The resilience of education in a broken world

By Susan Hopgood
President, Education International (EI)

This article is the first of a two-part series and is the transcript of a speech delivered by Education International President Susan Hopgood (pictured right) at the Australian Education Union's 2022 Federal Conference in Melbourne in April.

I want to begin by thanking (AEU Federal President) Correna (Haythorpe) and the entire AEU leadership for inviting me to provide an international perspective to you this morning. I can say for certain that this is the first time in history this address has been given by a person who has been largely behind closed doors in Melbourne for the past two years.

At the same time that many of us have been stuck in place, it strikes me that the one central feature we're all witnessing is a world unmoored from its foundations.

In an era of lockdowns, so many circumstances and situations that used to reliably attach the past to the present have become detached.

These are seismic events, a reordering that defies all our experience. But more than that, these events are occurring against the will and largely against the interests of the vast majority caught up in them.

The brutal invasion of Ukraine by the Putin regime has ushered in crisis and chaos on a global scale. Thousands have already been killed and millions are under threat as a much wider involvement in the combat remains a very real possibility.

These events tear away at our foundations – respect for international borders, the right of nations not to be invaded and the proscriptions against the killings of civilians.

Education has reportedly been a special target. In the southern Ukrainian city of Melitopol, teachers and the education department pushed back on Russian occupier demands to teach a new official curriculum. They refused and the Russians have since kidnapped the head of the state education department in retaliation.

It's important that we remember this is not the first time just in our own working lifetimes that war has been waged against civilians. Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, just to name a few. Brutal military campaigns led by a handful and perpetrated against entire societies.

I don't need to tell you how this all disproportionately affects children. Back before most of our lifetimes, at the outset of World War I, Save the Children founder Eglantyne Jebb wrote that "Every war is a war against children."

UNICEF tells us the war has caused one of the fastest large-scale displacements of children since World War II.

This includes more than 1.8 million who have crossed into neighbouring countries as refugees and 2.5 million who are now internally displaced.

Every day in every way, our children are being detached physically and emotionally from the world we all know and from any predictable path forward.

The examples are all around us. We can see with our own eyes the structure of millions of lives shifting off the foundations.

And of course, this destructive trend disproportionately affects the poor, people of colour, nations in the global south.

[Let's] begin with Covid. The first thing to know from an international perspective is simply the numbers: as of last week (late March), [there were] 479 million global cases and just over six million deaths.

But we also have to know that in low-income countries, one in five persons have been vaccinated, while in high-income countries, everyone eligible has received an average of two doses.

Think of that gap. COVID-19 disrupted education for an estimated 1.6 billion students worldwide. The implications of global learning loss are just now beginning to come in and, to no one's surprise, the loss was again focused on vulnerable populations. Hundreds of millions of families were also effectively unmoored from food security, social stability and personal safety.

It's important to recall that Covid hit at a time when reportedly fewer than half of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were able to read a short, age-appropriate text, compared to more than 90 percent in high-income countries; at a time when 128 million youths already faced education disruption due to conflicts, forced displacement, child labor and a range of environmental crises; and at a time when an estimated 69 million more teachers were needed worldwide to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goal for quality education.

The pandemic also hit at a time of crisis for the planet itself.

Here at home, the adjective "record-breaking" has lost all meaning. This year's floods follow last year's cyclones and record rainfall and the year before that the worst wildfires in recorded history.

A group of former defence and security officials wrote in an open letter to the Australian government just weeks ago, saying climate change represents the "greatest threat to the future and security" of our country.

"The first duty of government," these officials said, "is the safety and protection of the people, but Australia has failed when it comes to climate change threats."

In February, the UN body charged with environmental monitoring said three things that should terrify everyone on the planet:

- Climate breakdown is accelerating rapidly.
- Many of the impacts will be more severe than predicted, and
- There is only a narrow chance left of avoiding its worst ravages.

Even without further action, human activity is causing dangerous and widespread disruption, threatening devastation to swaths of the natural world and rendering many areas unlivable.

Unlivable.

Families, communities and nations untethered from their homes and their lands.

And of course, countries that contribute least to the problem shoulder the heaviest burden of the climate emergency, while the countries that created the problem and got rich in the process, can afford the luxury of piecemeal responses and public relations.

And who are the most vulnerable and subject to the most severe impacts?

No surprise: women and girls from marginalised backgrounds and in the poorest communities.

Floods often mean schools are either destroyed or inaccessible. In times of climate-induced crises, such as a natural disaster, drought, or resource scarcity, girls are more likely than boys to be taken out of school to complete household chores like collecting water or taking care of siblings.

In Malawi, it is estimated that 1.5 million girls are at risk of becoming child brides due to the impacts of extreme weather events caused by climate change.

Impoverished girls and women are often forced into sex work in the aftermath of a natural disaster, as documented in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. After our own 2009 bushfires, there was an increase in domestic violence against women and children.

Natural disasters such as floods, fires and hurricanes caused by climate change displace millions of people annually from their homes, and 80 percent of those displaced by the effects of climate change are women.
This forced migration often places women in precarious, unsafe and unstable conditions. Migrant women are more likely to face poverty and are less likely to receive a quality education.

Separated from their families, women and girls face increased vulnerability to human trafficking and sexual assault in overcrowded shelters.

Beyond the natural and accelerated crises are the disasters of policy.

Across the globe, too many governments are failing miserably in their responsibilities to their people.

Basic responsibilities – to collect taxes, to provide infrastructure, to promote equity and equal rights, to invest in their own people, to meet their funding commitments to education.

Failing to adequately invest in teachers' training, many governments have resorted to recruiting unqualified teachers, with salaries well below the minimum wage.

Worse than that, as you well know, governments have turned to privatisation of public education systems.

The pressure from the education technology sector has grown to the point where failure is almost not an option economically. Valued at $254 billion US dollars in 2021, it is expected to reach more than $600 billion in five years.

Successive World Congresses of EI have supported a campaign to confront these forces and the opportunists among them.

Since 2015, EI's Global Response campaign has driven the fight against the growing privatisation and commercialisation of education globally.

The privatisation trend is especially pernicious in Africa. For years the continent has witnessed the rapid growth of so called "low-cost" private schools – schools notorious for employing unqualified teachers with low salaries and few labour rights and operating with little accountability.

For several years, EI and our member organisations have campaigned against these schools, especially Bridge International Academies, the largest "low-cost", for-profit school chain in the world.

The World Bank's private sector division invested more than $10 million US dollars in Bridge's operations in Africa and supported the company's expansion elsewhere.

Just weeks ago, the Bank announced it would no longer invest in this chain. This is a very big deal coming from the largest funder of education in the developing world.

Organising and mobilising public pressure can make a huge difference in a democracy.

We aim to prove that very soon with the elections here in Australia, am I right?

Other parts of the world would envy – at the very least – our access to levers of democracy: the right to vote, to organise, to speak out.

But democracy is not guaranteed. Neither is free association or the right to teach and learn. Your support for EI and international solidarity with the world's educators is making a difference.

In nations including Colombia, Burma, the Philippines, Brazil, Turkey, Bahrain, Iran, Zimbabwe and Afghanistan, the fight for our right to join a union, the fight for democratic values and systems, and the fight for educators to do their jobs – these are the same fights.

In the Philippines, the national police has been profiling leaders and members of EI's member organisation, ACT (Alliance of Concerned Teachers).

At a press conference calling this out, ACT's president Raymond Basilio received a cell phone call from an anonymous man who had detailed knowledge of Raymond's movements and whereabouts.

The man said an order had been issued for him to be killed. For weeks, billboards sprouted up around the country with his face and those of other union leaders. We helped make sure that Raymond never slept in the same place more than one night.

Last June in Myanmar, on the first day of school, more than 200,000 teachers were suspended for opposing the military junta.

Hundreds were arrested and tortured; as of last count in October, 29 had been killed. Many are in hiding.

EI has extended financial support to the families of teachers who were killed during the protests and to those teachers who are jailed or lost their jobs for joining the protests.

In Iran in December, teachers in 110 cities across took to the streets to demand decent salaries and working conditions, an incredibly courageous move in a country where unionists are routinely jailed.

One of them is Esmail Abdi, a math teacher and former Secretary General of the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association and we have been working for his release and that of other jailed teachers and unionists.

In Colombia, where more than 1,000 teachers have been assassinated since 1986 and death threats to union leaders continue to this day, EI has worked tirelessly to defend the lives of education activists.

The teachers' union president Nelson Alarcón, left Colombia for a while after receiving more than 1,000 death threats in one week.

In Afghanistan, with the leaders of the main two teacher unions forced into hiding, we helped obtain buses and worked to get them space on a plane.

They were there when a suicide attack on the very gate they were approaching killed 100 Afghanis and 13 American service members, injuring hundreds more.

Weeks later we managed to evacuate much of this group and are working to get others who were hiding spread across the country to safety.

In Hong Kong our 95,000 colleagues were forced to disband their union after a Chinese crackdown during which Chinese state media called the association "a malignant tumor" that needed to be "eradicated."

The dismantling of quality education often doesn't require troops and bullets.

The New York Times wrote about Lo Kit Ling, a high school civics teacher in Hong Kong whose course has been replaced by "positive" information, in other words, indoctrination.

She once took pride in stimulating critical thinking. Now, she said "It's not teaching. It's just like a kind of brainwashing."

On the other side of the world, the free-speech organisation PEN America has reported that, in the last year in the US, 122 education bills have been offered in more than half the states penalising teachers from discussing subjects declared off limits by far-right legislatures.

In the first three weeks of January this year, an additional 71 so-called "gag order" bills were offered in legislatures, more than half of them including some kind of mandatory punishment for violators.

The educators and their unions are fighting back. Clearly, when you see public education as a public good and a human right and you organise collectively around the principles of quality, fairness and equity, you make some enemies.

Our members work every day to ground and connect their students to the knowledge and experience that can make them successful and resilient.

Our unions work every day to ground and connect our profession to sustainable policies by governments held accountable for quality education.

And together, every day, we are fighting for these foundations around the world, on Covid, on climate, democracy and sustainable development.

This transcript has been published with the permission of the speaker. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not wholly or necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of EI, the SSTUWA or AEU.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026