

Education in Syria: a catalyst to girls' well-being under risk

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Executive Summary

In the context of the ongoing armed conflict, Syria is the country of the world with most internally displaced people. Amongst the most vulnerable, internally displaced children are paying a high price for the country's situation, which is undermining their access to quality education, thus risking not only their future prospects but also those of Syria as a whole. The active conflict, the resulting displacement of families and the lack of sufficient humanitarian assistance push education down the priority list equally for boys and girls, negatively affecting school enrollment and literacy rates for both genders. Yet, girls are left in a much more vulnerable position.

This report highlights the urgent need of addressing the collapse of Syria's education infrastructure. Especially for girls, education is linked to empowerment and thus decisive for their future well-being. Only with both greater commitment from the international community and the political will from all parties involved, along with the recognition of the crucial role that education has for a country, will a better future for be granted Syrian boys and girls and their life prospects.

Introduction

The conflict in Syria has entered its fourth year and with no signs of abating in sight, it has so far affected 10.8 million people of Syria's 22 million person population. With an estimation of 7.6 million internally displaced people (IDP) by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2015), some of them forced to flee even several times, Syria has become the country with the largest number of IDPs in the world¹. Almost 3 million Syrian children are out of school. Especially girls turn into potential victims of exploitation. Their future is at risk and so is that of Syria. The prospect of eventual peace, stability and economic prosperity depends as much as on political will as on future generations.

Armed repression, escalating violence and indiscriminate attacks following the initially peaceful demands for gradual democratization in the Arab world starting in December 2010 place civilians in extreme danger on a daily basis. In the case of Syria, huge numbers of refugees, most of them women and children, have left their towns into border regions such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq² in what has been one of the largest refugee exoduses in recent history (Slim; Trombetta, 2014).³ When inside Syria, IDPs are today in the regions of Damascus, Alep, Homs, Deir Ez-Zor and Idlib⁴ (MPC Research Report 2013/03:5). Overall, more than 11 million people have been forced to flee their homes and an estimated 12.2 million are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including 5.6 million children, the UN says (Asare, Gritten, Offer & Rodgers, 2015).

Context for out of school children in Syria

As the most vulnerable to be affected by the dramatic consequences of the crisis, especially on health and education, and exposed to exploitation, trauma and abuse, every Syrian child out of school is a lifetime's potential under threat (MPC Research Report 2013/03:5). Indeed, when enrolled in school, children are less vulnerable to protection risks such as child labor, early

¹ See also UNHCR: "World Refugee Day: Global forced displacement tops 50 million for first time in post-World War II era", at <http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html>

² When departing from Syria, the regional situation of the Syrian refugees came to depend on the host country. International organizations provide humanitarian assistance and access to formal and non-formal education both in camps and in host communities. For more information see UNHRC: "2014 Syria Regional Response Plan: Education"

³ For more information concerning the refugee crisis in Syria visit the UNHCR's Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

⁴ See the map "Displacement in Syria as of 21 October 2014" by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/2014/displacement-in-syria-as-of-october-2014>

marriage and recruitment to armed groups (Save the Children, 2015). Humanitarian operations resulting from the positive cooperation between regional governments hosting Syrian refugees are lifesaving initiatives enhancing the living conditions of IDPs across the country (Cumming-Bruce, 2013). Nevertheless, when looking at the longer term, the universal right to a quality education, as established under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is the best guarantee for both a child's wellbeing development and the country's future prospects to prevent a "lost generation" (Human Rights Watch, 2013; UNICEF, Save the Children, UNHCR & World Vision, 2013).

Indeed, Syrian children, in particular female children, are paying an enormous price for the region's politics. Both government and non-State armed forces have been accused of inflicting civilian suffering, such as blocking access to food, water and health services, as a method of war (UNHR OHCHR, 2014; Asare et al., 2015).⁵ Given the poverty and the lack of income-generating opportunities, families are forced to push education down their list of priorities. Children from under-skilled and overburdened female-headed households, which make up to one in four families regionally, are at particular risk of child labor (UNHR, 2014). Often, refugee boys are pushed by financial pressure to return to Syria to join armed groups in exchange for sustenance, shelter and a salary. As for girls, the ones who get married are more likely to stop their education and those who drop out of school are more likely to marry (Save the Children, 2014). Child marriage is in fact closely linked to traditional gender roles and inequalities, where a girl's value is largely determined by her upholding family honor, having children and remaining at home (Save the Children, 2014b). Therefore, especially for girls, education is key. And yet, if Syria's children are risking their lives just to go to school, it is of little surprise that more Syrian parents are choosing to keep their children at home.⁶

⁵ According to the Migration Policy Center, the regime considers displaced people as part of the population which dared to challenge its absolute power. Therefore, it prevents emergency aid from getting through and no NGO installed in Syria can distribute aid without authorization. The regime determines in which region and by whom this aid must be distributed, choosing those in which no IDPs are found and thereby exploiting international aid to build up a client base to which it delivers emergency aid meant for refugees. As a result, displaced people do not have any confidence in emergency aid organizations supported by the regime. The western NGOs that want to help displaced Syrians effectively have to make contact with informal networks within the country and support associations. These are the weak local partners that send aid directly from various support committees. Today, this is the only way to pass on aid to IDP.

⁶ Already before the war, it was not uncommon for girls under 18 to get married in Syria. Nevertheless, under the pretext of protecting their virtue and ease financial pressure on families, there are reports pointing at an increase of forced early marriages by both IDP and refugee families, often with much older men. Child marriage also isolates girls from family and friends, often resulting in social and psychological isolation. This isolation in turn limits girls' access to sexual and reproductive health.

Today, there are 4.8 million Syrian children of school age. Inside Syria, 2.2 million of them are not in school, while more than half a million refugee children are not in school outside Syria, as indicated by several international organizations (UNICEF, Save the Children, UNHCR & World Vision, 2013). The days are gone in which an estimated 97% of primary-age children were attending school and literacy rates were at over 90% for both men and women, surpassing the regional average (UNICEF, 2014).

The Syrian education system

Years of brutal conflict have reversed more than a decade of progress in children's education. Schools have been destroyed, damaged, used for military purposes or turned into shelters for displaced people (Save the Children, 2015b:25)⁷. Where the buildings still stand, teachers and available education staff are reportedly lost. It is not uncommon that children drop out of school as their families move around, every time less likely that they will re-enroll (Save the Children, 2014). Trying to enter school in a new location is challenging when classrooms are overcrowded or due to the complicated official paperwork that results in most cases in children never completing their education (Save the Children, 2014). What was once one of the region's leading school systems has mostly suffered in areas hit hardest by violence: in Al-Raqqa, Idlib, Aleppo, Deir ez Zor, Hama and Darra'a less than half of all children attend school (Save the Children, 2014).

In addition to protecting education areas and ensuring they are "spaces of peace", efforts are being made to develop informal and non-formal education opportunities in both Syria and refugee camps of hosting countries in order to reach the poorest and most vulnerable children (Save the Children, 2014). These learning opportunities help children deal with the worst kinds of trauma. Indeed, inside Syria, children who have been able to listen, play and talk in safe spaces set up across the country are better able to process their experiences and are more optimistic about their prospects (Save the Children, 2014).

⁷ Concrete numbers are contradictory. Information provided by UNICEF, quoting the 'Government of Syria's Education Information Management System': "The Government of Syria says that of the 18,129 Government schools, 15,432 are functioning, and 2,697 are affected or damaged." In contrast, Secretary-General, *Report to UN Security Council*, UN, 23 April 2014, p.13, said that by April 2014, over 4,000 schools were closed, damaged, or used for shelter by people displaced by the conflict.

Equality, the benchmark in the field of Syria education

Equality is the benchmark in the field of education in Syria. The Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic grants equal rights to all its citizens regardless of gender in article 25. Besides, article 45 states that women are guaranteed “all the opportunities that enable them to participate fully and effectively in political, social, cultural, and economic life”(OECD Development Center, 2015). Although individual laws contain discriminatory provisions, and no legislation specifically prohibits gender-based discrimination (Kelly & Breslin, 2010:462), education has been nondiscriminatory and equally accessible to boys and girls.

School enrolment rates among Syrian refugees are now lower than those found in Afghanistan, a country with a much longer history of conflict and deep levels of poverty. Before the current conflict, gross primary and secondary school enrolment ratios (females as % of males) were approximately equal (at 99% for primary education, secondary at 100%) (JICA, 2006:11).⁸ Due to the government's goal to eliminate illiteracy by 1991, primary and preparatory schools were built in many areas, and mobile schools travelled into remote desert areas(JICA, 2006:24).In Syria, approximately 5% GDP expenditure has been allocated for education ever since 1980 (UNDP, 2013). No tuition fees were charged and parents were legally compelled to send their children, both boys and girls, to school. Therefore education levels had been consistently good ever since. If daughters did not attend school, their parents risked facing punishment (JICA, 2006).

Despite the fast-changing context, its dramatic impact on people’s livelihoods and life chances and the devastated education system, enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education for both boys and girls remains remarkably equal (UNESCO, 2013). Total net enrollment rates have decreased from 92% to 61% (61.1% for female and 62.4% for male) by 2013 for primary education and to 44% (43.8% for female and 44.3% for male) for secondary education (UIS, 2013). Indeed, according to the Global Gender Gap Index 2014, Syria performs considerably well in closing the gender gap when it comes to education, with only a small variation of approximately 1%, providing Syria with an outstanding position in the region. However, the situation changes when entering the labor market, where other additional indicators such as economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, health and survival locate

⁸The Syrian Arab Republic is an active member of a number of organizations that benefit education. Among these are the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science; the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO); the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Syria in an overall gender gap position of 139 out of 142 countries with a total score of 0,577 (0.00 = inequality, 1.00 = equality) (World Economic Forum, 2014).

Particularly girls' education is, according to a UNICEF report, one of the most powerful tools for creating economic growth, decreasing the likelihood of conflict, increasing resilience and impacting future generations with wide-reaching economic and social benefits (UNICEF, 2015). Whereas education is a transformative tool for youth in general, especially for girls, education is linked to empowerment. Women with higher education are much more likely than uneducated women to be able to make their own choices in life (UNICEF, 2015). Nevertheless, this is especially challenging in a conflict which has been distinguished by a brutal targeting of women since its eruption. The United Nations has gathered evidence of systematic sexual assault of women and girls by combatants in Syria⁹ and describes rape as "a weapon of war" (Freedom House, 2014). In this context, the Islamic State (ISIL) has only escalated the brutal treatment and sexual enslavement of women and girls in the zone (Asare et al., 2015). In the territories under its control, ISIL has imposed strict limitation of movement for the female population and the overall situation of women and girls is reported to be increasingly critical (OCHA, 2015). Although cases of sexual violence of boys in detention have also been reported, security concerns and parental prejudice against girls' education result in parents becoming more reluctant to allow their daughters to travel long distances to attend school (OECD Development Center, 2014:4). Given the increased risks for girls and women in the context of conflict, it is crucial for Syria to maintain its record of equal educational opportunities for boys and girls so as to protect girls and help them become the literate independent women of the future.

Funding and initiatives preventing a "Lost Generation"

Globally, education in emergencies is consistently underfunded. Indeed, the Syrian response is the largest funding appeal in history to provide education and protection to children both inside Syria and across the region. In that sense, the "No Lost Generation Initiative" (NLGI)¹⁰,

¹⁰NLGI was created to provide the infrastructure needed for education (supported by USAID and other international agencies). Established in October 2013, NLGI's goal is to provide educational tools to assist in the creation of a stable civil society in Syria. More precisely, the program seeks to expand classroom rehabilitation and the provision of school equipment, supplies and learning material. A special focus will be set in improving the quality and relevance of learning through remedial education, catch-up classes, life skills, child-centered interactive and innovative approaches (like e-learning), and secure school environments. In child protection, UNICEF will work to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and separation of children, in line with the NLGI.

backed by numerous partners from UN and international agencies, plays –despite still being significantly underfunded- a crucial role in calling upon global attention and gathering donors around a common cause (Global Education Cluster, 2014). Governments, host communities and other partners focus on reaching more children with education protection support and services. The aim is to promote non-discriminatory access to quality and relevant formal and non-formal education for both refugee and vulnerable host community children (UNICEF, 2015b).

Initially, NLGI called for almost US\$ 1 billion (US\$114 million in 2013 and US\$885 million in 2014). However, as of the latest data available, only 60% was funded in 2013 and 33% by August 2014 (Save the Children, 2014:29). Save the Children highlights the fact that “the NGLI has so far not played a particular strong catalytic role in increasing education funding within the country” (Save the Children, 2014). Also, policy and capacity barriers have continued to limit education service scale-up, with 49% of Syrian refugee children remaining out of school through the 2013/14 school year (Save the Children, 2014). For 2015, in line with the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2015-16¹¹, UNICEF is requesting US\$624 million to respond to the humanitarian crisis faced by Syrian refugees and other vulnerable children in the region (UNICEF, 2015b). With a total allocation for education of US\$ 75.006 explicitly for education, 494.000 children are meant to receive school supplies (UNICEF, 2015b).

While underfunding of NLGI is concerning, it is also true that the international community has systematically failed to recognize the importance of education in humanitarian crisis through its funding commitment.¹² Half of the world’s out of school children live in conflict areas and yet -although there has been a slight increase in 2014- development aid to education has globally experienced a decreasing trend since 2010, leaving an annual global funding gap for basic education estimated of US\$ 26billion (UNESCO, 2013). Numbers are not inspiring for the Syrian population. NLGI partners will need to adjust their response to more flexible and long-term funding modalities alongside the short-term humanitarian assistance in order to

¹¹ The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) constitutes a strategic shift in the response to the Syria crisis. It is an innovative approach that effectively harnesses the capacities, knowledge and resources of humanitarian and development partners to create a multi-faceted resilience-based response to the Syria crisis. It is a country-driven, regionally coherent plan to address refugee protection and humanitarian needs whilst building the resilience of vulnerable people and impacted communities and strengthening the capacity of national delivery. See <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/>.

For additional information on previous plans and the Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP6) please visit <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/2014/displacement-in-syria-as-of-october-2014>

¹² For more data and information, see Global Education Cluster (2014): “Education Cannot Wait: Financing Education in Emergencies Challenges and Opportunities”

guarantee and call upon the recognition of education's impact on children's future prospects as well as the country's peace, stability and economic development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the conflict persists and the humanitarian crisis worsens, the number of families and children displaced by the conflict continues to increase. Among many other challenges that Syrian children face today, ensuring their access to learning is an essential platform for protection, social stabilization and economic recovery (UNICEF, Save the Children, UNHCR & World Vision, 2013). Especially for girls, education is key in order to ensure their autonomy and future prospects. And yet, in the given context of lasting conflict, the task of providing an education to Syria's children is becoming ever more challenging.

Education has indeed a catalytic and transformative effect on children's well-being. Child protection and education are deeply interconnected. Literate girls are more prone to know their different opportunities and make informed choices. Thus, despite the conflict, horrors and human rights abuses, children hold the potential to become a decisive part in shaping Syria's future. Through education, children can acquire knowledge and skills for a peaceful future in which they will be the ones leading their community. For girls, education is crucial for empowerment and for guaranteeing an increased well-being in their future. Nevertheless, conflict is putting under question the equally positive high literacy rates for both boys and girls achieved in the last decades. Hard economic conditions as well as security concerns, together with the lasting humanitarian crisis, risk to push education down the priority list.

Today, there has been insufficient attention, political support and resources to minimize the disruptions this devastating conflict is causing to children's opportunities and ability to learn. The collapse of Syria's education system and the consequent rise in the proportion of uneducated youth, especially girls, can only be halted by political commitment from all parties involved. With no change in sight, the economic situation will soon reach catastrophic levels with problems at the level of human security. Significantly costly and dependent on economic support of the international community, humanitarian actors will need to look at ways to find more suitable and effective solutions to a long term education response and meet the needs of out of school children in Syria. Given the mobility of families, active conflict and limited humanitarian access, only immediate and concerted action will prevent a "lost generation" of uneducated boys and girls that would perpetuate the costs of conflict for decades to come.

In order to address the aforementioned issues and shortcomings and support the education and thereby the future of the children affected by the ongoing conflict, this report recommends:

1. **Increasing the international investment to end the collapse of Syria's education system.** Dialogue and cooperation between national authorities, the international community and NGOs working on the field must be enhanced so as to foster the exchange of ideas and best practices that provide Syrian children with the sufficient assistance to guarantee that both boys and girls get an adequate learning experience.
2. **Long-term planning from national authorities and the international community** to ensure access to education to children in Syria. Needs must be addressed by developing new innovative education policies that guarantee access to education for internally displaced people such as flexible curriculum, additional education spaces to accommodate increasing amount of students and increasing informal and non-formal education provisions so as to help students overcome trauma and abuse. Education plays a crucial role in children's developments and psychological wellbeing and should be a priority component in conflict zones.
3. **Ensuring equal access to education for boys and girls.** Current legislation supports girls' education and yet, the international community, local authorities and NGOs will need to raise awareness of its benefits in the means of empowering the women of tomorrow. Child marriage should be prevented by making girls aware of their opportunities and support them when choosing education.
4. **Further cooperating of national authorities with NGOs and local partners so as to ensure humanitarian aid reaches internally displaced people.** By assisting families in need, boys and girls have a better chance to avoid dropping out of school, increase their future prospects and guarantee for a dignified life.
5. **Commitment from all parties involved in the conflict to respect International Humanitarian Law and cease attacks on education infrastructure.** Schools must no longer be used for military purposes and need to become "zones of peace" schools so as to guarantee a safe and inclusive environment for children where they can achieve learning.

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