Joint Statement by the Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts, the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department of the African Union Commission and Save the Children International, on the International Day to Protect Education from Attacks

Addis Ababa, 09 September 2022 - The Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts, the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department of the African Union Commission and Save the Children International join the rest of the African continent and the international community to commemorate the International Day to Protect Education from Attack.

The African Union (AU) has taken significant steps to mainstream child protection in its peace efforts. The normative provisions of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), the adoption of a policy on Child Protection in African Union Peace Support Operations and the Policy on Mainstreaming Child Protection in the African Peace and Security Architecture, and several resolutions of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union confirm the AU's unwavering commitment to children's rights, especially in conflict situations. The Peace and Security Council, at its 1101st Session held on 18th August 2022, closely examined the Continental Child Protection Architecture and made profound and progressive decisions on the issues critical to the protection of the rights of children on the continent including directing the development of guidelines for the participation of children in PSC sessions to ensure a systematic engagement. The Council also placed children's voices, particularly those affected by armed conflicts, at the epicentre of the continental discourse to advance all the integrated initiatives in safeguarding children's rights. These child protection tools adopted by the policy organs of the AU also aim to guarantee the protection of education in Africa from all forms of attack during conflicts.

The International Day to Protect Education from Attack provides an opportunity to reflect on the concrete actions the AU Member States took to insulate education from the vagaries of conflicts. It is, however, disconcerting to note that the attacks on education in conflict settings are not relenting. The number of attacks on schools continues to rise, including attacks on students and educational personnel and the military use of schools, depriving children of their right to education and reducing the availability of safe and child-friendly spaces. These jeopardise children’s futures and access to essential services and expose them to other violations.¹ It is reprehensible to note that children are abducted, killed or maimed, and suffer sexual violence in or on the way to school. Some parties to the conflicts have also used schools as recruitment grounds. Of concern is the realisation that attacks on education are affecting girls disproportionately as girls’ schools have been frequent targets for abductions. Such attacks assault efforts geared towards improving the already limited access to education for the girl child on the continent. The uncomfortable reality is that in some contexts, the affected girls may never be able to return to school as they strive to earn an income or are forcibly married off to support their families.

The Commemoration of the Protection of Education from Attack also provides an opportunity for the Member States yet to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration to expeditiously do so and develop national action plans with measurable implementation targets. This is in recognition of the fact that the attainment of the Pan African vision as encapsulated in Agenda 2063 for “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena” is incumbent on guaranteeing access to quality education for the children of Africa, including those affected by conflict. Attacks on education directly derail Africa from a trajectory to achieving the desired aspirations of Agenda 2063. Therefore, the Safe Schools Declaration is a critical instrument that can assist the Member States in upholding their commitment to protecting the sacrosanctity of education in conflict situations.

It is worth highlighting that attacks against education are among the six grave violations committed against children in conflict settings. As such, parties to conflicts on the continent must be reminded that committing offences against children will not go unpunished. Therefore, parties to conflicts must respect principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

In this regard, Member States are called upon to renew their commitment to protecting the rights and welfare of children at all times, particularly during conflict situations. We take this opportunity to further call upon the AU States to take all necessary measures to ensure the continuity of education during conflict situations, including enacting and enforcing laws to bring perpetrators of violations against children’s rights to account.

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