

**Schools as tactical targets in conflict: What the case of Nepal can teach us**  
Margit van Wessel and Ruud van Hirtum

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## **Abstract**

That school grounds, students and staff can become tactical targets for parties in conflict is widely accepted as a fact by analysts of education and conflict. However, our understanding of the motivations for such targeting remains limited, as does our ability to engage with this matter through policy. In this article we explore tactical targeting of schools in Nepal in order to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. Our key argument is that schools offered important qualities and resources to parties in conflict. We distinguish physical and symbolic qualities and resources that are human and financial in nature, and we explain how and why these played a role in the targeting of schools. We conclude that if we seek to protect schools, children and school staff from being targeted, it may be well worth temporarily decreasing schools' societal prominence in comparable cases in which our argumentation may apply, such as rural areas in low-income countries.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, connections between education and conflict have received greater attention among scholars, practitioners, and organizations in the field. Considerable attention has been paid to the description and analysis of the impact that conflicts have on education and to the question of how schools, teachers, and students can be protected (O'Malley 2007, 2010; UNESCO 2010). Much attention has also focused on explaining the connections between education and conflict. Two major themes have crystallized. The first examines the role of education in reproducing social divisions. It emphasizes that by inculcating conflict-related ideologies and stereotypes in children, education often reflects social tensions and conflicts in society.<sup>1</sup> The second theme examines the positive effect that education can have in conflict and post-conflict situations and how this might be achieved.<sup>2</sup> Within the latter theme, two important subthemes have emerged: first, education for peace – schools as places where different perspectives can come together in a positive way, nurturing insight and helping people to learn to resolve problems (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Davies 2004; Evans 2008); and second, the ways that education can provide physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection for children in conflict (Winthrop and Kirk 2008; Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003).

Authors working on all these themes view education contextually. They highlight the complexity and embeddedness of education in society, as well as education's implications in conflict. Despite the above-noted advances in the understanding of connections between education and conflict, we see an important research gap that merits attention: how school grounds, students, and staff are becoming targets for attack for reasons that have little to do with education per se (see e.g. Sommers 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Davies 2004; Burde et al. 2005; Gallagher 2005; Barakat 2008

<sup>2</sup> Davies 2004; Burde et al. 2005; Betancourt et al. 2008; Davies and Talbot 2008

Policymakers, activists, and scholars point out facts about certain types of attacks, and the motives behind them. For example, Graça Machel (1996, 47) notes that schools can be targeted during war because of their high profile: “In rural areas, the school building may be the only substantial permanent structure.” Additionally, Robin Shields and Jeremy Rappleye (2008, quoting Caddell 2002 and Sharma 2004) suggest that school attacks in Nepal, connected as they are with the state, should be understood as symbolic attacks on the state.

However, even the most systematic and engaged efforts to understand the tactical significance of schools remain brief, factual, and anecdotal. According to Susan Nicolai and Carl Triplehorn (2003, 3):

Schools may not always be safe: for example, Chechen schools have been bombed during class hours because they were deemed to be sheltering military targets and grenades have been thrown into classrooms (Peterson 2001). Teachers too may be at risk: in Colombia and Sudan, teachers have been threatened and killed (McCallin 2001). Education may be connected to recruitment by facilitating access to children; in Sudan, for instance, schools have been used as a convenient way of assembling young men for military service (Sesnan 1998). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), schools have been a common site of child recruitment by Rwandan-backed rebel groups.

Brendan O’Malley (2007; 2010) presents a more systematic list of what motivates parties in conflict to target schools. His *Education Under Attack* reports (2007, 2010) state that, among other things, parties may seek to undermine the authority of the state, to take revenge, to show strength, to drive out intellectuals, to recruit, to terrorize, to degrade infrastructure, to abduct for ransom, and/or to occupy premises. Such lists, although informative, provide little idea as to how motives for attacking schools might be related to one another and might possibly be specific to schools.

In short, it is well-known that schools are targeted in conflicts for reasons unrelated to the educational process. However, thus far few studies have gone beyond the identification of different motives that parties in conflict may have. Consequently, our understanding of the phenomenon remains limited, as does our ability to address its policy implications. As the UNESCO (2010, 112) report *Protecting Education from Attack* points out, “the real nature of who and what is targeted, the reasons behind attacks, and trends over time are often not well understood.” As the report also notes, there is a need for research into the underlying causes, motives, and nature of attacks on education.

These concerns motivated our research project, which explores the role of schools in the 1996–2006 conflict between the government and Maoists in Nepal. This article seeks to answer the following research question: what rationales were behind the targeting of schools in the conflict between the government and the Maoists in Nepal? Specifically, this study moves away from an opaque and undifferentiated concept of “attack” and focuses on the role of education in conflict by developing a conceptualization of “attacks” as *tactical targeting of schools*. In this study, schools are formally organized institutions for all levels of education, including buildings and premises, staff, and students. By tactical targeting of schools we mean actions involving schools that arise from operational decision making intended to serve larger political or military purposes. In other words, we look into why parties in conflict might consider schools as useful in battle. Our key argument is that schools offer parties in conflict important qualities and

resources. Our analysis identifies physical and symbolic qualities and human and financial resources as the main considerations.

We focus on the case of the 1996–2006 conflict in Nepal between the government of Nepal and the rebel forces led by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), known in the literature as “the Maoists.” These forces, promoting a Maoist form of communism, initiated armed battle in 1996 in order to overturn the government and move toward the establishment of a Maoist regime.

A prime reason for concentrating on the conflict in Nepal is that the targeting of schools was significant, as indicated by available reports. The educational infrastructure and numbers of students and staff potentially affected by the conflict were clearly substantial. Official enrolment numbers have been disputed (Graner 2006), but the Government of Nepal reports that in 2010 almost eight million students (from primary to higher education) were enrolled in Nepal (Ministry of Education 2010).

Another reason for studying this conflict in particular is that it took place in one of the poorest countries in the world. Many other conflicts take place in poor countries, as noted by Julia Paulson and Jeremy Rappleye (2007, 341): “The vast majority of recent conflicts are fought within national borders and do not play out on conventional, demarcated battlefields.” More and more of the world’s armed conflicts are local and regional wars fought predominantly in poor countries within weak or failed states (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008, 474, quoting UNDP 2005, 12). Nine of the ten countries lowest on the human development index have experienced some form of armed conflict since the 1990s (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008, 474). Thus, this study contributes a potentially significant understanding of the situation of schools in many other conflicts.

We first introduce the conflict in Nepal in which our contribution is rooted. We then discuss the data collection methods of this study. The results section elaborates the different types of qualities and resources that schools provided to both Maoists and the Nepali government. Finally, we draw our insights together to discuss their potential broader implications.

## **The Conflict in Nepal**

On 13 February 1996, the CPN started a guerrilla war against the government of Nepal that would claim the lives of more than 13,000 individuals and displace more than 100,000 residents. This so-called People’s War of Nepal was launched from six comparatively disadvantaged districts in mid-western and western Nepal.<sup>3</sup> Initially, as actions were localized and on a relatively small scale, and did not involve many casualties, the war received little attention. At first, only the police were dispatched to deal with the Maoists. Over the years, the conflict intensified, and the army (government forces) was called in. Although the conflict spread to many of Nepal’s districts, it continued to be concentrated in rural areas. After a failed ceasefire in November 2001, the conflict became bloodier than ever (Thapa 2003). In January 2003, King Gyanendra succeeded in getting the Maoists to agree to another ceasefire, but this one lasted only

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<sup>3</sup> As S. Mansoob Murshed and Scott Gates (2005) have shown, conflict was most intense in areas that were most disadvantaged in terms of human development indicators (income per capita, educational attainment, and longevity) and land holdings.

until April 2003, after which the conflict intensified again, with the Maoists gaining control of most of the rural areas.

On 1 February 2005, King Gyanendra took all executive power into his own hands. However, an alliance between the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) consequently came about and generated the People's Movement of April 2006 which eventually forced Gyanendra to step down. This initiated a peace process between the Maoists and the political parties that ended the decade-long war (International Crisis Group 2006a, 2006b). After two years of negotiations, free elections were held for a Constituent Assembly, which was to draft a new Constitution. The CPN scored a decisive victory in the elections but did not attract enough votes to secure a majority. On 18 August 2008, the Maoist chief, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known under his guerrilla name Prachanda, was sworn in as prime minister of the new coalition government. Prachanda stepped down the next year over conflict within the coalition, and to date relations between the CPN and other political parties in Nepal continue to be tense. Although the "peace process" continues and the CPN is no longer engaging in acts of violence, it has not abandoned activism or the option of revolution.

## **Research Methods**

How was the tactical significance of schools in Nepal established in this study? Given the open-ended nature of our research question, our approach was exploratory and, therefore, qualitative and largely inductive in nature. We decided to conduct unstructured and semi-structured interviews of people who, because of their knowledge or experience of the conflict, could provide information about our research question. Fieldwork and analysis complemented each other. In due course, we started discovering patterns in the data, developed the theoretical notion of schools as tactical targets, and clarified the nature and value of the Nepal case.

Our primary data were collected between September and December 2007. We conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with 67 individuals and visited seven schools in different parts of the country. We also conducted three informal group interviews, involving different numbers and types of participants. These informal group discussions developed during visits to schools, where staff introduced us to groups of students. Group interviews took place with two classes of bachelor degree students and one class of primary school students.

For the most part, we could not directly access Maoist or government forces in order to establish their tactical reasoning and action. However, through discussions with people with close and often direct knowledge and experience of the conflict, we could establish the nature of, and plausible logic behind, schools' tactical significance.

We started to explore the issue through conversations with a wide range of people involved in the conflict. We spoke to teachers, principals, students, and parents, but also to NGO staff, activists, and political leaders (Maoist and non-Maoist), government officials, journalists, and experts. Early interviewees were selected for their experiences in, or knowledge about, education and the conflict in Nepal. With the iterative development of the research, criteria for selection of interviewees became more specific. We moved to snowball sampling and directly contacting people who could share with us the more specific knowledge or experiences in which we were interested. One important criterion was direct exposure to conflict relating to involvement with education. As our interest became more specific and focused during the fieldwork, so did our questions during the interviews. At the same time, we sought to maintain

spread, so that we would not end up with biased data. We made sure to meet informed individuals in different localities, including teachers, principals, students (from primary schools to undergraduates at the university level), and parents.<sup>4</sup>

The schools we visited were highly diverse. We made sure to include in our research both private and public educational institutions. Schools were also diverse in size, both physically and in terms of numbers of students attending. Some schools consisted of large compounds, comprising spacious grounds and large concrete buildings. Others consisted of little more than a few rooms. Schools were also diverse in terms of wealth. Some had spacious and well-furnished rooms, and facilities in working order. Others consisted of little more than a few run-down rooms.

The interviews were conducted in four locales. Locale A<sup>5</sup> is a village in Kathmandu Valley. Locale B is a town in the hilly area of central Nepal. It is an urban area to which many people from the surrounding areas fled during the insurgency. Locale C is a district in the Himalayan region of Nepal, which is one of the least developed regions in the country. The district headquarters is a little village on the top of a hill. Several villages are close to the headquarters, on surrounding hilltops. However, a lot of villages lie deep in the mountains and are only accessible by walking for days. The headquarters of Locale C represents the only developed part of the district: it has the higher secondary school, government forces' headquarters, and a hospital. It is also the headquarters of the political parties, the District Education Officer (DEO), and NGOs working in the district. The district itself saw a lot of Maoist activity during the insurgency, being so remote from the areas of Nepal where the government troops had a strong foothold. During the insurgency, many government officials (including teachers) fled to the headquarters to escape the fighting. Finally, 31 interviews were conducted in Kathmandu; mostly with experts (journalists, researchers, NGO staff, government officials) on the conflict and on education in Nepal.

Apart from fieldwork, we also used secondary data, including 20 reports by Nepali and international NGOs and 18 Nepali English language newspaper articles. We selected these for their ability to contribute to the development of our insights by providing accounts indicating, confirming, and specifying how schools were tactical targets. We collected and analyzed these secondary data before, during, and after the fieldwork period. Our interview material and secondary data thus complement each other, offering a form of triangulation. Furthermore, we could build on, and integrate, a number of recent scientific publications on the conflict in Nepal.

## **Results: How School Qualities and Resources Made Them Tactical Targets**

Certain characteristics that make schools places of societal prominence in Nepali society under conditions of peace are the *same characteristics* that make them vulnerable under conditions of

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<sup>4</sup> A few limitations of the data can be pointed out. Snowball sampling can lead to biases. We have tried to negate this sampling bias by "following" a number of "snowballs" and interviewing people in different types of locales and from different economic, social, and political backgrounds. Another limitation of this study is that most respondents were male. This derives from the fact that most teachers, students, and principals in Nepal are male, but may also be partly due to the sampling technique, as well as to the fact that the interviewer and his interpreters were male. In any case, the possibility of divergent female perspectives was not explored in this project.

<sup>5</sup> To protect respondents' identities, we do not reveal exact locales. To protect identities we have also changed respondents' names

conflict. Schools are tactical targets because they offer different types of qualities and resources to parties in conflict.

Firstly, schools were tactically significant for the Nepali parties in conflict because of physical properties that made them relatively unique in the rural Nepali landscape, offering functional amenities.

Secondly, the symbolic meaning of schools in Nepal made schools tactically significant. Their symbolic meaning was strategically important in that they stood for normalcy and a sign of a functioning state.

Thirdly, schools offered access to human resources. More concretely: schools provided access to students as potential supporters and militants, and access to teachers as influential people within their communities.

Fourthly, schools offered financial resources to the parties in conflict, by offering access to school staff as holders of (rurally scarce) cash that could be extorted from them.

### *Physical Properties*

Schools were tactically important for both Maoist and government forces because of their prominence in Nepal in terms of physical properties. Schools are often the largest and most spacious complexes for many miles around, and can easily be put to use for military purposes. Rooms are easily converted into housing for combatants, both government and Maoist. In addition, there are the school grounds: large, flat, and open areas ideally suited for holding gatherings, making speeches, conducting cultural programs or parades. Our research particularly points to the Maoists use of schools in this manner. Indeed, indoctrination was an important part of Maoist campaigning, and local populations were often gathered in schools to carry out indoctrination programs.

Schools were thus attractive to both parties in the conflict in terms of the structures they had to offer. In the mountainous parts of Nepal, flat and open spaces and large buildings are hard to come by. Villages consist of small houses and huts, often spread over hilly terrain, cut through by steep and winding paths, and surrounded by steep mountain slopes. There is possibly a slightly larger open space in the centre of the village. There may be a few two-story buildings there: a guesthouse, or a government office. So the school and its grounds are very attractive places that often service not only the village itself, but also surrounding villages that do not have schools of their own. Schools were confiscated by Maoist and government forces alike to use as barracks, or even bunkers, because this was often easier and cheaper than building temporary structures that would otherwise be necessary. NGO reports on the conflict in Nepal refer to different instances in which this happened. According to Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2005), Maoists would suspend classes and use the school as they saw fit. Respondents suggested that Maoists took schools as barracks or grounds because the government troops would not then attack: the students could function as a human shield, and the government troops would rather not destroy school premises.

The Maoists used schools to hide. Schools became war areas. They thought: a school is a student area, so the police, soldiers will not bomb there. They won't do anything with a

school. Students and Maoists also look similar. Mostly teenagers are in the PLA.<sup>6</sup>  
(*Rajkumar Chhetri, researcher, District Education Office*)

Another example provided by the report is that of an operation in Achham district in 2004, when the Maoists dug trenches around schools as defense barriers against the government troops in case of attack:

On October 29, 2004, Kantipur reported that Maoists are digging trenches (200 meters long and 3 meters deep) inside many of the district's 58 schools to facilitate retaliation against security forces in the case of attack ... According to the report, Maoists have coerced students, teachers and parents to participate in the digging effort.

Respondents declared that the government forces sometimes attacked schools occupied by Maoists, but they also explained that the government forces would also take over school structures and grounds for their own barracks.

The army made camp in one school area. They said they were there for security. All students were scared at that time, because they feared an encounter with the rebels. The admission rate of the school decreased. The army would bomb at nighttime, just to threaten the terrorists. Local students were always frightened. The sound of guns is normal to us. (*Keshav Gaire, community leader*)

Sometimes, schools remained in session. An Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, a UN initiative) report mentions that "children have to pass through the security checks to reach their classes" (IRIN 2005), but students were fearful of being caught in the crossfire between the armed forces and stayed away from class. Another report mentions that the government troops used schools as barracks. The government troops could surround the school with barbed wire and walk around with weapons in the schools, sometimes even while classes were being conducted inside (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict 2005).

Many respondents mention similar reasons for both the government troops and the Maoists to use schools. They refer to the specific qualities that structures and grounds offer to the parties in conflict:

Easy. They are isolated. They have rooms and an open playground. They were the obvious choice. Schools are where elections are held, where health camps are held, etc. For the Maoists, they also had an added advantage: schools provided a big parade ground. So they could show their forces. (*Raj Tamang, writer/researcher*)

In many schools, the government troops made base camp. Because there they have rooms, a lot of space, grounds. Nepal does not have many security posts. During the insurgency, they had to react quickly, so schools were easy to use. Maoists also had base camps in schools. On hillsides, it could be cold, chilly, rainy. So schools were more comfortable. In schools, they could also train cadres. (*Pradip Thapa, school principal*)

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<sup>6</sup> People's Liberation Army, armed wing of the CPN.

A school can provide lodging, food. They could give seminars. They had interaction with the students. Schools have a large open space. They are with many. They cannot lodge in a single house. But they can in schools. (*Ashok Siwakoti, school campus chief*)

### *Symbolic Meaning*

The tactical significance of schools lay also in their symbolic meaning in Nepali society. Open and functioning schools represent an important instance of normalcy. One Maoist strategy in the conflict consisted of undermining normalcy, thereby undermining the powers that be. Maoists sought to pressure the government to comply with their demands by organizing *bandhs* – an important element in the South Asian repertoire of political action – involving a suspension of commercial and formally organized collective activity in an area, such as a town. During a *bandh*, trade, production, administration, transportation, as well as education are put on hold. *Bandhs* may last for a day, a week, or even longer.

Save the Children conducted research on educational programs that they have been running in two Nepali districts. In one of these districts, Kavre, children had lost a third of their school days due to frequent *bandhs*. When schools tried to resist the call to strike, rebels forced them to close (Save the Children 2007). If schools did not respond to Maoist instructions to close, there could be severe repercussions. For example, according to Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2005), on 9 June 2004 the (private) Modern Indian School in Kathmandu, which defied a four-day *bandh* imposed by the Maoists, was attacked early in the morning, when the school was empty. Gunmen held the school guards at gun point, seven school buses were blown up, and several computers were trashed. A related measure taken by the Maoists in a number of instances was the forcible, indefinite closure of schools. The indefinite closure often came about as a result of the efforts of the Maoist student wing, the All Nepal National Free Students' Union – Revolutionary (ANNFSU-R) (Asian Centre for Human Rights 2005). This group often forced schools and colleges, particularly private institutions, to close indefinitely in order to press their demands on the government. The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2005) reports that during the 10-year struggle Maoists closed around 700 private schools throughout the country. However, closing government schools also could be tactically attractive for Maoists. Closing such schools could contribute not only to undermining normalcy, but also to undermining state authority, especially in rural areas:

The Maoist objective was to disrupt, damage the state. Local cadres first targeted the VDCs [sub-district administrative units]. When these were disrupted, local leaders fled to town. Thereafter, they went for schools. Schools were the only thing left of the state in communities. (*Susil Thapa, school principal*)

Even though such actions do not necessarily single out schools rather than other institutions, we should point out here that, in remote regions, schools are among the few existing formal institutions, making them de facto specific targets for *bandhs* and forced closures. Furthermore, during the conflict, many government institutions in rural areas were not functioning, whereas schools attempted to continue to operate (Sharma 2004), thereby further strengthening their symbolic significance as targets.



### *Human Resources: Students as Potential Supporters*

The third purpose schools served were as access points to students who were potential supporters and militants. Indeed, the use of schools as recruiting grounds has been widely noted, with regard to the conflict in Nepal as well as conflicts elsewhere (McCallin 2001; Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003; IRIN 2005). Scholars studying the Nepali educational system have noted that education was part of the political battle (Caddell 2006; Shields and Rappleye 2008; Pherali 2011). Much political conflict between the Maoists and the government occurred on school grounds. In the Nepal case, sometimes it would be more apt to speak of a taking over of the school. Ashish Chhetri, principal of a high school in Locale C, was a headmaster of a village school during the insurgency. He explains how the Maoists chased him and other teachers away:

Two years ago, I was headmaster of a secondary school. One day, the Maoists came and said: “the school is ours.” I refused to give the school to them. Then they came into my office and said: “All is ours, except you.” Then they beat me up. Later, the Maoists had gathered around 200 to 400 people in the school grounds. The Maoists started a speech. They said: “Everyone must become a Maoist. If you don’t, you are not alive.” People got in a line, and everyone had to proclaim that they were Maoist, even a one-month-old child. After some time I left that village and came to the headquarters. The DEO placed me in this school. Around 46 teachers here have fled their villages. (*Ashish Chhetri, school principal*)

Reportedly, such gatherings of students, staff, other locals, and Maoist forces could then become a target for government forces, which would attack the gathering, resulting in injury and death, even of teachers and students (ACHR 2005; Amnesty International 2005)

Maoists abducted students and teachers for indoctrination and recruitment into the movement. The modus operandi was to enter a high school and to take all students and teachers to a remote area for a few days. Students abducted by the Maoists had different experiences. Himal Jha, a student in Kathmandu, recounts his own four-month-long abduction and forced participation in the Maoist campaign:

The Maoists wanted me to become involved in their organization. They accused me of being a government spy because I knew the DEO personally. They put pressure on me to join. I told them: “I would like to study. I’m not interested. I have no intention of fighting against Nepali people. I don’t want to fight with either the Maoists or the government troops. Both are equal to me.” In the end, they forced me to come with them. They took me into their movement for four months. They pressured me to conduct some activities in favor of the Maoists. I had to convince other people of their ideology. They took me to so many places. In the end, I repudiated their program and their actions. I requested them to allow me to continue my studies. I said that I was the only son of my family, that I could not be involved with them in a long-term relationship. I said: “You have to set me free. You have to give me my human rights. You have no right to force me into your organization.” I argued with them for a long time. In the end, they let me go.

In Locale A, Maoists abducted around 60 students and teachers from their schools and took them away for three days. It was allegedly the largest abduction this close to Kathmandu that the country had witnessed. A teacher, Bijay Dulal, explained what happened:

The Maoists called us down and informed us that they would abduct us. In total, they abducted 48 students and 12 teachers. There were only five Maoists, but they used the threat of their gun. They said they wanted to show us that the party is good to people. The Maoist area commander himself was a member of the school. They took us on a nine-hour walk. We were taken into a large house. There were more students from another district also. There were 13 Maoists and 105 abductees. We were given very good food. They didn't behave badly and even provided medicine. The following day, they engaged us in talk. There was an interaction program. The next day they told us: "you can go home, the program is finished." We were given a very small bit of food and were sent away. We had to find our own way back. The whole program looked planned.

His daughter and a student in the school, Bina Dulal, also described her experience:

I was the youngest in my class, Grade 10. When we went away from the school, I started crying. The Maoists were kind to me and told me that, if they had known I would be so upset, they wouldn't have taken me. During the program, they put questions to us. They tried to impose their ideology. We asked them questions: "Why do you attack the educational system?" "Why are there so many strikes? Students hate strikes." "Why are you fighting so near our homes?" But their answers were very unsatisfactory. Smiling, they told us that it was not so. They denied that their actions had affected education. Nobody was tempted to join the Maoists by the program. We weren't scared of the Maoists. The only thing we would be frightened about was an encounter with the army, because it could have become violent.

According to Amnesty International (2005), tens of thousands of school children have been abducted in this way. Some children did not return from these sessions, and it is suspected that they joined the Maoist force. IRIN (2005) asserts that the Maoists began specifically to target schools in 2000. From that year onward, the number of abducted students increased each year. The Community Study and Welfare Centre (CSWC), a Nepali NGO working for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), told IRIN that between July and September 2004 nearly 5,000 students were abducted by Maoists. Our fieldwork and available reports do not reveal similar abductions of students by government.

Thus, our respondents as well as other reports make clear that the functioning of schools was clearly hampered or even made impossible by activities such as abductions and in-school indoctrination. However, analyses so far have paid little or no attention to schools as a societal resource in the sense that they were attractive as places for gathering support. Although neither reports nor our own data speak of government forces using schools for this purpose, respondents explained to us why schools were an ideal spot for Maoists to spread the word of their rebellion and their ideology:

Schools are an easy place to campaign and gather people. It is the best place. Maoists have targeted schools because they want to recruit students. They wanted the new generation. For marches or rallies, they close the school and then take the students. Everyone comes to

schools. It is easy to give speeches, because everyone is there. (*Birendra Thapa, employee international NGO*)

Why do Maoists focus on schools? In villages, they held their programs in public places. In schools it is easy to gather people. Schools are built in the centre. They have a large open area. It is easy to gather crowds. This is the main reason. (*Rohini Chand and Ashmita Gorkhali, members of Maoist student wing*)

Such analyses by locals give a clear indication of why schools were tactical targets, offering access to an extraordinary number of social relations through their many ties in communities. In addition, in Nepal schools are traditionally the places where elections or health programs are held. A related benefit is that people are used to schools being the center of community activity. Schools are thus not only places where students can be found; they are often situated in the heart of the locality and looked upon by local populations as places where key developments in society take their course. Schools are therefore an ideal base for campaigns and rallying local populations.

#### *Human Resources: Teachers and Their Social Role in Communities*

Schools formed a societal resource also because they offered access to local populations through teachers. Both government forces and Maoists sought support from teachers, and also kept a keen eye on teachers as potential supporters of the other side, and sought to exert control (Paulson and Rappleye 2007; Pherali 2011). Government forces reportedly arrested, tortured, and killed teachers they suspected of supporting the Maoists (Amnesty International 2005; Pherali 2011). In an IRIN publication, a teacher relates the story of how he was abducted by the Maoists. Dipendra Roka, a teacher from Salle village in Rukum district, was forced to work for the Maoists for two years. His task was to explain the Maoist ideology to other teachers and to students (IRIN 2006). A case from *The Rising Nepal* (2005) also tells the story of a teacher:

The security forces have rescued a 58-year old teacher of Ramjakot, Tanahu district. Eight Maoists, including a woman, called him out of his home and kidnapped him. He was accused of spying against the terrorists, refusing to accept Maoist principles, refusing to make donations and close the school, teaching Sanskrit, and refusing to include the Maoist curriculum in school. The teacher describes his days with the Maoists as “a living hell.”

Teachers have been abducted; but also in other ways, non-violent as well as violent, they have been coerced into joining sides, stopping perceived anti-actions, mobilizing, and indoctrinating others. Keshab Bhattarai, president of the Teachers’ Union of Nepal, believes that teachers are targeted in order to control the educational system and use it to instruct the Maoist ideology (IRIN 2006).

All this can at least partly be motivated by the fact that teachers in Nepali society often have a social role going beyond the classroom. Teachers may have key positions as respected, knowledgeable figures in rural Nepali society (Save the Children 2006). According to respondents, teachers may have the role of *gurus*, esteemed persons with the ability to guide

members of society in a broad sense, their authority rooted in their knowledge. As respondents explained:

If you go to a remote area, the only respected person is the teacher. There are no other state officials, beyond the district headquarters. Teachers are seen as the *guru* for everything. (*Keshav Gupta, human rights consultant*)

The Maoists thought that teachers and students who are able to read and write could more easily understand their instructions and ideology. So they could transfer the Maoists' ideas to the people in the community. To reach uneducated masses, they used teachers and students. (*Prabin Himanshu, conflict officer international NGO*)

Teachers are educated people. If you tell them something about a populist movement, they could effectively communicate it to the villagers. Their network is so extensive. Teachers live in the village. It is easy for them to pass on the message. In some cases, teachers are the only educated persons around. (*Manoj Joshi, university educational researcher*)

According to Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics, rural literacy was 46 percent in 2001, as compared to 74 percent for urban areas. However, there can be considerable differences between regions and income levels (CBS 2003). Even if teachers cannot entirely be said to be "the only educated persons around," according to the respondents they do play a pivotal role in rural society. In rural, remote, and/or poor communities, where many members are illiterate or have only a few years of schooling, a school teacher may very well be the most educated person present. Many of the more educated people move to the urban areas, but teachers work and live in the rural communities and are in frequent contact with many members of those communities.

However, what matters here is not just their many connections; with the ability to explain the concepts of ideology to members of the community and to convince them of its merits, teachers may have significant influence on local populations' social awareness and political perspectives. Respondents described teachers as outstanding in their ability to understand and communicate Maoist ideology to local populations. If the Maoists could get a teacher to take their side, they could gain a lot of followers at one stroke. In this way, teachers could fulfill the role of ideological broker between Maoists and villagers. Thus, it is connections combined with teachers' potential *guru* status that make teachers significant as tactical targets for both government and Maoists. As our respondents explained:

We can communicate and mobilize a society. We have a large network of parents. We have been educated. We know how to handle society, how to speak in a polite way. Also, if one teacher is converted, he can convert others. (*Sushant Devkota, teacher*)

The school is the epicenter of the countryside. If you exploit teachers, you will get 100,000 followers at one stroke. Children follow teachers. (*Himal Koirala, university professor*)

Teachers are looked up to in rural areas, they are esteemed very highly. They are the only ones who are educated, the only ones who read newspapers. Any opposition from teachers is not to be taken lightly. Maoists thought teachers to be their adversaries. (*Prashant Gadal, writer/researcher*)

In this connection, respondents also pointed out the more general phenomenon of teacher politicization, with teachers and teacher unions being aligned to political parties, and teachers playing a key role in political mobilization and conflict more generally. For instance:

Political pressure is the main problem. Other political parties put pressure on teachers too. Teachers are the competent persons in the community. They can convince and lead the community. They can read. The parties want teachers, so that they can control the community. (*Navin Tamrakar, school principal*)

Because of the political role that teachers can play in communities, they have also been targeted as enemies. If a teacher was against the insurgency, or preached against Maoist ideology, they risked violent reactions from the Maoists. Government and government troops, on the other hand, targeted teachers for their alleged alignment with the Maoists.

All in all, what we see here is that parties in conflict seek out teachers because of their ties to many other individuals on whom they can be expected to have an influence. And it is at least partly through their formal association with the school that these parties in the conflict are able to identify potentially influential individuals and affect the role they play in Nepali society.

### *Financial Resources*

One more way in which schools formed a societal resource was the access that they offered to financial resources. It appears that schools represented this resource for the Maoists in particular; neither our fieldwork nor available reports revealed the involvement of government forces in such practices. Although we cannot verify this, it can be suggested that government would have been less dependent on such resources and that such practices would also undercut the desired order and government legitimacy.

For Maoist forces, the presence of a school signaled the presence of financial resources in the form of persons with money or access to money that could be located and accessed through the school. In rural Nepal, Maoists extorted money from school principals and teachers; failure to comply regularly resulted in violence (Pherali 2011, 137). The Maoists extorted money from other people as well, including business people and tourists. However, according to respondents, in rural areas, school principals and teachers were often the only ones with cash available. People in rural areas generally have very little cash income. Some may have assets, like land, or houses, or cattle, but not much cash. Teachers are known to be among the few in the countryside to get a regular salary for their work. It may not be much, but for the villagers, and for the Maoists, the amounts they could extract apparently were still worth the effort. Maoists demanded money from school principals and teachers for their campaigns, using pressure and fear to extract it. If the principal or teacher did not pay, the Maoists might force the school to close, or sometimes the principal or teacher was abducted or abused. Mahesh Upreti, the principal of a private school in Locale B, recounts how it was to be a headmaster dealing with the Maoists:

Before, we had to contribute to the Maoists. We had to give money, give them a fee. We had to obey. Once, we had to bargain with a Maoist outside the city, in some remote area. We, all

the principals, were called out of town. About 40 meters outside of town, we met a Maoist. The first thing he did, he showed us a hand grenade. Then he started negotiations.

Tony Vaux et al. (2006) assert that the violence against schools and teachers was mostly collateral. The Maoists did not try to change or stop education by attacking schools. Rather, they claimed that they wanted the educational system to continue to function. Indeed, it was an important source of income for them (Vaux et al. 2006). Also, many of our respondents mentioned that teachers often had to pay some of their salary to the Maoists, varying from 5 percent to 20 percent. Kishore Giri, principal of a government campus in Locale B, was one of those forced to donate money to the Maoists:

I often get letters from the Maoists asking me to support them, to join in their meetings. But I never go. I was ordered to pay fees to them, both as a teacher and in the name of my school. I never intended to give them money. They did not dare to come to the campus, because it is in the headquarters and the army is so close. But they came to my village house to get the money.

NGO reports mention this levy as well. For example, as Amnesty International (2005, 4) reported: “In areas under CPN (Maoist) control teachers are compelled to pay part of their income to the CPN (Maoist) as well as attend ‘political education’ sessions and teach the Maoist curriculum.” The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2005) report mentions that these donations often had to be paid in large chunks. During the period of *Dasain*, Nepal’s national fifteen-day religious festival, teachers would travel to the district headquarters to collect four months’ salary plus their *Dasain* bonus; but then they were afraid to return to the village, because they feared the Maoists would come to collect their “tax.” In addition, if the government forces got wind of the teachers’ monetary contribution to the Maoists, they would accuse them of being Maoist supporters. As a result, teachers remained trapped in district headquarters, and many village schools were forced to stay closed after *Dasain*.

## Discussion

Our analysis shows that schools in Nepal were targeted because of their physical properties, symbolic meaning, and the access to human and financial resources that they offered to parties in conflict. However, this begs the question of the wider significance of our results. What are the implications of this insight, beyond the Nepal case, given that many of the qualities discussed are contextual in nature? Indeed, few countries have the *bandh* as an element in their repertoire of political action. Teachers do not have the same status in every conflict as they do in rural Nepal. Schools and teachers are not always obvious targets for extortion; and school grounds are not always the obvious place for assembling community members and establishing barracks. We can see strategies grounded in local culture here – for example, the *guru* status of teachers and the *bandh* – and some school targeting is partly related to the specific geographic and socio-economic conditions in Nepal.

That said, the analysis here does seem applicable to other conflict areas outside Nepal. Particularly in rural areas, there may be few structures, apart from schools, that can provide parties in conflict with barracks, meeting places, and leverage over the state. Similarly, there are

even fewer institutions that provide ties to people who have other resources to offer, such as funds, personnel, or potential support. This suggests that the strategic significance of schools may be applicable in local or regional conflicts that occur under similar conditions of low development. In such conflicts, parties will seek financial resources from coffers other than those of the state and be dependent on locating structures for military operation, mobilization, and recruitment other than those of the state.

By deepening our understanding of how and why schools are targeted, this article seeks to develop insights on how to counter schools' tactical significance and thus their vulnerability to "attacks." In this sense, our study joins the debate on the prevention of, and response to, the targeting of schools by parties in conflict by highlighting the various resources a school offers. Existing literature points out a number of possible prevention and response strategies. Brendan O'Malley (2007, 27-33, 2010, 109-127) identifies different possible types of action. One is that of armed response, involving armed forces coming to protect schools, students and staff. A second focuses on community defense and involves popular resistance to attacks. A third promotes resilience, which can involve the relocation of classes away from large, easily targeted buildings, and then returning to them swiftly after the attacks have concluded. A fourth possibility is the development and enforcement of codes of conduct or rules and pressure on parties in conflict to keep away from schools. A fifth involves the negotiation with parties. Finally, Brendan O'Malley discusses the nature and quality of education itself..

A prominent approach to the question of prevention and response, broadly accepted by practitioners, organizations, and scholars, has been that of schools as safe zones; in Nepal too, a multi-stakeholder initiative for the development and institutionalization of schools as safe zones was developed.<sup>7</sup> Supporters of this approach acknowledge that schools themselves contribute to conflict, are affected by it, or have a role in it. In order to counter this reality, they advocate the development of codes of conduct (Caddell 2006; Wedge 2008), peace education (Wedge 2008), and encouragement of popular resistance (O'Malley 2010).

While we acknowledge the importance and validity of these ideas, this article's findings point to potential limitations of the different ideas on prevention and response that have been developed thus far. First, we see in these ideas little attention to the motives of parties to target schools and the reasons why schools are actually "attacked." A better understanding of these reasons would contribute to the protection of schools, especially because it may be very difficult to convince warring parties to leave the educational sector alone. By doing so, parties in conflict would actually rob themselves of important strategic resources. Secondly, many prevention and response strategies involve organizations beyond the locality itself, including the state and international institutions. Thirdly, many involve a longer-term orientation. Fourthly, some involve extraordinary courage by civilians in the face of armed attack.

Our findings lead us to suggest the potential importance of shorter-term actions that locals themselves can take without facing great risks. Brendan O'Malley (2007) pointed out that, in Afghanistan, UNICEF is helping local people set up smaller school units closer to or within communities, even inside homes. Dana Burde's discussion of community-based schools in Afghanistan (Burde 2010) also points in this direction. Such strategies, which change the institutional and physical setup of schools while maintaining their function, may be advisable in many conflict contexts. To become less attractive as a tactical target, schools change their organizational structures and physical setup, thus reducing their prominence and recognizability as places of tactical importance. Relocation to makeshift premises, fragmentation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Caddell 2006; O'Malley 2007, 2010; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008; Wedge 2008; Smith 2010

institution into smaller units, does not do away with the attractiveness of school buildings, but other dimensions that we discussed would be removed or at least disguised and decreased, making staff and students less accessible as targets. Importantly, this is something locals themselves could do, swiftly, without the need for interventions by NGO or international institutions, large financial resources, or long-term process orientations. To best protect schools, children, and school staff from being targeted by parties in conflict, it may be well worth temporarily decreasing schools' societal prominence, especially in rural and low-income contexts.



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