armed forces by the Ministry of Defence's Child Protection Unit.²⁴
- In June 2020, in **Spain**, the Ministry of Defence released its new National Defence Directive stating that in their operations abroad, the armed forces will be supporting the implementation of “the Safe Schools initiative”.²⁵ The Defence Policy Directive 2020 implements the National Defense Directive, setting the objectives of Spain's Defence Policy, which include contributing to the Safe Schools Initiative, for which contingents deployed in peace operations will receive specific training.
- **Yemen's** Ministry of Education adopted a National Guide for Safety and Security in Schools in 2021 as the culmination of a high-level national initiative to strengthen the protection of schools through agreed upon principles of protection and emergency preparedness planning. Among the principles listed in the Guide is “preventing the use of school buildings by armed groups”.²⁶ The Guide has been disseminated widely among the educational community through training and awareness raising materials.
- The Government of **Ukraine** adopted an action plan for implementing the *Declaration* in August 2021 that was reviewed and updated in March 2024, expanding its scope to the entire territory of Ukraine. Civil society supported the government in training officers in the armed forces on the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines*. Since the escalation of the hostilities, the Ministry of Education and Science instituted remote learning and several measures to enhance the safety and security of students and teachers within schools, including risk education, safety plans, early warning systems, access to shelters, and mine decontamination. Data on attacks on educational facilities has been collected and published on the ministry's education in emergency website.²⁷
- Also in **Ukraine**, according to information shared by the Ministry of Defense with Human Rights Watch, a high-level military order was issued in July 2022 to restrict the military use of educational facilities.²⁸

Protection of Education in Conflict by Non-State Armed Groups

While non-State armed groups cannot endorse the *Safe Schools Declaration*, which is an inter-governmental political commitment, they can take a number of other actions to protect students, teachers, and schools, including implementing the *Guidelines to Protect Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflicts*.

- In the **Central African Republic**, in 2018 and 2019, three armed groups signed action plans with the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC), which covers four grave violations against children, including attacks on schools.²⁹ In 2024, following advocacy conducted by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), an armed group committed to put an end to the six grave violations against children in conflict, issuing a directive to this effect addressed to all operational commanders.³⁰
- In **Mali**, several non-State armed groups that are signatories to the Algiers Peace and Reconciliation Agreement committed to comply with the principles of the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines*. These advances were supported by the national and local technical committees on the *Declaration*, as well as two international organizations. The engagement of community and religious leaders led to agreements with non-State armed groups for the reopening of schools under certain conditions, such as teaching Arabic alongside French and separating girls and boys students.³¹

Increased Leadership, Good Practice, and Standards from Regional Bodies and Mechanisms

- The **African Union Peace and Security Council** has, over the years, expressed support for the *Declaration*. For example, at its 994th meeting on 11 May 2021, the Council took “note of the growing number of AU Member States who have signed and endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and its Guidelines as a non-binding framework assisting States in undertaking their respective obligations under international law.”³²
- In 2020, the **African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child** (ACERWC) adopted General Comment on Article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: Children in Situations of Conflict, which states that “attacks on students, educational personnel and schools” are prohibited, including “sexual violence, abduction, and forced recruitment”. All Member States are urged to endorse the *Declaration*; “the African Union and other relevant African inter-governmental organizations that authorize peace support operations should adopt an explicit ban on the use of schools in their operations”.³³
- Following the **ACERWC’s** General Comment of 2020, the African Union adopted a Doctrine on Peace Support Operations, in January 2021, which directly refers to the central commitment of the *Declaration*, namely, to “ensure that schools are not attacked and used for military purposes”. In effect, this is a prohibition against using schools for military purposes by regional peacekeepers.³⁴
- The **ACERWC** also developed a Model Law on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts in Africa, which includes a prohibition of attacks on, and the military use of, schools.³⁵
- In 2021, the **African Union** established the African Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflict (AP CAAC) to strengthen the CAAC agenda, including attacks on education, within AU processes. In that same year, the AU co-hosted the *Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration*, which took place in Abuja, Nigeria.
- In the conclusions of the Ministerial and High-Level Open Session on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights and Welfare of Children in Situations of Conflict in Africa, held in Banjul, **The Gambia**, in December 2023, the **African Union** reaffirmed its commitment to the *Declaration*, emphasizing the “imperative of Member States to ensure sensitization on the rights of children in the communities and endorse, domesticate and implement the Safe Schools Declaration to ensure continuity of education in conflicts”.³⁶
- In June 2024, on the occasion of the Day of the African Child, the **United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child** and the **ACERWC** released a joint statement calling on “States parties to fully commit to the Safe Schools Declaration, thereby preventing the use of and or attacks on schools by armed forces”.³⁷
- In its first education in emergencies policy communication in 2018, the **European Commission** voiced support for the *Declaration*, declaring that the EU “will support initiatives to promote and roll out the Safe Schools Declaration,” and acknowledging that the practice of military use of schools increases violence in education settings and negatively affects access to education.³⁸
- In the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child released in 2021, the **European Commission’s** key actions include to “continue allocating 10% of humanitarian aid funding for education in emergencies and protracted crises, and promote the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration.”³⁹
- On 24 June 2024, the **European Union** significantly updated its Children and Armed Conflict framework by adopting revised guidelines for work in this area, which includes support for the endorsement and implementation of the *Declaration*.⁴⁰
- The **Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (ICESCO), a specialized organization that operates under the aegis of the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation** (OIC), has expressed its support for the *Declaration* and called on all of its members to endorse and implement it.⁴¹
- At the Vilnius Summit (11-12 July 2023), Allies approved **NATO’s** first Policy on the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict, in which it commits to “adopt the highest standards in protecting schools, students, teachers and other important elements of educational processes in its missions, operations and activities” and in so doing, to “consider the best practices of all Allies [...] including, as applicable, the *Safe Schools Declaration* and its associated *Guidelines*”.⁴²

Protection of Education in Peacekeeping Operations

- Following the **Central African Republic's** endorsement of the *Declaration* in 2015, MINUSCA, the in-country UN peacekeeping mission, issued a directive replicating much of the text of the *Guidelines*, and stating that “the use of a school or university by a party to a conflict is not permitted.”⁴³ In 2015 and 2016, schools occupied by peacekeepers were vacated; and in another instance peacekeepers turned down an offer to use a school for accommodation. In 2016, the mission also successfully vacated five schools that were being occupied by armed groups in the country.
- In 2017, the **UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations** (UNDPO) developed a child protection policy that strengthens its policy banning the use of educational facilities by peacekeepers, and notes that UN peace operations have an obligation to promote and adhere to the *Guidelines*.⁴⁴ UN DPO has subsequently released a range of training materials that reference the child protection policy and ban on military use of schools.
- GCPEA has not identified any reports of military use of schools or universities by UN peacekeeping forces occurring since early 2017.

Heightened International Standards, Positions, and Good Practices on the Protection of Education from Attacks and Military Use

- **High-level UN officials** have expressed support for the *Declaration*, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who consistently urges all States to endorse the *Declaration* in his annual reports on children and armed conflict and protection of civilians. Likewise, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, regularly calls for endorsement of the *Declaration*,⁴⁵ and conducts bilateral advocacy with states to encourage endorsement and implementation.
- The First annual **UN International Day to Protect Education from Attack** was established by a unanimous decision of the **UN General Assembly** and celebrated on September 9, 2020,⁴⁶ providing an annual opportunity to galvanize action to protect education. The resolution noted efforts of Member States that are signatories to the *Declaration*, hereby suggesting value of endorsement and implementation of the *Declaration*. Commemorating the 2024 International Day, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged “all countries to fully endorse and implement the Declaration, support the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, and stand with all efforts to ensure that children and young people can continue their learning — both in times of crisis and after the fighting stops.”⁴⁷
- On September 10, 2020, the **UN Security Council** (UNSC), under the presidency of **Niger**, held an **Open Debate on Attacks against Schools as a Grave Violation of Children's Rights**⁴⁸ - the first formal debate by the UNSC on attacks on education. This led to the UNSC milestone **UNSC Presidential Statement**⁴⁹ – the first outcome document solely focused on attacks on education, which notes efforts of States that have endorsed the *Declaration*.
- On 29 October 2021, the **UNSC** unanimously adopted **UNSC Resolution 2601 (2021)**⁵⁰ on the protection of education during conflict. The resolution, the first thematic resolution on attacks on education, references the *Declaration*, condemns attacks against schools, children, and teachers, and urges parties in conflict to immediately safeguard the right to education.
- At the 47th session of the **Human Rights Council (HRC)**, in July 2021, **HRC Resolution 47/6** on the right to education,⁵¹ referenced the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* for the first time, noting efforts of endorsing States and calling on States to consider implementing the *Guidelines*. The subsequent 2023 **HRC Resolution 53/7** on the right to education⁵² further strengthened language by explicitly calling States to consider endorsing the *Declaration* and implementing the *Guidelines*, as well as to take into account UNSC Resolution 2601 (2021).
- The **HRC** also advanced standards on the protection of education in conflict, increasing accountability for attacks on education and *Declaration*. A milestone example was the 2024 **HRC Resolution on Myanmar**⁵³ which urged all parties to cease attacks on education, investigate and prosecute violations, avoid military use of schools, and implement UNSC Resolution 2601. It also highlighted the relevance of the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines*.

- The 2024 **HRC Resolution on Ukraine**⁵⁴ was also particularly important as it strengthened condemnation of attacks on schools. It also included a child-rights perspective by strongly condemning the “devastating impact on children’s right to education and a profound psychological impact on children” of attacks. It also recalled the obligations under International Humanitarian Law involving the protection of civilian objects, including schools, in situations of armed conflict.
- In 2024, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** issued notable recommendations to States on the protection of education, including on endorsing the *Declaration*. For instance, it recommended to the **Russian Federation** “to recognize that hospitals and schools are civilian objects that may not be targets of attack and take measures to deter the military use of schools by Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups” and “to take all feasible precautions to avoid damage and protect civilian objects, including schools and endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.”⁵⁵ It also recommended to **Israel** “to immediately cease all attacks on schools, hospitals and medical facilities, including ambulances and protected persons, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law; to facilitate the reconstruction of those that have been attacked; to take all measures necessary to prevent future attacks on hospitals and schools and ensure the safety of children in such environments; and to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration.”⁵⁶
- The **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** has also issued relevant recommendations on the implementation of the *Declaration*, including to the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**: “through direct negotiation with non-State armed groups, ensure respect for women’s and girls’ right to education without fear of violence or attack by preventing attacks on schools, teachers, school administrators and students, guided by the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict”.⁵⁷
- **CEDAW** also recommended to **Niger** to “ensure access to safe and high-quality education for girls and women, strengthen measures to prevent the occupation of schools by the military and armed groups and implement the Safe Schools Declaration, the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict and Security Council resolution 2601 (2021).”⁵⁸
- In 2023, the **UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education** stressed that the right to education suffers no derogation under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and highlighted the *Declaration* and the *Guidelines* as crucial tools.⁵⁹ In her 2023 report to the UN General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur stressed that international law urges “States, especially parties to armed conflict, to refrain from actions that impede children’s access to education and to consider concrete measures to deter the use of schools by armed forces and armed non-State groups in contravention of applicable international law.”⁶⁰ In 2024, the Special Rapporteur recognized that the occupation of schools by armed forces has a negative impact on academic freedom and institutional autonomy,⁶¹ and she joined other UN independent experts in denouncing a “scholasticide” in Gaza.⁶²
- In 2023, the **Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC)** adopted a Policy on Children⁶³ which recognizes that disruption of education is one of the most damaging effects of armed conflict on children and that some war crimes have unique impacts on them, such as acts intentionally directing attacks against education facilities. In 2024, the ICC Prosecutor issued a milestone application for arrest warrants against two senior Taliban leaders for severe deprivation of the right to education as the crime against humanity of persecution. The Prosecutor acknowledged that Afghan girls and women were severely deprived of their right to education and that other crimes – including imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearance, and other inhumane acts – were committed in connection with the severe deprivation of girls’ right to education.⁶⁴

Experience Sharing and Meetings to Review Progress Made on Implementation of the Declaration

- Strong cooperation and information sharing are instrumental in improving the protection of students, teachers, and schools. The four major **international conferences on the Safe Schools Declaration** - in Oslo (2015), Buenos Aires (2017), Palma de Mallorca (2019), and Abuja (2021), brought together defense, education, and foreign affairs representatives along with civil society to exchange examples of good practice in better protecting students, teachers, and schools.⁶⁵
- Through the framework of the *Declaration*, representatives from ministries of education, defense actors, UN agencies, and international NGOs have participated in **regional workshops** organized by GCPEA to exchange promising practices and examples of increased implementation of the *Declaration*, including in Istanbul in 2015, Addis Ababa in 2016, Panama City in 2017 and Dakar in 2023.
- In 2021, the Spanish Government, with support from GCPEA, convened a **virtual training course** on effective implementation of the *Declaration* and exchange of good practice in safeguarding education. The training brought together more than 90 representatives from ministries of defense, education, and foreign affairs from 20 countries. A second global online training on implementing the *Declaration* took place in 2023, with the participation of around 80 representatives from 22 endorsing States from different regions.⁶⁶
- At the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration in Abuja, Nigeria in October, 2021, Norway launched the State-led **Implementation Network** on the Safe Schools Declaration,⁶⁷ with the aim of promoting cooperation, assistance, and peer-to-peer exchange of experiences and good practice amongst endorsing States. To facilitate exchange of experiences and good practices among network members, several activities have been organized, such as a workshop for countries from West and Central Africa in Dakar in 2023,⁶⁸ a bilateral exchange between the *Safe Schools Declaration* committees of Burkina Faso and Mali in July 2024,⁶⁹ and a workshop on school safety in Latin America and the Caribbean in Colombia in October 2024.⁷⁰ Through the Network, technical support was provided to implementation efforts in countries such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique and Senegal, among others.

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