

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY REPORT¹

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Rights don't stop in conflict situations. There is an increased need to ensure values of justice, rights, equality, environmental protection, which don't stop when a conflict starts. – Survey respondent

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

Overview

This report explores the importance, feasibility, and approaches to human rights education (HRE) in conflict settings, where human rights violations are widespread. The report emphasizes that, despite the challenges, conflict situations heighten the need for HRE in order to uphold justice, equality and human dignity, both during and after conflicts.

Rationale and Context

With a record number of state-based conflicts in 2023 and immense human and economic costs, the report argues that education about human rights is essential for both immediate protection and post-conflict recovery. Internally displaced people—especially women and children—are particularly vulnerable, making targeted HRE vital. However, such education is rare in conflict settings due to security risks, logistical difficulties, and skepticism about its impact during active violence.

Definitions and Approach

Article 2 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) defines HRE as:

“...all educational, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights.”²

“Situations of conflict” span inter-state, intra-state, sub-state, and extra-state violence, with varied local conditions impacting HRE implementation. The study sought to explore the aims, learners, themes, and strategies of HRE across these conflict contexts.

¹ Full report available: www.equitas.org

² United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/11-united-nations-declaration-human-rights-education-and-training-2011>

Methodology

The study combined a literature review with an online global survey (in English and French) distributed in late 2024 through Equitas and Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) networks. The 20-question survey (8 closed-ended) addressed perceived importance, challenges, ideal learners, themes, and strategies for HRE in conflict situations. Responses from 28 practitioners across regions were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Limitations and Future Directions

The small sample size and regional imbalances (e.g., limited input from East Asia) limit generalizability. The report recommends further qualitative research, including interviews and case studies, to deepen understanding and strengthen future HRE programming in conflict areas.

SECTION 2. RESULTS

2.1 Profiles of Respondents

The survey gathered responses from 28 individuals based in diverse global regions, with the majority of the educators located in Africa and North America. Although themselves not fully representative of all conflict contexts, the respondents bring wide-ranging geographic experiences. Many have worked directly in conflict-affected regions, most notably Africa, Central/Eastern Europe, and Western Europe, while East Asia was notably underrepresented.

Respondents came from a broad spectrum of professional backgrounds. Half were affiliated with human rights education NGOs, while nearly a third worked with general human rights NGOs or held university educator roles. Others represented community-based groups, humanitarian aid organizations, schools, religious institutions, or independent media. This diversity reflects the range of actors involved in delivering human rights education in conflict settings, each bringing different approaches, methods, and spheres of influence—whether through formal education systems, community outreach, or advocacy via digital and faith-based platforms.

2.2 Definitions: Human Rights Education and Conflict Situations

The survey used a condensed UN-based definition of HRE, highlighting learning about, through, and for human rights. Respondents expanded on this, emphasizing that HRE should develop critical thinking, encourage rights-claiming, and instill respect for others' rights. Suggested content areas included human dignity, rule of law, rights-holder/duty-bearer dynamics, and links with social sciences and humanities. In conflict settings, respondents noted the importance of addressing violence, impunity, and promoting compassion for victims. Regarding conflict definitions, the study clarified terms like armed conflict and other situations of violence, covering a range from civil war to political unrest. Most respondents agreed with this framing, underscoring the need for HRE to consider both structural violence and policy impacts.

2.3 Importance of HRE in Conflict Situations

Nearly all respondents agreed on the importance of HRE in conflict settings (75% strongly agreed, 21% somewhat agreed). Some acknowledged that while urgent needs like health and safety may take precedence, HRE plays a vital long-term role. It can help build peace, support conflict resolution, and empower communities to become changemakers. Others pointed out that HRE fosters participation, identifies community norms, and can act as a deterrent to human rights violations.

2.4 Challenges to HRE in Conflict Contexts

Most respondents (89%) found HRE in conflict zones to be highly challenging. Challenges were grouped into four dimensions:

- Security and Risks: General dangers to educators and participants, associated with the conflict situation, political targeting
- Logistics: Lack of infrastructure, displacement, limited resources
- Sociopolitical Context: Mistrust, rejection of human rights and HRE, perceived irrelevance during conflict crises
- Perception: HRE seen as secondary to survival with long-term benefits not evident

Proposed solutions include localized approaches, community collaboration, ensuring safety, and emphasizing HRE's relevance to peacebuilding, which are elaborated later in this Executive Summary. The research stresses the importance of non-local actors to build trust with those living in the conflict and to adapt HRE to local priorities and perspectives.

2.5 Planning Strategies for Effective HRE

Respondents highlighted key planning strategies: diagnosing root causes of conflict (54%), partnering with local NGOs (50%), and analyzing local human rights contexts (46%). While partnerships with governments were often viewed skeptically, collaboration with local actors and flexible, context-sensitive planning were widely supported. Recommendations were grouped into two categories:

- Transversal: Ensuring safety, cultural sensitivity, participation, and continuity.
- Capacity-Building: Training in digital and physical security, using local experiences, and tailoring content to specific needs (e.g., women, children, displaced persons). Integrating practical tools—like learning materials, songs, or legal guidance—was also advised.

2.6 Implementation Strategies for HRE in Conflict Situations

Survey respondents highlighted participatory methods (63%), use of local trainers (48%), and a victim-centered approach (41%) as the most effective strategies for implementing HRE in conflict contexts. Other relevant methods included community-oriented projects, peer training, and social-emotional learning. Comments emphasized the importance of in-person, culturally contextualized, locally-led initiatives tailored to victims' needs. While some supported digital tools (videos, mobile learning), most favored offline strategies that foster trust,

emotional healing, and meaningful engagement. Peer learning and trauma-informed approaches were seen as particularly useful where social-emotional support is needed.

2.7 Ideal Learners for HRE in Conflict Situations

Respondents prioritized people marginalized due to identity (81%), followed by youth (65%) and women (58%) as the most important HRE learners in conflict contexts. These groups are especially vulnerable to violations and are viewed as key agents of change. Teachers (42%) were also highlighted for their multiplier effect. Children (38%), NGO staff (35%), and municipal authorities (31%) followed. Few prioritized decision-makers or media professionals, reflecting either distrust or a focus on empowering victims and frontline actors. Some respondents noted the dual purpose of HRE: empowering victims to claim rights and reminding duty bearers of their responsibilities.

2.8 Learning Outcomes for HRE in Conflict Situations

Respondents identified learning outcomes across three domains:

- Knowledge: Understanding human rights and humanitarian law, root causes of conflict, and harmful practices
- Values: Promoting equality, justice, empathy, and peaceful coexistence
- Skills: Advocacy, conflict resolution, non-violent communication, and applying the “do no harm” principle

Profession-specific applications (e.g., medical ethics for physicians) and intercultural understanding were also suggested. The overarching aim of HRE is to empower learners to act safely and effectively in challenging environments.

2.9 Key Human Rights Themes for HRE in Conflict Situations

The most relevant themes included the rights of displaced persons (63%), conflict resolution and coexistence (52%), and a general introduction to human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (48%). Women’s and children’s rights (44% each) and sexual violence in war (37%) also ranked high. Lower-priority themes included international humanitarian law, advocacy, migrant rights, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). The data reflects a practical orientation toward immediate needs (displacement, violence, reconciliation) and a preference for foundational human rights education in unstable contexts.

2.10 Recommendations for Effective HRE Programs in Conflict Contexts

Key recommendations include:

- Do no harm: Ensure physical, emotional, and digital safety.
- Contextualize: Base programs on needs assessments and local realities.
- Be inclusive: Engage local actors and prioritize gender sensitivity.
- Offer practical help: Provide realistic resources and guidance.

A detailed 10-point list included in the full report calls for integrating HRE within humanitarian aid, involving affected communities, and designing programs that are responsive, realistic, and sustainable in conflict environments.

SECTION 3. SUMMARY OF LESSONS FOR PRACTICE

This section builds on the results and distills five key lessons for effectively designing and implementing Human Rights Education (HRE) in conflict settings, emphasizing the need for context-specific, flexible, and local approaches.

Lesson 1. Context Matters

HRE programs must be tailored to the unique political, social, and security dynamics of each conflict. Practitioners should conduct context analyses and needs assessments to adapt HRE content, delivery methods, and partnerships. It is also crucial to acknowledge the influence of the implementing organization's structure and approach, especially where civic spaces are limited.

Lesson 2. Emphasize Relevance

In conflict zones, HRE is often perceived as a lesser priority. Practitioners must clearly demonstrate its short- and long-term value—such as supporting community resilience, reducing tensions, and contributing to peacebuilding—through practical, immediate applications rooted in local realities.

Lesson 3. Prioritize Safety and Adapt to Constraints

Ensuring the safety of learners and educators is paramount. Programs must address physical, emotional, and digital security and be delivered creatively within logistical constraints. Partnerships with local actors and integration into humanitarian services can enhance both safety and reach.

Lesson 4. Adopt a Rights-Based and Inclusive Approach

HRE should be developed with local communities, especially those most vulnerable, to ensure cultural relevance and sustainability. Participation, empowerment, and accountability must underpin programming, which should also promote both protection and responsibility among participants.

Lesson 5. Apply and Adapt Good Practices with Conflict Sensitivity

While established HRE methods remain relevant, they must be adjusted to address trauma, provide realistic tools for navigating conflict, and support learners' well-being. Content should also prepare communities for post-conflict rebuilding, including justice and accountability mechanisms.

Together, these lessons underscore the need for flexible, locally owned, and safety-conscious HRE that empowers individuals even in the most fragile environments.

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