

Research report

Forum: UNICEF

Issue: Sustaining Educational Infrastructure for
Displaced Youth in Humanitarian Crisis Zones

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Introduction

Humanitarian crises and the forced displacement of populations create a serious problem for the displaced youth as they are forced to leave their homes, along with their schools which are often damaged or destroyed. Moreover, these crises and displacement also separates the youth from learning resources and their teachers, completely removing a stable and suitable environment for their cognitive growth. Even in host communities where the displaced children arrive, their sudden arrival causes overcrowding, and insufficient water access, sanitation electricity and safety.

Despite the unfavourable circumstances ensuring access to safe and quality education is imperative and schools are not just limited to academics but also provide protection, routine, psychosocial support and opportunities to the vulnerable youth. If education is interrupted for long periods of extreme uncertainty, the displaced youth faces increased risks of child labour, exploitation and recruitment by armed forces as they fall behind academically and lose opportunities to grow. This problem is made worse by protracted crises as the temporary emergency arrangements are forced to continue for years while host communities struggle to support additional learners with limited resources.

In attempts to sustain education for displaced youth during periods of crises, governments and organizations face several challenges as funding is often limited and short-term, and threats to security prevent schools from operating. Getting qualified teachers is also a challenge as they can be displaced or unavailable. Displaced learners may also face documentation and language barriers preventing their enrollment in traditional educational facilities. This makes temporary learning spaces and alternative learning programs necessary until regular schooling can be made safe and accessible.

Due to this the international community has made efforts towards protecting the right to education in crisis situations by establishing mechanisms like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the INEE Minimum Standards, the Safe School Declaration, the Global Compact on Refugees, and the Education Cannot Wait fund. Along with this, dedicated organizations like UNICEF, UNHCR, UNESCO, the Global Education Cluster, and humanitarian NGOs support emergency learning efforts. However, this issue requires stronger international efforts as significant gaps in funding, accessibility, infrastructure and teacher capacity remain, requiring coordinated policies that support both displaced learners and the host communities receiving them.

Definitions of key terms

Displaced Youth

Displaced Youth refers to the young individuals who have had to flee their place of residence forcefully due to reasons like armed conflict, systematic human rights violations or natural

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disasters. This includes both young individuals who have been internally displaced (IDP) within the borders of their country and those who have crossed international borders.

Forced Displacement

Forced Displacement is involuntary movement of people out of their places of residence driven by coercive factors which pose an immediate threat to the lives, physical integrity or fundamental freedoms of the displaced individuals or populations.

Humanitarian Crisis / Emergency

A humanitarian crisis / emergency is a severe and widespread threat to the life, health, safety and dignity of a large group of people causing a disruption to how the normal community or society functions resulting in human suffering which exceeds the local capacity to cope. These result from armed conflicts, state or institutional failure or natural disasters and severe disease epidemics.

Educational Infrastructure

Educational Infrastructure refers to all things that are needed to establish, protect and maintain a functional learning environment such as physical facilities which is the “Hard” infrastructure which form the physical learning spaces along with the digital and technological frameworks like high speed internet and the “Soft” infrastructure which is the regulatory and operation structures needed to manage education systems.

Education in Emergencies (EiE)

EiE refers to providing immediate, medium and long term quality learning opportunities for all in the situation of a crisis, conflict, forced displacement or natural disaster. This functions through providing physical protection through safe spaces along with the provision of psychosocial and cognitive protection through things like reinstating old routines and preserving development milestones to prevent long-term intellectual regression.

Education Continuity

Education continuity is ensuring continued learning through providing quality education services in periods before, during or in the aftermath of humanitarian crises or situations of prolonged school closures so that education does not stop and they can continue to grow normally physically, mentally and socially. This also helps in transitioning from temporary emergency relief to permanent national growth.

Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS)

Temporary learning spaces are developed when permanent educational infrastructure is destroyed or is physically unsafe due to emergencies like armed conflict or natural disasters. These spaces are not replacements of the original infrastructure but temporary educational facilities that are rapidly deployed to ensure cognitive and physical protection of the affected youth.

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Protracted Crises

Protracted crises are long lasting emergencies that become a permanent part of the affected populations daily life, that unlike short-term emergencies cannot be fixed with immediate aid and drag on for years or even decades usually when a country is facing ongoing war, weak government systems, or repeating natural disasters.

Disaster Risk Reduction / Resilience (DRR)

Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience are the steps taken to protect people, schools and communities from the impacts of crises and disasters by planning ahead so communities can survive crises and recover quickly.

General overview

Historically humanitarian crises have had significant negative impacts on children's access to education by causing damage to schools, forced displacement and weakening systems responsible for education and learning. As forced displacement has increased in scale and complexity over the years, sustaining education is not only due to school closures but also instability caused by repeated movement, and large populations living in camps or host communities.

This has made addressing the educational needs of the displaced youth even more challenging. Longer lasting conflicts and displacement also add another layer of difficulty as protracted crises require stable teachers, curriculums and support for the population which short-term assistance does not meet. Moreover, displaced populations often find themselves in communities that are already struggling with underfunded and overcrowded schools. Hence, UNICEF emphasized the education systems must also strengthen opportunities for children in host communities along with supporting displaced learners.

The scale of this issue is reflected by the current global situation and UNHCR estimates that approximately 14.8 million school aged children were under its mandate in 2024, with around 7.2 million were out of school and not receiving any education. A decrease in enrollment as age increased was also noted with only 7% enrollment for tertiary education in reporting countries. Similar issues can be seen in internally displaced populations as UNICEF estimates approximately 13 million children of primary and early-secondary school age to live in internal displacement.

The barriers to education faced by the youth differ based on the type of displacement and the communities affected. Internally displaced children mostly struggle to register in new schools, lose school records or remain in unsafe and insecure areas, while refugees face restrictions regarding documentation, language barriers and limited access. Both groups can experience poverty, trauma, discrimination and loss of resources along with high competition for limited educational resources.

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Therefore, during periods of prolonged displacement sustaining educational infrastructure is different from providing short term emergency education. Since emergency education focuses on restoring basic access rapidly, sustainability focuses on education systems and infrastructure that can remain safe, functional and effective for years to come. To achieve this, ensuring temporary and alternative learning programmes lead to recognized qualifications, damaged schools are rehabilitated and teachers are trained and qualified. This is necessary because displaced youth may stay away from home for long periods of time and host communities can continue to receive quality education.

Major parties involved

UNICEF

UNICEF plays a key role in safeguarding education in crisis zones. UNICEF aids countries affected by conflicts by developing school safety plans, training teachers, rehabilitating schools, and providing supplies for teaching and learning. UNICEF also leads global efforts to provide education to children in conflict areas. For example, a partnership with governments in West and Central Africa to develop a radio education system in order to help youth affected by crisis.

UNHCR

As the UN refugee agency, the UNHCR works to make sure all refugees have access to primary, secondary, and higher education, and heavily encourages nations to include refugees into their national education system, as opposed to limiting themselves to temporary education centers.

UNESCO

As the UN agency for education, UNESCO plays a key role in ensuring quality education for all. UNESCO describes education as a fundamental right, and as a source of stability for youth during crises. Its Strategic Framework for Migration, Displacement, and Education

Education Cannot Wait (ECW)

Education Cannot Wait is the International fund aimed at supporting education during emergencies and crises. It brings together governments, UN organizations, and NGOs, to fund initiatives for children and teenagers affected by conflict, migration, disasters, and other crises.

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

The International Rescue Committee is a humanitarian NGO that offers educational programs in situations of crisis and displacement. It assists children impacted by conflict and implements a

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variety of programs that include preschool education, elementary education, teacher training, and support for educational systems in crisis.

Timeline of Key Events

1989	The Convention on the Rights of Child takes place (CRC), establishing education as a right for every child. This provides the basis for future efforts in maintaining education in humanitarian crisis zones.
2000	The Inter - Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is created, a global network of organisations and practitioners working together to ensure the right to education for all those in crisis contexts.
2000	The Dakar World Education Forum takes place, where governments and international organizations reaffirm commitment to ensuring education is available to all.
2004	The INEE develops the Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery, whose purpose is to help nations increase access to safe learning opportunities in times of crisis.
2006	The Global Education Cluster is established in order to improve coordination from humanitarian organisations in cases of crisis.
2015	The Safe Schools Declaration is endorsed by many states, aiming to protect the right to education in situations of crisis, and to improve protection of students, teachers, and education facilities.
2018	The UN General Assembly creates the Global Compact on Refugees. It aims to give education opportunities for refugees, and to provide help to host countries whose education infrastructure is affected by crisis.
2019	UNHCR launched its Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion, which includes goals to improve children's access to pre-primary, primary, secondary, and higher education in humanitarian crisis zones.
2024	UNESCO Strategic Framework for Migration, Displacement, Emergencies, and Education is established. This framework

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	addresses education for people affected by crisis and emergencies, focusing on protecting the right to education.
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Previous attempts to solve the issue

One of the first direct attempts to tackle this issue can be seen in UN General Assembly Resolution 64/290: The right to education in emergency situations, adopted in 2010. This resolution highlighted the right to education during emergencies, encouraged the integration of education into future responses, and encouraged nations to ensure the continuity and consistency of education.

In 2007, the Global Education Cluster was established, with the goal of improving coordination between humanitarian agencies in times of crisis, allowing for more quick and coordinated responses. It provides remote and direct field reports, develops guidance, collects evidence, and it advocates for the emphasis on providing education to all youth globally. Despite this, this solution has its limitations. It fails to address the lack of infrastructure or funding in areas of crisis, leaving these issues to national governments or other humanitarian agencies.

The Education Cannot Wait fund (ECW) was established at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, and focuses on giving aid through funding for children and adolescents affected by crisis. It was created to address the lack of funding given to education during humanitarian crises. Despite this, there is still a much larger need for funding than what is currently provided. The 2024 INEE minimum standards state that education in emergencies remains underfunded, and gaps in funding continue to hinder humanitarian efforts.

In 2018 the UN established the Global Compact on Refugees, which recognizes education as an integral part in the inclusion of refugees. The Global Compact supports the inclusion of all refugees into national education systems, in order to give displaced youth better qualification and opportunity for higher education. However, since the compact is a non binding framework, application of its goals is largely dependent on individual states and the resources that are available.

Possible solutions

Delegates should consider how they can make current education infrastructure more resilient in the case of a crisis. Inadequate infrastructure and limited resources both suppose large obstacles

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when tackling this issue. Delegates should also look into how they can take pressure off educational infrastructure in areas that host victims of displacement.

Delegates should also consider how to maintain access to education when traditional school facilities are unavailable. This could be done through the creation of temporary learning spaces, or the creation of digital education platforms. Delegates should keep in mind many communities have unequal access to digital resources, and take this into account when developing solutions.

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