

Middle Eastern post-conflict futures in education: Iraq, Syria and Yemen

Conflict takes an incommensurate toll on education, jeopardizing children's present and future. The statistics are staggering. Today, approximately 75m crisis-affected children aged 3–18, of whom many live in conflict situations, are in urgent need of quality education. This is so because children in conflict-affected countries are 30 percent less likely to complete primary school and half as likely to complete lower-secondary school[1]. About two thirds of all out-of-school children, adolescents and youth worldwide live in conflict affected countries[2].

For those able to escape conflict, education remains a challenge. The educational status of refugee children tends to be worse than that of their non-refugee peers. About 60 percent attend primary education, while 90 percent of the world's children attend primary school. Only 23 percent of refugee adolescents are in lower-secondary school. In contrast, 84 percent of the world's adolescents attend school.

In conflict situation, children's safety in schools and educational institutions is also increasingly under attack. Between 2000 and 2014, the numbers of education institutions targeted rose 17-fold[3]. Further, during conflict, wealth-based and gender disparities in education increase. Girls living in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than if they live non-conflict/crisis countries. Conflicts also have a heavy toll on the quality of education – though there is a lack of evidence documenting the scope of this impact, as too often learning outcomes are not assessed in conflict situations.

In 2017, humanitarian response plan education appeals amounted to \$800m in 2017, while refugee education appeals amounted to close to \$1bn[4]. Actual needs are even greater: emergencies could add approximately \$9bn to projected education costs overall by 2030[5]. Yet, only 4 percent of all humanitarian funding went to education in 2017. Even when funding is there, it tends to be fragmented and short-term. If funding comes and goes, so does children's education.

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) was created at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 to transform and strengthen the education response in emergency and protracted crises, and fill the gap that leaves behind millions of children whose education is disrupted by crisis. In its first year of operations, by March 2018, ECW had allocated some \$84m in 14 countries, reaching over 650,000 children and youth (48 percent of them girls), most of them in conflict situations.

ECW's investments are geared to support rapid lifesaving education responses at the onset of a crisis and extend beyond the short span of humanitarian interventions to bridge the gap between humanitarian and development aid. ECW facilitates the establishment of joint multi-year programs in protracted crises, bringing together humanitarian and development actors to ensure predictability and coordination in the education response. In addition, ECW aims at funding research and innovation to generate much needed evidence-based knowledge and public goods to further inform and improve the education response.

Crisis situations may not always be conducive to academic research. Yet, there are high needs to develop practical evidence, particularly as to what works to actually improve learning and decrease education inequalities that are both a result and a driver of conflict. The special issue on the Middle Eastern post-conflict futures: Iraq, Syria and Yemen, is much welcome. It puts a spotlight on research in conflict and post-conflict environments, and can provide much needed insight to help inform the response in the region and support millions of children in need.



In Syria, after seven years of crisis, an estimated 5.8m children and youth and over 300,000 education personnel need urgent education assistance. Across the country, 1.75m school-age children are out of school. In Yemen, three years of conflict have left hundreds of schools destroyed or damaged. The number of out-of-school children is estimated at 3.6m. Most teachers have not received a full salary since October 2016. In Iraq, the education sector has been particularly hard-hit by the crisis. Schools in conflict-affected areas are operating double and triple shifts. Nearly 50 percent of children in displaced camps do not have access to quality education and 3.2m children attend school irregularly or not at all[6].

ECW has allocated \$15m in Syria to strengthen the capacity of the education system, improve access to equitable learning opportunities and improve relevance of education within a protective environment. ECW also allocated US\$15m in Yemen to help set up temporary learning spaces, distribute learning materials, conduct end of cycle exams, and strengthen child protection and violence prevention. Iraq is among the 25 priority countries identified by ECW for future investments.

However, much more needs to be done. I am hopeful that the body of research and analysis presented in this special issue will guide donors, governments, aid actors and affected communities in joining efforts to better support learning opportunities for the millions of children and youth affected by the crises in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. They deserve no less.

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Notes

1. The Learning generation: investing in education for a changing world; New York, International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016.
2. UIS, 2018.
3. Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre (REAL), University of Cambridge. 2015. “REAL: Let Girls Learn in Conflict Settings.”
4. OCHA Financial Tracking System and UNHCR data.
5. The Learning generation: investing in education for a changing world; International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016.
6. Iraq 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan.