

Education in Conflict:

Disrupted Education a View from Inside Syria ¹

Introduction

The conflict in Syria has had a devastating impact on the education system of the country. According to recent estimates, 2.4 million children (aged 5-17) are out of school, representing half of the children population in Syria (UNICEF, 2022). The international and the Government of Syria have worked on several interventions to assist the education sector over the last decade. The international community aims to help Syria achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4). SDG 4 is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The policy brief outlines the current education situation in Syria. Secondly, it provides insights based on the SDG 4 pillars of access, quality, and inclusion. Lastly, it provides insights from interventions conducted in Syria during the conflict.

Education Situation in Syria

The education sector in Syria has faced deterioration due to the continuous internal and external conflict. An estimation that provides a striking comparison is that in 2011, 100 percent of students completed primary education, and the most recent estimates point out that that has dropped by over 40% (WB, n.d.). Another impact that created an alarming situation is the number of internally displaced people within the country, approximately 6 million, out of which one-third are estimated to be out-of-school children and youth (Almasri et al., 2019). These factors impact the resources to provide quality education with limited capacity. It is crucial to understand how the conflict has caused damage to the infrastructure of schools and institutions (Christophersen, 2015; SC, 2020b, 2020a). Evidence from the GCPEA study highlighted that the attacks on

Syria between 2011 and 2015 led to the destruction of 40% of its schools, and loss also included the death of teachers and students (SC, 2015; GCPEA, 2014, 2018, 2022). Moreover, it is essential to understand that having a functional school is not enough if conflict is persistent and there is an issue about safe access to education. Including all these challenges Syria's education has faced, the COVID-19 pandemic has further hindered access to education (SC, 2020a, 2020b).

However, over the last decade, humanitarian assistance has been provided in the context of education continuity. The interventions also aim to create social protection by providing food, water, shelter, and protection. Moreover, refugee camps are provided for internally displaced people. This snapshot provides how the conflict has an impact on the education sector in Syria.

SDG 4 in Conflict

The section highlights three pillars of SDG 4 in the context of Syria. The aim is to understand the internal education dynamics in Syria that are barriers to access to education with the alignment of these pillars.

Access to Education for All

There are several barriers to education in the conflicts; some of them have been highlighted in the context of Syria's education sector. Some of these educational barriers are poverty, malnutrition, lack of access to basic needs, including food and shelter, and socioeconomic disparities. The disparities regarding access to education widen based on the government-controlled areas with the contested areas. The areas under government control have

1. This policy brief is derived from a forthcoming academic paper summarizing the key outcomes and implications of the systematic literature review and analysis conducted at the end of 2022. *Hammad, S. and Cochrane, L. (Under Review) Disrupted Education for Out-of-School Children Inside Syria: A Critical Literature Review and Lessons for Policy and Practice. European Journal of Development Research.*

fewer damaged schools. Moreover, there is an additional barrier for minority groups or people without legal status to access education. In the background of this landscape, access to education for all seems daunting for the government and international organizations. Furthermore, international organizations and humanitarian assistance are limited in conflict areas; for instance, the suspension of humanitarian assistance in Northwest Syria caused a decline in education provision (ICG, 2019). Investigating through the lens of SDG 4, it is difficult to track the progress of the target 4.1,4.2,4.3 considering the nature of continuous conflict in the country.

Quality and adequacy of education provision

Zooming into the quality of education aspects, it is crucial to understand that in the case of Syria, there has been resource constraint in the expenditure and the government's capacity to support the education sector. The evidence of this is that government expenditure on income declined by 78% from 2011 to 2022 in real terms (Rasmussen et al., 2022, p. 2). The education system is overstretched mainly due to the priority of the budget towards security, the military, and fuel. The budget constraint impacts the allocation of resources towards the reconstruction of the new classrooms, providing salaries for human resources, ensuring facilities at schools, and, most importantly, capacity building of the stakeholders in the education sector. The learning is compromised not only because of the lack of infrastructure but also due to the ability of the teachers to complete the learning outcome for each grade level. For instance, a survey study from Syria identified that more than half the children in the sample in grades 6, 7, and 8 could not solve problems from the 2nd-grade level in Math and English (IRC, 2017). This is an alarming situation in the context of the quality of education. In addition to the issue of the quality of teachers, another aspect observed in Syria is the reduction in the number of teachers. There was a decline in the percentage of teachers by 31% between 2010-2018; there was a high percentage of males who did not

continue teaching at the basic education level (SCPR, 2020).

Another complexity in the Syrian context was the lack of curriculum harmonization. Six different curricula were used in Syria, including religious and ethnic connotations. The six curricula were government, ISIS, Syrian Interim government, Jabhat Tahrir Al Sham, Kurdish Autonomous Administration, and other religious curricula. This further entangled the problem related to the learning outcomes and the long-term issue with regard to the accreditation of the curricula.

Inclusion and elimination of discrimination

SDG 4 emphasizes access to education for all individuals, regardless of their background, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, or abilities. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to eradicate discrimination in the provision of education, both at the institutional and individual levels. However, access to quality education is not uniform across Syria. There is variation based on the control of the government and which political group has control over the area. Notably, government control has functioning schools, and education continuity prevails as the pre-crisis status quo. On the contrary, in contested areas, those under non-state local governance, and those with a significant influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs), vulnerable children and youth are often denied access to educational opportunities. Al-Hasakeh is an example of an area that lacks educational infrastructure, which predates the conflict due to the nature of the governance in the area. Evidence shows that university enrollments have declined due to neglect and recently due to conflict (Omran for Strategic Studies, 2016).

Another main concern regarding inclusion in Syria's context is the polarization in the society based on political factors that have also influenced the curricula within the education system. This fragmentation in the education system has further exacerbated identity politics and perpetuated a conflict rooted in the ideology, which has a long-run

impact on social and national cohesion. Employing education as a tool for indoctrination and failing to promote conciliatory discourse stands in stark contrast to the spirit of SDG sub-target 4.7, which envisions education as a cornerstone for building sustainable, cohesive, and equitable societies in the aftermath of conflict.

Policy Recommendations

With these three SDG 4 pillars in mind, it is necessary to understand what initiatives could help achieve them based on different indicators. It is already established there are socioeconomic complexities in Syria, some of which are fueled by ethnic, political, and ideological differences that are reflected in the education system. Following are some interventions rolled out in Syria for education continuity that complements the (SDG 4) pillars.

Access

The most prominent programs in this context within the country were the accelerated learning programs and 'curriculum B; both are alternative learning pathways for students who missed elementary education (Deane, 2016). Another intervention conducted was to ensure the nutrition aspects for the pre-primary (under 5 years) and primary (6-12 years). Snacks and fresh meals were provided through the intervention(WFP, 2022). As identified that malnutrition is one of the barriers to access to education, this intervention provided an environment where parents were incentivized to send their children to schools.

In addition to these interventions, another innovative intervention was the learning passport, which enabled the children to access education through online and offline learning platforms. In Syria's case, the intervention was implemented through cinema sessions, and the teachers and institutions were provided with laptops and projectors. Moreover, alternative power sources were provided, considering the lack of access to electricity and power shortages (Learning Passport, 2023). This intervention aimed to motivate students collectively

to learn based on standards practiced at the international level regarding the content. However, one could argue that these interventions could be suitable in government-controlled safe areas, but such gatherings might not be a safe option in conflict areas.

Quality of education

One theme that emerged in the literature relates to teachers' quality and availability due to the conflict's impact. In response to this, several interventions were conducted to build the capacity of the teachers through training. One such intervention was the Teacher in Crisis Context; this intervention was training modules that covered education in crisis. This program aimed to reach 360 teachers who could teach 10500 children in northern Syria(Worldwide, 2020). This intervention was part of a more extensive program developed in the context of education in emergencies. As a result of the program, the learning outcomes and access to a safe learning environment improved.

Inclusion

To ensure inclusiveness, it is crucial to understand the importance of sensitization through which students can acknowledge cross-cultural issues and develop skills to think critically. Moreover, in the context of Syria, it is vital to understand the composition of the displaced people within the camps; some of them are from within Syria and there are other nationalities, such as Palestine. In this background, a similar intervention conducted for the Palestinian refugees in Syria was the 'My Voice Program,' which allowed cross-culture interaction to develop and improve the quality of education (UNWRA, 2017). Similar interventions could be conducted at the national level through awareness regarding inclusiveness in education that could allow the children and youth to have a dialogue and meaningful engagement activities.

References

- Almasri, N. et al. (2019) 'A digital platform for supervised self-directed learning in emergencies: the case of the Syrian crisis', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 28(1), pp. 91–113. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475939X.2019.1568293>.
- Christophersen, M. (2015) *Education in Syria and Jordan*. New York: International Peace Institute.
- Deane, S. (2016) 'Syria's Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency', *IDS Bulletin*, 47(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2016.143>.
- GCPEA (2014) *Education Under Attack 2014*. New York: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.
- GCPEA (2018) *Education Under Attack 2018*. New York: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack.
- Hammad, S. and Cochrane, L. (Under Review) *Disrupted Education for Out-of-School Children Inside Syria: A Critical Literature Review and Lessons for Policy and Practice*. *European Journal of Development Research*.
- ICG (2019) *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*. Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- Learning Passport. (2023). January-June 2023 Progress Report | The Learning Passport. <https://www.learningpassport.org/reports/january-june-2023-progress-report>
- Rasmussen, B., Sheehan, P., Symons, J., Maharaj, N., Welsh, A., & Kumnick, M. (2022). *Syria Education and Development Investment Case: Economic, Social and Psychological Costs and Risks Resulting from Not Investing in Education Systems in Syria: Report to UNICEF Syria* (pp. 1–160) [Monograph]. Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University.
- SC (2015) *Education Under Attack in Syria*. London: Save the Children. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/education-under-attack-syria/> (Accessed: 1 November 2023).
- SC (2017) *Invisible Wounds: The Impact of Six Years of War on the Mental Health of Syria's Children*. London: Save the Children.
- SC (2020a) *Number of out of school children doubles in Northern Syria as coronavirus, poverty take their toll*, Relief Web. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/number-out-school-children-doubles-northern-syriacoronavirus-poverty> (Accessed: 1 November 2023).
- SC (2020b) *Reversing Gains: Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Syria*. London: Save the Children.
- SC, AIR and CfBT (2015) *The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria's education system on Syria's future*. London: Save the Children, American Institutes for Research, CfBT Education Trust



SCPR (2020) Justice to Transcend Conflict: Impact of Syrian Conflict Report 2016-2019. Syrian Center for Policy Research.

UNICEF. (2022). The situation of children in Syria | UNICEF Syrian Arab Republic.
<https://www.unicef.org/syria/situation-children-syria>

UNWRA. (2017). Promising Practices in Refugee Education: Bringing hope in times of conflict: United Nations Relief and Works Agency education in emergencies programme | Save the Children's Resource Centre.
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/promising-practices-in-refugee-education-36/>

WFP. (2022). Syrian Arab Republic, School Feeding in Emergencies: An evaluation | World Food Programme.
<https://www.wfp.org/publications/syrian-arab-republic-school-feeding-emergencies-evaluation>

WB (n.d) Primary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group) - Syrian Arab Republic | Data. Available at:
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.ZS?locations=SY>
(Accessed: 15 November 2023).

Worldwide, C. (2020). Syria Education in Emergencies Evaluation 2020. Concern Worldwide.
<https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub/syria-education-emergencies-evaluation-2020>

