

SAMANTHA NUTT



THOSE WHO KNOW,

TEACH

**THE ONLY WAY TO BE CERTAIN THAT CHILDREN WILL HAVE A SUSTAIN-
ABLE FUTURE THROUGH EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD IS TO
FULLY INVOLVE LOCAL COMMUNITIES AT ALL STAGES.**

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS I am most frequently asked, as Executive Director of War Child Canada, is, 'If we really want to make a difference in the lives of those living with war or poverty, globally, what's the single most important thing that we can do?' And my answer is always the same: *support education*. This support isn't limited to initiatives that promote education at the primary and secondary levels in developing countries,¹ but is also directed at Canadian students of all ages so that they, too, can be globally engaged and involved. The challenge, then, is in knowing which kind of educational programs have the greatest impact – both on Canadian students and on students in the developing world.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example – a war ravaged country in which War Child Canada has been working for the past six years – children's educational needs go far beyond bricks and mortar. While rebuilding schools is a high priority and something that the organization is actively engaged in, students need more than a safe place in which to learn and grow. Girls, especially, need the support of families and communities in order to make sure that they have an equal opportunity to attend school. In many conflict-affected areas, ensuring girls' access to education requires careful community sensitization and mobilization, as families with limited resources often fail to see the benefit of girls finishing primary school. And while the challenges may be different for boys, they too require special consideration and support. Many young boys in the DRC found themselves caught up in an eight-year civil war that saw them exploited as combatants, porters, and labourers for various armed groups.

Congolese children have witnessed horrors that many of us, living in Canada, can thankfully not even imagine. Congolese teachers, therefore, are faced with the insurmountable task of not only helping children learn, but also of acquiring the knowledge and training they need to meet the unique academic and psychosocial needs within their classrooms. On top of all of this, schools in the eastern DRC were looted – stripped of even the most basic classroom supplies in an environment where children can rarely afford shoes, let alone textbooks, pens, and paper.

So any meaningful effort to support education in the DRC – or, for that matter, any conflict or poverty-stricken community – must carefully balance all of these competing needs and priorities in order to be maximally effective. It means providing a structurally sound, child-friendly educational environment with well-trained, sensitized teachers. It also means working diligently to ensure that communities take ownership of their schools and are prepared to invest both human and financial capital into maintaining them.

EN BREF Si nous voulons vraiment changer la vie des personnes vivant dans un contexte de guerre ou de pauvreté, dans le monde, la chose la plus importante que nous puissions faire consiste à appuyer l'éducation. Le défi consiste alors à établir quels types de programmes éducatifs ont le plus grand impact – tant pour les élèves canadiens que pour ceux des pays en développement. La seule façon de s'assurer que les enfants des pays en développement aient un avenir durable grâce à l'éducation consiste à faire participer pleinement les collectivités locales à toutes les étapes, en tenant compte de leurs priorités et besoins particuliers. Le succès de ces entreprises dépend également de l'éducation globale que reçoivent les enfants ici, chez nous; une éducation qui doit insister sur les droits fondamentaux, la dignité et les questions humanitaires en tant que choix moraux plutôt qu'un acte de charité, ainsi que sur l'importance d'engager les bénéficiaires dans leurs propres plans de développement.

- A child born to an educated mother is more than twice as likely to survive to the age of five.
- HIV/AIDS infection rates are halved among young people who finish primary school.
- 101 million children of primary school age are out of school worldwide.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 41 million primary-school-age children are out of school, and in South Asia 31.5 million remain out of school.
- In the DRC, more than 4.4 million children are not in school. This number includes 2.5 million girls and 400,000 displaced children.
- In the DRC, more than a quarter of children ages 5 to 14 are working.

For these reasons, the only way to be certain that children will have a sustainable future through education in the developing world is to fully involve local communities at all stages. All of War Child Canada's school rehabilitation and teacher training programs rely on local labour and on the full participation of communities, as well as local government and civil society groups. And while this process can often be more time-consuming than sending in foreign staff or volunteers to do the work, it is the only way to prevent a cycle of international aid dependency and to promote community pride and resiliency. I can tell you from first-hand experience that few things make my job more satisfying than watching a war-ravaged community pull together to create a brighter future for their children through education. I have listened to Congolese children who, five years ago, could neither read nor write, tell me about their hopes and dreams to be their country's next generation of doctors, lawyers, business leaders, and presidents – and it all started with the reopening of a school.

But the success of initiatives such as these is not limited to what happens at the field level; it is also wholly dependent upon the kind of global education that teachers impart back here at home.

When it comes to Canadian students, there are certain fundamental principles that can and must be adhered to in order to ensure that younger generations of Canadians are fully engaged in and informed about global issues. First, it is imperative that students of all ages – from elementary level through high school – understand that all people, irrespective of gender, race, religion, geography, or ethnicity, deserve to live with dignity and are entitled to the same basic rights and protections. This awareness is critical to respecting and promoting human rights worldwide, and it begins with the recognition that we cannot ignore injustice simply because it doesn't directly involve us.

Second, there needs to be a philosophical shift in the didactic way in which international humanitarian and development issues are taught as an act of charity, rather than as a moral choice. When the suffering of the people of Darfur, for example, is reduced to a charitable act – something that we can choose, as Canadians, to pay atten-

tion to or not – we fail to learn from the lessons of history, which teach that we have a moral and ethical obligation to respond in the face of injustice. War is, after all, a distinctly human construct, and it requires a distinctly human response to mitigate its effects, globally. The death of six million Jews in World War II and nearly one million Rwandans in 1994 should serve as an omnipresent reminder that allowing horrors to unfold anywhere in the world is indefensible. When we teach children that helping those in need either here at home or beyond our borders is 'charity' – rather than a social responsibility – we leave them believing that there is always the option of doing nothing whenever it suits us.

And finally, it is critical that Canadian students understand what good development *really* means, and these are conversations that can be had even with elementary-aged students. All students understand the importance of learning by doing things for themselves. They are therefore capable of understanding that when we strip that opportunity from people living with war or poverty globally, we deny them the chance to learn and to make their own positive contribution towards their communities. This also disrespects the level of knowledge, experience, and capacity that exists within these communities – in effect, a form of cultural arrogance. So when Canadian students approach international development with the belief that the most effective contribution they can make is to fly to a developing country and do the work themselves, they are not fully aware of the limitations of their impact. This does not mean that overseas volunteer work involving students ('voluntours') cannot have a major educational benefit in terms of expanding a student's horizon and making him or her more globally aware; but, without exception, these kinds of programs give the educational advantage to Canadian students rather than to those in the developing world. In order for development initiatives to be most effective and sustainable, the best approach – and the one that should be taught in Canadian classrooms – is the one that includes local communities in identifying *their* needs and *their* priorities and that fully engages them in the learning process.

Canadian humanitarian organizations that forge strong linkages to local partners, and that meaningfully and systematically invest in local capacity building, see first-hand the lasting impact of their efforts – an impact that can be felt long after a project has ended. For these reasons, it is essential that Canadian students learn that good development is about much more than what 'we' can do for 'them' or vice versa; it is, at its core, about promoting lasting change by respectfully fostering community self-reliance.



War Child Canada is an award-winning charity that provides opportunities and long term solutions for war-affected children, focusing on education, strengthening children's rights, reducing poverty, and fostering self-reliance. War Child Canada works in partnership with local people and organizations to build sustainable programming that empowers children and their communities. War Child Canada currently provides active support to communities in Afghanistan, Sudan (Darfur), Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, and Georgia. War Child Canada also generates awareness, support, and action for children's rights everywhere and has domestic outreach programs in schools and among youth across Canada. For more information, please visit www.warchild.ca

Over the past year, elementary students at Glencairn and Empire Public Schools in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, undertook a massive campaign to raise sufficient funds to support the reconstruction of a war-ravaged school in the DRC through War Child Canada. One kindergarten class alone spent the entire year collecting pennies, totaling \$14,000. Many children opted out of receiving birthday presents in lieu of donations, and some sold customized bookmarks. Their hard work won't just benefit one or two children living with war each year; as a school community, they have made it possible for another community half way around the world to fulfill its dream of enabling hundreds of children every year to fully realize their right to an education. With the funds raised by Glencairn and Empire students, the school will be rebuilt by the Congolese community in partnership with War Child Canada's local staff in the DRC over a period of three months, using local materials, supplies, and labour. The project will include teacher-training, as well. The positive actions of Glencairn and Empire Public School will be felt in the DRC for generations, and, back here at home,

1,100 Canadian children learned a lifelong lesson about social justice. It's never too early to teach children about the importance of being globally aware and involved, or about the value of compassion in our often-troubled world.

Education is the greatest gift any of us can ever receive – it is the dividing line between dependence and independence, between ignorance and tolerance, and between despair and hope. Over the past fifteen years of working in war zones all around the world, whenever I have asked a child – even children living in the most desperate, abject conditions – what they most want for themselves, they universally reply "I want to learn and to go to school." Let's give them that chance. **I**

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Notes

- 1 There is a great deal of debate within the international aid community with respect to what constitutes pejorative terminology when referencing the impoverished countries of the world ("Third World", etc). Much of this debate is academic. To avoid confusion, the term "developing countries" has been used in this article to summarily reference countries at the lowest end of the Human Development Index, including those that are impacted by war.

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