Conflict-affected, displaced and vulnerable populations

Introduction

The vast majority of learners are now unable to attend school due to COVID-19 related school and learning institution closures and there is uncertainty as to when such measures will end, particularly in low-income and conflict-affected states. COVID-19, unlike other outbreaks of fatal illnesses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 and the most recent outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in 2018, has been characterized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic due its scope and magnitude. Although COVID-19 is a global health crisis affecting most people globally, conflict-affected, displaced and vulnerable migrant populations are disproportionally affected by the pandemic.

The data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre show 50.8 million people were internally displaced due to conflict and disasters at the end of 2019, 55% of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are under the age of 25. UNHCR figures put the total number of forcibly displaced people, 1

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1 https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19
including refugees, at 75 million\textsuperscript{2}. Furthermore, it is estimated that there are 75 million school-aged children living in 35 crisis-affected countries who are in the most desperate need of educational support\textsuperscript{3}. Displaced learners and those living in crisis-affected settings\textsuperscript{4} are already marginalized and highly vulnerable, with their right to education often unfulfilled and routinely violated. Even before the emergence of COVID-19, the challenges facing these learners were large, complex and daunting. The spread of COVID-19 further exacerbates their vulnerabilities, whilst related restrictions will negatively impact the delivery of humanitarian assistance including for education in emergencies (EiE). The COVID-19 pandemic poses a grave threat to these communities and their ability to access and continue quality education.

Despite the efforts and progress on inclusion, barriers to education persist and could potentially worsen due to the pandemic. Learners in crisis-affected situations, and displaced persons and migrants more broadly, are now faced with increasing precarity due to a lack of social safety nets and the hardening of migration policies\textsuperscript{5} amongst other factors, with consequences for their ability to access and continue learning. In some contexts, displaced and migrant populations are already facing exposure to increasing levels of violence\textsuperscript{6}. This is occurring against the backdrop of nearly one third of those out of school being in crisis-affected countries\textsuperscript{7}.

Despite the pandemic, conflict, natural hazards and violence have not ceased, and continue to disrupt education posing threats to learners, notably their right to education. Tropical Cyclone Harold\textsuperscript{8}, recent floods and landslides Burundi\textsuperscript{9}, the continued displacement of Venezuelans\textsuperscript{10,11}, along with escalating violence in Northern Mozambique\textsuperscript{12} and Mali since 2012 and five years of continuous conflict in Yemen\textsuperscript{13}, to name a few, are a stark reminder that crises and displacement continue. Moreover, the populations affected by these crises are more likely to find themselves in conditions more favorable for higher COVID-19 transmission, such as camps and crowded urban settings, without access to any form of health services, let alone education and learning. Education responses to COVID-19 should pay particular attention to those who are conflict-affected, forcibly displaced and vulnerable migrants who are facing an alarming level of risk, in some contexts they are not even able to adopt the basic restrictive measures such as social distancing\textsuperscript{14}.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Upholding the right to education

Conflict-affected, forcibly displaced and migrant populations continue to face discrimination and linguistic and legal barriers in accessing quality education, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting and amplifying these. Responses to the pandemic must account for such dynamics and avoid uncontextualized assumptions about access to distance learning technologies, or they risk entrenching

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\textsuperscript{2} http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview
\textsuperscript{4} In this issue note these settings refer to contexts where conflict, disasters, displacement and epidemics were already existing and/or are occurring simultaneously to the COVID-19 pandemic.
\textsuperscript{5} https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/04/17/coronavirus-global-migration-policies-exploited
\textsuperscript{6} https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/03/27/greece-island-refugee-camps-coronavirus
\textsuperscript{8} https://reliefweb.int/disaster/tc-2020-000049-vut
\textsuperscript{9} https://reliefweb.int/disaster/fl-2020-000054-bdi#overview
\textsuperscript{10} https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/75315.pdf
\textsuperscript{11} https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/04/22/Venezuela-Colombia-migrants-coronavirus
\textsuperscript{12} https://www.acaps.org/country/mozambique/crisis/violent-insurgency-in-cabo-delgado
\textsuperscript{14} https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m1213

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and furthering already existing inequalities in and through education. Thus, upholding the right to education for all, regardless of status, should be at the forefront of all responses, including in and through distance learning and national responses in education.

**Ensuring the equitable continuation of learning**

Much of the current education response to COVID-19 is centered on strategies and attempts to maintain learning through distance learning facilitated by technology. For learners in crisis-affected and displacement settings, this option may not be available or appropriate. The wholesale adoption of such strategies without careful consideration to existing inequalities in education, notably the divides in connectivity and digital literacy, or language of instruction, risk being deepened and becoming entrenched beyond the current crisis. The Rohingya refugee crisis is a pertinent example in that respect, as refugees are banned from buying mobile phone sim cards and in the past six months have been denied internet access. However, this example is not universal and is in contrast to some established refugee camps, such as Kakuma in Kenya, where partners have invested heavily in technology and connectivity over the past couple of decades, making them better prepared for the implementation of distance learning. These contexts could provide important lessons and best practices moving forwards.

**Provision of protection and safety**

Schools often provide safety and security to learners through a variety of mechanisms including school feeding, psychosocial support, WASH facilities, support and care for learners with disabilities and the provision of safe spaces for socializing, learning and play. Furthermore, disruption to education also results in the disruption of health services, which are often provided by and through schools and learning institutions. Migration status is often a barrier to accessing health systems, often schools and learning institutions can be the only support for vulnerable populations rendering them extremely vulnerable during this pandemic.

When schools and learning institutions close and crisis-affected learners become isolated in their communities with diminishing protection, they face increased risk of abuse, exploitation and gender-based and sexual violence. Research conducted by UNDP into the impact of the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone found that teenage pregnancy increased by up 65% in some communities during the crisis partly due to school closures. In addition, if the pandemic-related school closures become protracted, conflict-affected, displaced and migrant communities are likely to be adversely affected economically, making it more likely that children will be needed to bolster household income through labor. This will predictably lead to a rise in child labor and exploitation in these populations, which will disproportionately affect women and girls. When school and learning institutions begin reopening it will be vital to adopt measures to ensure the most at risk return to school.

**Acknowledging existing challenges in EiE**

There is also a need to advance the response and subsequent recovery interventions and strategies beyond ‘add education and stir’ models, recognizing education, particularly for those affected by crises, has the potential to be a driver of inequality, conflict, violence and exclusion. Lessons learned in EiE on the need to holistically approach education during crises must be heeded. In this regard the domains of the INEE Minimum Standards provide a useful framework which action and intervention in education can be aligned to and built upon. Crisis-affected settings, notably those involving displacement, pose and amplify a series of complex challenges in education such as critical decisions around the language instruction and how to manage the diversity found in schools and classrooms in such settings. The

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16. [https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/03/10/rohingya-refugees-internet-ban-bangladesh](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/03/10/rohingya-refugees-internet-ban-bangladesh)

primary and immediate needs of displaced, vulnerable migrant and conflict-affected learners must not be deemed secondary to broader, more universal, COVID-19 responses in education, instead responses should build on existing strategies.

**Teachers**

These challenges must be managed against the backdrop of a shortage of qualified and appropriately trained teachers, including support and skills for COVID-19 response, many of who have been displaced and suffered the impacts of conflict, violence and disasters themselves. Many teachers in crisis settings were already facing seemingly unsurmountable challenges such as huge class sizes, low or no pay and the stress of living in unstable environments themselves. These challenges have been compounded by COVID-19 and teachers in crisis-affected contexts, like many teachers around the world, are expected to quickly adapt with limited resources to continue delivering education whilst schools and learning institutions are closed. Similarly, parents, guardians and caregivers have to adapt to their newfound full-time role as more formal educators and require support in doing so. Teacher welfare is key, it is vital to recognize many teachers are parents too, therefore a degree of disruption in the workforce must be expected and planned for. The calls of the Teacher Task Force to ensure that teachers are protected, supported and recognized during this crisis, especially those displaced and situated in conflict, disasters and violence affected contexts, must be considered.

**Host communities and local integration**

When considering and addressing the outlined key issues the educational needs of host communities must also be met, local integration in education has the potential to be jeopardized by responses to the pandemic that prioritize either host or displaced populations. Furthermore, there is the potential that as host communities feel the economic impact of the pandemic there may be moves to limit already strained education resources to refugees, migrants and forcibly displaced persons. This has the potential to trigger and exacerbate conflict, which in turn could lead to further displacement.

**Lessons from past practices and current crisis**

The education in emergencies (EiE) community across the world has decades of experience in ensuring the continuity of education in some of the most complex and volatile settings. However, the current pandemic poses a challenge to the conventional model of ensuring access to educational facilities first, due to the need for social distancing measures. Any interventions will need to take into account the new reality of learning where bringing children together is not feasible and different modalities of support for parents, caregivers and communities whose role in education must be considered.

**Radio broadcasts**

The EiE response to the Ebola crisis faced similar constraints and serves as a strong starting point, providing some important lessons learned and promising practices, for the current response. During the crisis many schools were forced to close, as with the current crisis, resulting in the most marginalized learners being out of school. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, lessons aligned to the national curriculum were broadcast five days per week on local FM stations in 30-minute increments and listeners were able to call in with questions at the end of each session.

Although basic and relatively limited, radio broadcasts go some way to addressing barriers to connectivity based on migration status and income. In most displacement and crisis-affected settings there are likely no restrictions on the access to basic FM radios, while this is not the case with other

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technologies requiring internet connectivity as previously highlighted. Furthermore, despite questions around the quality of the education provided and difficulties in reaching the entire population due to poor signal, the broadcasts allowed learners to maintain a link to education\textsuperscript{21}. There is also the potential to develop radio broadcasts beyond simply transmitting learning content, through interactive radio instruction\textsuperscript{22}.

**Self-learning**

Self-learning is a key element of the UNRWA’s holistic Education in Emergencies response to any crisis which impacts all or some of its 530,000 plus students. Its EiE response was developed for the conflicts in Syria, over the last nine years, and the conflict of Gaza in 2014. The UNRWA Self Learning Programme (SLP) combines hard copy print and online materials, with an interactive learning programme in Arabic and Maths, and UNRWA TV lessons. UNESCO has recently developed similar self-learning materials for crisis-affected communities in Cameroon, this model could be explored in other contexts too and lessons learned shared and built upon.

**Accelerated learning in Syria**

The CapED-funded accelerated learning in Syria for children and young people who missed out on years of learning provides a potential model for the school reopening process in conflict-affected and displacement settings. Children and youth are provided with accelerated learning opportunities through three different models:

1. **Curriculum B** – a condensed curriculum to allow previously out of school children to catch-up with their peers in half the time, allowing them to reintegrate into formal education.

2. **Second chance summer programming** – an eight-week condensed program for children and young people who previously failed to achieve the necessary standards in their academic work. These learners undergo an intensive summer program delivered by some of the most-skilled teachers, allowing for exams to be retaken with the aim of enabling transition to the next grade.

3. **Catch up program** – regularly provided accelerated learning program tailor-made to children returning to school (could be for Grades 9 and 12 preparing to sit for national examinations, or those schools reopening after a return to safety in a given location).

Notably this model establishes a system of accelerated learning and develops the preparedness of schools, teachers and communities. Thus, once schools reopen, this system can be activated. This model will be operationalized in Syria once schools reopen. There is strong evidence from around the world which suggests accelerated learning programs and other forms of intensive learning targeted at the most disadvantaged learners, can be effective in bridging periods of learning loss and providing pathways for successful school re-entry\textsuperscript{23}.

**Key messages and practical tips for designing policy and program interventions**

**Continued support to Ministries of Education in advancing the inclusion agenda**

The inclusion of displaced populations in education systems must continue and be accelerated. Ministries of Education, and Governments more broadly, should continue to be supported in the inclusion of forcibly displaced people in education. This support should be extended to the education components of COVID-19 national response plans. Inclusion is not simply a desirable goal or best practice it has tangible benefits, which are amplified in the current context. Through inclusion, there is the possibility that all learners receive support with distance learning, nutrition, adequate WASH and

\textsuperscript{21} [https://www.cgdev.org/blog/containing-epidemic-should-schools-close-coronavirus](https://www.cgdev.org/blog/containing-epidemic-should-schools-close-coronavirus)


protection, the impacts of which are felt by entire communities and societies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there is the worrying possibility that discrimination, racism and xenophobia targeted at displaced and migrant populations increases, including in and through education. This must be mitigated and addressed by responses in education, the first step to doing this is upholding and guaranteeing the right to education for all regardless of status during all phases of the pandemic.

**Careful consideration of overlapping and intersecting inequalities, which points to the need to plan for context and language specific responses**

All interventions and decisions pertaining to the implementation of distance learning in conflict-affected and displacement contexts should carefully consider overlapping and intersecting inequalities, particularly for girls and women and those with disabilities. This can be contextualized and enhanced through conducting or using education needs assessment of the most vulnerable populations. Any assessments should be coordinated and collaborative, this will likely involve coordination mechanisms such as the Education Cluster and/or Local Education Groups. Such assessments should also be carried out in accordance with the INEE Minimum Standards, highlighted below. In light of COVID-19 particular attention should be paid to access to technologies, connectivity, digital literacy and the hidden costs of distance learning. Finally, it is vital to stress that nuance is needed and education planning delivery for vulnerable learners in this context should be context and language specific and not be assumed to be benign and risk-free.

**Application and contextualization of the INEE Minimum Standards**

The INEE Minimum standards serve as useful and vital guidance and a framework to align with and build EiE programming upon. Substantial work has gone into establishing the minimum standards and the associated guidance, they are tested and robust. Furthermore, INEE has documented multiple cases of where and how the minimum standards have been operationalized and contextualized, a link is provided in the key references section. Additionally, INEE has recently released a technical note on education during the COVID-19 (link also in the key reference section), which lays out the suggested actions in relation to the minimum standards during the pandemic.

**Alignment, coordination and strengthening the Humanitarian-Development Nexus**

Considering the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the scale of its impact on education, mainly through school closures, which may add to existing emergencies notably in displacement contexts, there is no room for duplication, uncoordinated responses and a lack of alignment with response plans. All responses and programming in and for crisis-affected settings should be coordinated through established coordination mechanisms, notably national coordination mechanisms including activities by the education cluster. This is of particular relevance in relation to new windows of funding from global funding mechanisms such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. Where possible, appropriate and resources permit, UNESCO should enhance its presence in coordination mechanisms and strengthen the capacity of MoEs to coordinate the response. The current health crisis requires renewed and strengthened partnerships and collaboration which build on the comparative advantages of actors from across the humanitarian-development spectrum. Finally, any and all COVID-19 in-country programming and support should be aligned with, if present, education sector components of COVID-19 national response plans and should build on national education sector plans.

**Focus on recovery and preparedness (Medium to long term)**

As it is highly likely that the impacts of school closures and the predicted economic downturn caused by COVID-19 will be protracted, recovery efforts and strategies that focus on reaching the most vulnerable first, through an educational crisis sensitive planning perspective, will be critical. For more information, see issue note 2.4 on crisis-sensitive planning. Although critical, shorter term ‘stop-gap’ responses and solutions will not be adequate and sustainable in the medium to long-term, particularly when considering addressing the larger issues of inclusion, equity and quality. Efforts will need to be made to
ensure that when medium to longer term strategies are developed and implemented, they include and address the educational needs and systemic inequalities often faced by conflict-affected, displaced and migrant learners. For instance, this may include targeting of the most at risk learners, notably those in conflict-affected and displacement settings, in school and learning institutions reopening processes. Coupled with this, close monitoring could be conducted to ensure these learners are returning to school and the vital support infrastructure provided through schools and learning institutions is adequate, equitable and inclusive.

Key references

UNESCO Education in Emergencies: https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies
UNESCO COVID-19 Education Disruption and Response: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse
UNHCR - How to ensure everyone can continue learning amid the coronavirus situation: Connected education: resources, considerations & guidance: https://www.unhcr.org/5e787bea4
IOM – Global Crisis Response Platform: https://crisisresponse.iom.int/
UNESCO - Enforcing the right to education of refugees: a policy perspective: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366839
UNESCO Education Sector’s issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by the Section of Education for Migration, Displacement and Emergencies with support from the International Institute for Educational Planning, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, Section of Education Policy, and UNESCO Regional Office in Santiago.

Stay in touch

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