

## **Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP)**

### **Education for stabilization and peace building in post-conflict Nepal**

#### **Context and Challenges to Education in Nepal**

In 2006 Nepal emerged from a decade long civil war. Despite peacebuilding efforts, continuous political flux poses a threat for the consolidation of peace, particularly in *terai*, or plain lands, a term used to refer to the Southern districts bordering India. The UNICEF-supported Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) initiative forms part of the UNICEF country programme partnership with the Government of Nepal. It is part of UNICEF's peacebuilding framework, which aims to promote a culture of peace, tolerance and respect for different ethnic groups, opinions and values, as well as a culture of civic responsibility among children and young people.

From 1996-2006, Nepal suffered from a civil conflict. Schools and education were badly affected by the conflict: children were recruited into armed groups through the school setting, political groups used schools for their own political ends, and School Management Committees (SMCs) were often unable to function properly due to intimidation or instability. Strikes and violence also inhibited schools from opening and functioning properly or from children attending classes.

The peace process, ongoing since 2006, has helped restore an element of peace and stability to the country, and has had positive effects on educational indicators. However, with the ending of the open conflict between the Maoists and government forces other types of conflicts and violence have emerged to threaten the stability of large parts of the country. Flare ups of political unrest, particularly in the *terai*, continue to disrupt daily activities in a large number of districts, hindering schools and limiting the government's capacity to delivery services and implement programmes.

#### **SZOP Approach and Overview of Programme**

UNICEF and partner organizations' analysis led to the conclusion that if children were not to miss out on schooling, through school closures and because of intimidation, then the resilience of the schools needed to be strengthened and political commitments needed to be made and kept by the political leaders to protect the right to education. Poor school governance was identified as a factor of conflict within schools, which needed to be addressed by strengthening school governance and wider involvement of the community in school management.

Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) is one approach to protect the right of children to access school in conflict and crisis-affected areas and to ensure that education can continue and is not affected by violence. SZOP incorporates diverse programming at the school, village and district levels and builds on UNICEF's ongoing efforts to develop holistic schools, in particular through the Child-Friendly Schools Initiative including the roll-out of the Quality Education Resource Package, targeting improving the teaching/learning process, strengthening of school management and the process of social audits and greater child participation through child clubs.

One of the central elements of the SZOP initiative is the development of Codes of Conduct at the school, Village (VDC) and District-level, which help unite communities, political parties and armed groups around key principles that protect the right of children to education. Working through local partners, whose staffs speak the local languages and understand the complex ground realities, is critically important to the success of SZOP and the development of Codes of Conduct.

Ongoing advocacy with major political parties has been the principal strategy for fostering political actors' understanding of their role in protecting children's rights to education. The highlight of these efforts was

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the 2008 high-level advocacy meeting in Kathmandu where ten Constituent Assembly members representing *terai* districts made public statements on the principle of SZOP. This, together with similar statements from fellow party members at the district level, reinforced the institutional pledge and helped attract more political support for SZOP.

SZOP's **overarching objectives aim to:** Reduce school closures as a result of political activities; Reduce presence of armed forces in and around schools; Reduce misuse of school grounds and buildings; Support political parties to honour commitments with regards to school functioning; Improve governance by SMC/PTA systems and local ownership of schools; Improve school functioning and resolution of internal conflicts; Increase inclusiveness at the school level.

## Results

### Reduction of School Closures for Political Activities

- Over 1 million students in 3,337 schools directly benefited from schools being open on more days as a result of fewer strikes and bandhs closing schools. The spillover effect is amplifying the effects of SZOP: during the December 2009 nationwide Maoists strike they did not close schools, extending the benefit of SZOP to many more Nepali school children.
- More strike organizers are exempting schools from closure – for example in the recent bandh in Siraha schools were permitted to open by strike organizers.
- More schools are refusing to close for small incidents and bandhs.
- Schools in conflict-affected VDCs are resuming longer hours as required to help students catch up with classes.

### Codes of Conduct in place

- 524 schools, which have approximately 130,000 pupils, have been supported to develop a code of conduct and 9 districts have signed codes of conduct;
- 128 VDC and 5 Municipality level codes of conduct have been prepared and endorsed;
- All national stakeholders and political groups (with the exception of armed Madeshi groups) endorsed a national SZOP Code of Conduct.

### Reduced Misuse of School Grounds and Buildings, including reduced Presence of Armed Forces

- Political armed groups and police have moved camps out of schools;
- Armed groups are cautious and do not enter schools with arms as they have done in the past.
- Many schools have been successful in reducing inappropriate use of school property for agricultural activities, animal slaughter, weddings and political programs.

To enhance the capacity of teachers to cope with and address conflict within schools a training package has been developed. The skills provided to the teachers will help to mitigate the impact of conflict and instability on children's learning and to de-fuse tensions, which are affecting the classroom. 30 trainers were trained on the content in March 2010 and 600 teachers are being trained in the current phase.

Overall, these efforts have contributed to greater access to education in the most affected Districts, for both boys and girls, though there is still an unacceptable level of gender disparity which requires continued attention and focused initiatives. As the table below reveals<sup>1</sup>, NERs and NERs for girls have shown marked improvements in seven of the eight SZOP Districts since the programme interventions began two years ago.

District	NER 2007/'08	NER 2009/'10	Girls NER 07/'08	Girls NER 09/'10
Sunsari	88.9	94.8	86.5	94.3
Danusha	74.5	86.1	72.8	86.1

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Mahottari	73.4	84.3	69.4	77.2
Rautahat	77.4	83.5	68	77.1
Sarlahi	72.4	86.3	69.6	82.5
Siraha	88.9	90.2	80.2	89.3
Sapatari	88.3	81.8	84.5	81.7
Bara	82	88.2	80.2	86.2
<b>Average</b>	<b>80.7</b>	<b>86.9</b>	<b>76.4</b>	<b>84.3</b>

The programme also contributed to an improvement in the functioning of schools. Schools overall in the eight districts also remained open for a greater number of days (90%) compared with the figure for 2008 (86%). In the 2008/2009 school year schools directly supported by the programme had closed on average 40 days for strikes and other reasons. The supported schools only closed on average 13 days during the school year 2009/2010. Of the eight supported Terai districts – Sarlahi was the worst with 20 days closed – next Rautahat with 18 days then Bara, Dhanusha, and Mahottari, 17 days closed and Siraha and Saptari 10-12 days with Sunsari doing best with 7 days closed<sup>ii</sup>.

### Challenges and Lessons Learned

The volatile security situation continues to delay the consolidation of peace, including the SZOP programme. Frequent strikes and bandhs in the terai hamper the pace of activities, although local NGOs have usually been able to find their way through the political dynamics, thus the importance of working through local partners.

**Attacks on teachers and members of school governance bodies, and forced closure of schools and extortion from school funds and teachers** continue to affect schools. Community members, school management, students and NGO facilitators have sometimes felt insecure when engaging in SZOP activities and expressing their opinions. SZOP has **responded** by mobilising the media and drawing attention to the violence, which exists to create a safer environment for those involved in education and peace building.

**Lack of monitoring and absence of a strong leading role by the District Education Offices (DEO):** in the most violence prone areas the government staff fear for their lives and refuse to monitor schools. This leaves school teachers feeling unsupported and frustrated. This perpetuates the exclusion of less powerful groups of society and affects the functioning of the schools and quality of education negatively. SZOP has formed joint monitoring teams at the local level to deal with this challenge, including youth and women's groups.

**Engaging political groups:** To date, there are a number of underground political/criminal armed groups who have not formally signed the SZOP Code of Conduct. However, in the *terai*, many members of these armed groups are known and are being invited to SZOP meetings as members of the 'school community', where they are being encouraged to sign and honour these codes of conduct at the school level. In this way, social pressure is being applied, although these groups are not being declared as formal signatories.

Participating schools with a signed Code of Conduct have been doing well with getting adherence. Extortion of money from school budgets by underground-armed groups has declined but is still happening on a regular basis. However, there continues to be violence in many other schools not directly supported by SZOP. The SZOP campaign continues to expand its scope to support additional schools, which are affected by conflict.

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<sup>i</sup> Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Flash Reports, 2007/'08 & 2009/'10.

<sup>ii</sup> World Education Report, March 2010.