



Launched in January 2021 and counting 24 members, the Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies is an ambitious commitment to action.

2021 Economic and Social Committee Humanitarian Affairs Segment

Education in Emergencies: Disruptions and Opportunities - How humanitarian crises affect children and youth and what we can do about it

Wednesday 23 June, 8:30 – 10:00 CET

Co-sponsors: Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, Core Group on Safe Schools, Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict

Objectives:

- Keep education in emergencies (EiE) high on the agenda by discussing its state and criticality.
- Put the spotlight on crisis-affected and displaced children and youth who cannot access safe education and involve local actors in global dialogues for strategic decision-influencing around education in emergencies.
- Discuss with speakers and participants the multiple disruptors to EiE, the window of opportunity opened by COVID-19, and how to seize the momentum.
- Promote dialogue about current challenges and opportunities related to EiE.

Speakers:

- Ambassador Thomas Gass, Assistant Director General and Head of the South Cooperation Department of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- Mr Raymond Ombere, Principal Education Officer, Arua City, Uganda
- Mr Francisco Benavides, Regional Education Advisor, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific
- Ms Dahabo Abdi Ibrahim, refugee student and advocate for education and women rights, Dadaab
- Mr Najeebullah Qadri, Coordinator, Afghanistan Education Cluster
- Ms Yasmine Sherif, Director of Education Cannot Wait

Moderated by Kerstin Holst, Chief, UNESCO Section of Migration, Displacement, EiE

Main points raised by each panellist:

Kerstin Holst introduced the discussion stating how COVID-19 has taken a toll on education worldwide, harming the education of crisis-affected and displaced children and youth who fell even further behind in their learning. Yet, she highlighted that crises also create opportunities.

Opening remarks by Ambassador Thomas Gass, Assistant Director General and Head of the South Cooperation Department of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

- 127 million children are out of school because they are displaced or caught in humanitarian crises - whether this is a conflict, a disaster, or a pandemic. Among refugee children, nearly 1 out of 2 is out of school. This is devastating for these children's future.
- Armed conflict is one of the main disruptors to education. International humanitarian law contains obligations that aim to ensure that people can continue to receive an education during armed conflict and that students, teachers and schools are protected from hostilities. Respect for these fundamental rules of war is a necessity and should be a basic starting point.
- Armed conflict is but one disrupter. The world is facing many challenges, with more to come: disasters, climate emergency, violence and pandemics.

- COVID-19 has aggravated the education crisis by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities while also creating a window of opportunity for increased prioritisation of education.
- Leaders have to make a choice: going back to 'normal' -where EiE is largely underfunded and many children and youth do not have access to safe and continuous education- or lead progress.
- The Geneva Global Hub for EiE - a 2019 Global Refugee Forum pledge - unites members who strive to contribute so that all crisis-affected and displaced children and youth have their right to a quality education fulfilled, respected and protected.
- States and organisations interested in supporting this important endeavour are warmly invited to co-sign this pledge.

Mr Raymond Ombere, Principal Education Officer, Arua City, Uganda

Education needs of the local host community alongside refugees in Arua, an urban environment, putting the spotlight on the education reality of a secondary city. Background video [here](#).

- Arua, Northern Uganda – a city experiencing a large influx of refugees – is greatly challenged in providing quality education to the growing number of children, due to limited space, an insufficient number of teachers and the associated capacity strain they are under, and further exacerbation of existing challenges caused by COVID-19.
- Older children forced into younger classes - due to disrupted education because of conflict or emergency - are at risk of dropping out.
- In big classes of 68 -100 students, the law of the 'survival of the fittest' applies: those children who learn quickly can progress; slower children are left behind.
- Limited funding has led to inadequate resources to deliver quality education to children who need it most, causing damage to society in the later years, further hindering the growth and development of local communities.

Mr Francisco Benavides, Regional Education Advisor, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific

Education in emergency's situation in East Asia and Pacific, the criticality of preparedness and response across sectors and the nexus. Highlighting opportunities for transformative action.

- The Asia Pacific region was the first affected by the pandemic, closing all schools; some countries have never reopened schools since.
- The back and forth between reopening and closure of schools hinders quality learning and has drastically affected the literacy levels among children, losing years of progress.
- The figures are terrifying: out-of-school children have increased by 20%, and 1 in 3 children cannot read a simple sentence (compared to 1 in 5 children pre-pandemic).
- Conflict, disasters, internal displacements and international migration further aggravate the situation.
- Even though politicians make the decisions about re-opening schools, other stakeholders and politics are determining factors. E.g. parents, paediatricians and teachers play important roles in lobbying governments; all advocacy work for education should consider these groups.
- There is tension about what to open first and it's not always coherent, e.g. children can go to the market but not to school. There is also a lot of inequity about tech, low tech and no tech solutions. Lessons learnt about this need to be captured and considered in future solutions.
- There is potential to build back better, for actors to jointly think of children's mental health and protection. Ministries of Education are forced to innovate, e.g. with blended learning approaches.
- There are new prospects for out-of-school children as we have new means and momentum.
- Teachers and parents see themselves now as a team. Ministries of Education should use this momentum to prepare for risks, be it COVID-19, disasters or climate change.

Ms Dahabo Abdi Ibrahim, refugee student and advocate for education and women rights at Dadaab

A personal account of the impact of interruptions of learning and what are key factors for change.

- Education can be a tremendous challenge for refugee children who struggle to afford fees and need to work to earn a living at a very young age.
- Culture can disrupt education, via harmful practices such as child marriage and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, child labour, all of which prevent girls from carrying on their education.
- Further disruptors include climate events, floods, food insecurity and COVID-19.
- When schools shut down in Kenya in March 2020, significant challenges to education arose: lack of radios, computers, phones, connectivity, etc. Children staying at home are also exposed to increased protection risks, such as early marriage and child pregnancy.
- More teachers and quality teaching are necessary. For this, more time for engaging in learning, learning materials and electronic materials to continue quality education is key.
- In emergencies, governments and humanitarian actors prioritise food, water, shelter, but education must also be prioritised.
- Education is 'life for tomorrow'; without it, displaced children simply won't have a chance to build their future.

Mr Najeebullah Qadri, Afghanistan Education Cluster

The impact of attacks and other disruptors on education and key recommendations

- 2020 was a lost year for education in Afghanistan, with no schools opened for nine months and no alternative learning methods until very late on in the pandemic.
- Lack of electricity within many provinces and, in particular, in rural areas prevents efficient online learning; literacy levels are only at 43% and prevent paper learning away from school.
- The Education Cluster works closely with the Ministry of Education, but Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for children with education threatened by the attacks.
- The withdrawal of US troops has led to more insecurity, directly affecting children's education. Half of the provinces witness continuous fighting, leading to safety concerns in schools.
- Due to insecurity, COVID-19 and political instability, 2022 is anticipated to be an even worse year for children's education than 2021.
- Funding for education is a key factor to solutions; right now, the funding gap is at over 95%.

Interventions from the floor

Ambassador Thomas Wagner, Deputy Permanent Representative, EU Delegation to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva

- Lack of quality education is particularly seen during conflict, in disaster and displacement settings and during pandemics. COVID-19 has exposed the existing inequalities and weaknesses of our education systems, the insufficient preparedness and resources.
- The absence of remote learning opportunities for many children and attacks on education increase the risk of school dropouts, child labour, child marriage and recruitment into armed groups.
- In 2020, the EU allocated € 150 million to support EiE, benefitting 2 million vulnerable children.
- The EU lives up to its commitment to invest 10% of its humanitarian aid budget in education; yet, this is not enough.
- The EU calls on decision-makers, donors, civil society and governments to ensure adequate investment in education despite challenging global economic prospects.
- We need to invest better and more effectively, integrate education into the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and ensure cross-sector programming and approaches.
- COVID-19 has inspired innovation, including low and no tech. It is not about technology but about adopting innovative solutions and build on lessons learnt from the pandemic.

On behalf of the Core Group on Safe Schools, Ms Ainhoa Fábrega Larrucea, Counselor for Humanitarian Affairs at the Permanent Mission of Spain to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva

- Schools must remain a safe place for children during conflict and disasters, a space of peace and normality, providing safety.
- Call on states to join those who already signed the Safe School Declaration, which is now endorsed by over 109 countries.
- Commitments remain as pressing as ever as the closure of educational facilities has a severe and long-lasting impact.
- The Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration will take place from 25 – 27 October 2021, in Abuja, Nigeria, and virtually. States are encouraged to participate and share good examples and recommendations for protecting schools during armed conflict.

Main points raised during the discussion with participants

- Community-based education in Afghanistan can provide alternatives to interruptions. This involves safe, small spaces for learning identified together with the community closer to the children. Teachers are also identified together with the community for the safety of the personnel and the school. Alternative models exist, but it's important to make them accessible to all children.
- COVID-19 has interrupted the education of millions of children worldwide. However, it has put a spotlight on education globally and provided an opportunity to help spur progress.
- Attacks on schools are underreported, and prevention and response are often limited. A key commitment of the Safe Schools Declaration is to collect reliable data. The tools are available for states and organisations supporting them to strengthen data collection. Adequate funding is needed for this.
- All countries must be invited and encouraged to sign the Safe School Declaration. The rapidly increasing signatories' point to the success of this instrument.
- It is key to listen to displaced and crisis-affected children and youth to understand what is best for them and those they care for. Include them in discussions about what measures are best to improve education in emergency settings. This will help maximise the aid effectiveness.
- More funding is needed for adequate prevention and response for education in emergencies.

Closing remarks by Ms Yasmine Sherif, Director of Education Cannot Wait

- Years of progress have been lost in the past 16 months, which causes great concern for reaching SDG4 by 2030. COVID-19 is a crisis upon existing crises. Extreme poverty, climate, displacement, and armed conflict all pose great risks to the education of children and youth.
- The European Commission has set an excellent example by allocating a minimum of 10% of its humanitarian aid to education.
- Governments need to endorse the Safe School Declaration and take political action to implement and respect it.
- Action orientation, inclusiveness, and working with the existing coordination mechanisms are key factors for ECW's success.
- A typical development approach cannot be transplanted into humanitarian contexts. It is necessary to adopt a crisis-sensitive approach in line with the humanitarian coordination mechanisms and respect for humanitarian principles. This is central to ensuring quality EiE.
- Leaders need to step up and make moral and legal choices. Financing is one of the biggest challenges for ensuring EiE. Structures, local actors, international agencies and civil society are ready to act, but they simply do not have the funding.
- There is massive inequity in funding for the education of children and youth: OECD countries spend on average USD 9,000 on education per child per year, while ECW only has around USD 150-200 to spend on education per year on crisis-affected or displaced children and youth.

- The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies is an important commitment; thanks go to the Government of Switzerland for bringing us together in Geneva.
- Gathering under the Geneva Global Hub, we can mobilise the political will and the resources to move away from USD 200 per child and a little bit closer to the OECD countries and quality education in emergencies.

Outcomes of the side event

Interventions ranged from governments to municipal authorities, refugees, and international agencies. All speakers highlighted the substantial deterioration in access to quality education for crisis-affected and displaced children and youth, partly because of the pandemic but also compounded by ongoing conflict, disasters and the effects of climate change. Years of progress on SDG4 have been lost.

Despite this alarming backdrop, the focus was resolutely on solutions. In Uganda: supporting teachers to manage complex situations and initiating community-based solutions to learning with parents' involvement; in Asia-Pacific: mobilising parents and doctors to advocate for school to reopen, and harnessing blended learning approaches post-COVID with the use of no, low tech or digital tools; in Kenyan refugee camps: more radios, phones, tablets can make or break an education; in Afghanistan: rising insecurity and school attacks require political solutions to the conflict and additional financial resources for education.

Interventions from the floor highlighted concerns regarding the global education crisis, the importance of education as the key factor for healthy societies and harnessing creative solutions for learning, mobilising political capital and resources, including progress in the endorsement of the Safe School Declaration. Finally, the importance to work across the nexus was emphasised, using an inclusive and action-oriented approach to tackling the tremendous education needs.

Key messages

- Urgent action must be taken to create a new vision for education – one where learning is guaranteed for every child and youth, including those displaced or living in crisis-affected contexts.
- Schools must be safe and inclusive learning spaces with an all-inclusive approach to prevent and address violence and leave no child behind.
- Teachers must be valued and supported to take on an increasingly complex role of facilitators of learning using different modalities at and beyond the school.
- Learners are safe, prepared and motivated to learn - with a stronger emphasis on whole-child development and support to learning continuity beyond the school.