EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT

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Breaking Barriers: Understanding educational exclusion in crises

Global estimates 2026 update

New evidence on where needs are greatest, who is being left behind and the barriers preventing children from learning.

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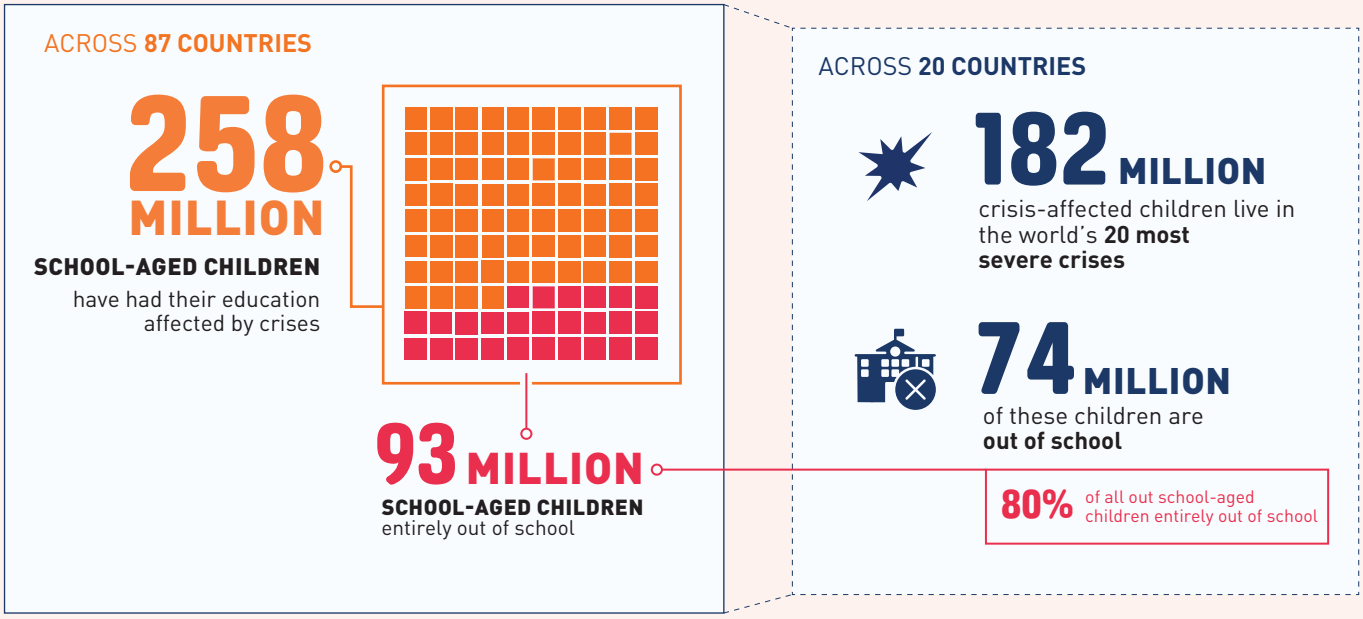
Executive summary

Global estimates 2026 update

Crises are affecting more children, lasting longer and placing growing pressure on education systems. This report presents updated global estimates of crisis-affected and out-of-school children, and introduces new evidence on barriers to participation, learning trajectories, disability-related exclusion and the educational progression of forcibly displaced children.

The findings reveal a challenge that is larger than ever, while providing new evidence on where educational needs are greatest, who is being left behind, and the barriers preventing children from accessing and benefiting from education. They also highlight how weak foundational learning can accumulate over time, contributing to educational exclusion in adolescence.



Key findings

1. The global education crisis continues to deepen.

An estimated 258 million children and adolescents of school age (49% girls) have had their education affected by crises across 87 countries. This is an increase of 21 million in the eighteen months since the previous ECW Global Estimates Update. Among these crisis-affected children, 93 million (51% girls) are out of school – equivalent to an out-of-school rate of 36% – while a further 165 million remain enrolled under conditions that disrupt schooling, undermine progression and increase the risk of dropout.

2. Educational needs are highly concentrated.

While the scale of need is unprecedented, educational exclusion is concentrated in a relatively small number of countries and crisis contexts. Nearly 60% of all crisis-affected children live in just nine countries affected by protracted crises – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen. Meanwhile, 67% of all out-of-school crisis-affected children are concentrated in just ten countries.

The 20 countries classified at the highest crisis severity level are home to 182 million crisis-affected children and 74 million out-of-school crisis-affected children, representing nearly 80% of all out-of-school crisis-affected children identified in this study. The out-of-school rate rises from 36% among all crisis-affected children to 40% among children living in the most severe crisis settings. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounts for 38 million out-of-school children living in extreme crisis settings, representing 51% of the global total in extreme severity.

3. Educational exclusion is deeply unequal.

Crisis does not affect all children equally. Educational exclusion rises systematically as vulnerabilities accumulate, with displaced children, children with disabilities and those living in the most severe crises facing the greatest barriers to education.

The out-of-school rate rises from 36% among all crisis-affected children to 40% among children living in the most severe crises, 52% among internally displaced children and 74% among refugee children in the most severe settings.

Disability is an independent axis of exclusion. Among non-forcibly displaced crisis-affected children, the weighted out-of-school rate is 31% for children without disabilities, compared with 43% for children with disabilities – a 12 percentage point gap observed across all crisis severity tiers.

Gender disparities remain significant across many crisis-affected contexts, particularly where crises compound existing barriers such as discriminatory social norms, child marriage, gender-based violence, displacement and disability. Afghanistan remains the starkest example, with girls excluded from secondary education.

4. Families have not given up on education.

Drawing on newly harmonised and internationally comparable MSNA data, the report finds that most crisis-affected households continue to prioritise education and keep children enrolled until financial resources are exhausted.

The barriers are economic, structural and political – not motivational.

When children leave school, financial barriers (39%) and conflict-related school closures (38%) account for nearly 80% of school withdrawal cases combined. These findings challenge assumptions that demand for education weakens during crises and suggest that, where schools remain accessible, affordability is often

the principal constraint on participation.

5. A learning crisis in the early grades can become an access crisis in adolescence.

Children are not only missing school. Too many are missing the opportunity to acquire foundational skills when they matter most.

Across many crisis-affected contexts, foundational learning levels remain alarmingly low. Large learning deficits emerge early and often persist throughout primary school, increasing the risk of disengagement, repetition and dropout.

Evidence from crisis-affected households shows that out-of-school rates at secondary level are 20–35 percentage points higher than national averages in the same countries. Together with evidence of lower promotion rates and slower progression among displaced learners, these findings suggest that educational exclusion is often the culmination of years of interrupted learning and unmet learning needs.

6. Conflict is associated with deeper and more persistent learning deficits.

New evidence suggests that learning progresses much more slowly in conflict-affected settings than in crisis contexts primarily affected by natural disasters or socioeconomic shocks.

Analysis across a sample of crisis-affected countries shows substantially lower reading proficiency and slower learning progression among children exposed to conflict and violence. While these findings should not be interpreted as representative of all crisis contexts globally, they suggest that conflict may be associated with deeper and more persistent learning deficits than other crisis types.

The results also highlight the importance of considering both crisis exposure and the underlying strength of education systems when assessing learning outcomes.

7. Forced displacement creates lasting educational disadvantages.

Analysis from Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Somalia shows that displaced children experience lower promotion rates, slower progression and overage rates 5–15 percentage points higher than those of non-displaced peers. These disadvantages accumulate over time and translate into substantial gaps in educational attainment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING, POLICY AND FINANCING

Taken together, the findings demonstrate both the scale of the challenge and the opportunity for action. We know where needs are greatest, who is being left behind and, increasingly, what is required to help crisis-affected children access education, acquire foundational skills and remain on positive learning pathways.

The evidence increasingly points to the need to address not only access, but also learning, progression and retention. Without stronger investment in foundational learning and educational continuity, learning deficits accumulated during childhood risk becoming permanent exclusion during adolescence.

The findings point to four priorities for collective action across the education in emergencies community:

- Prioritise foundational learning from the outset of emergency response.
- Reduce financial and structural barriers through integrated and inclusive approaches.
- Invest in structured catch-up and remedial learning at scale.
- Support progression and successful transition to secondary education, particularly for displaced learners.

Structure of report

PART 1 Describes the dataset underlying the estimates.

PART 2 Sets out the methodology for defining "crises" from an educational standpoint, identifies which children can be considered affected within each country and presents multiple disaggregation of the global headcount.

PART 3 Focuses on access to education in crises: we estimate out-of-school rates for crisis-affected children disaggregated by sex, displacement status, as well as presence of disabilities, and derive a global total. We then analyse barriers to access and transition specific to different protracted crises and conduct different deep dives in selected African countries on transition and survival of crisis-affected subpopulations.

PART 4 Examines the degree to which children in different crisis types fail to acquire foundational learning skills and includes a deep dive into recent data from Sub-Saharan Africa.

PART 5 Closes with a set of evidence-grounded calls to action.

About this publication

This report was prepared between January and April 2026 by Matteo Valenza (MVD Consulting) under the supervision of Christian Stoff (ECW).

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For any questions or feedback, contact Christian Stoff, cstoff@un-ecw.org.

Disclaimer: The estimates contained in this research must be considered indicative only and do not represent official United Nations estimates. The estimates should be considered as "educated guesses" of the number of children in need of educational support in emergencies and protracted crises, based on a combination of high-quality research and UN sources. The estimates were produced by ECW based on information available in March 2026. As humanitarian situations can change quickly, these estimates are subject to change.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this note are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of ECW or the United Nations. The depiction and use of boundaries, geographic names and related data in this note are not warranted to be error-free, nor do they necessarily imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of ECW concerning the legal status of any country or territory of its authorities, or the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

About Education Cannot Wait

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is the global fund for education in crises. The Fund provides rapid, flexible funding to locally-led education responses that protect the learning of the most marginalised children affected by crises, while strengthening education systems to sustain learning and resilience in fragile and conflictaffected contexts. ECW works with governments, youth, civil society, United Nations agencies and community partners to reach children left furthest behind.

As global crises intensify and the education financing gap widens, ECW calls on public and private sector partners to scale up investments so millions more crisis-affected girls and boys can learn and rebuild their futures.

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List of acronyms

ACAPS:	Assessment Capacities Project
ACLED:	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
ECW:	Education Cannot Wait
EiEPC:	Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises
EM-DAT:	Emergency Events Database
GEM:	Global Education Monitoring (Report)
ICAN-ICAR:	International Common Assessment of Numeracy/International Common Assessment of Reading
IDMC:	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP:	Internally displaced person
IPC:	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
ISI:	INFORM Severity Index
LMIC:	Low- and middle-income country
MICS:	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (UNICEF)
MPL:	Minimum proficiency level
MSNA:	Multi-Sector Needs Assessment
NFD:	Not forcibly displaced
OOS:	Out-of-school
OOSCiE:	Out-of-school children in emergencies
OOSR:	Out-of-school rate
OOSRiE:	Out-of-school rates in emergencies
REACH:	Impact Initiatives (joint initiative of ACTED, UNOSAT and IMPACT)
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goal
UIS:	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund

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PART 1

The largest cross-country dataset on education outcomes in crises assembled to date

1. Background and objectives

Crises are intensifying and spreading. According to ACLED, conflict event counts nearly doubled over the past five years globally. Climate change simultaneously amplifies the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. Together, these pressures have caused large-scale socioeconomic shocks, deepened food insecurity and driven displacement to record levels. Exposure to crises carries long-term consequences for children's health, education and well-being. Yet, when children have access to quality education, they demonstrate remarkable resilience, developing the skills and stability needed to rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities. This recognition has sharpened the commitment of actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to maintaining continuous, quality education in crises.

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The challenges involved are substantial and structurally different from those in stable contexts. Security risks, mass displacement, destroyed infrastructure, resource constraints, overstretched education systems, and the pervasive effects of trauma on children and educators compound one another, making consistent delivery of effective education exceptionally difficult. For marginalised groups, including the forcibly displaced and children with disabilities, these barriers are compounded further by discrimination and inadequate facilities.

Alongside these operational challenges, funding is contracting at precisely the wrong moment. After years of significant growth – from US$469 million in 2016 to US$1.2 billion in 2022 – humanitarian education funding plateaued in 2023 and has sharply declined since 2025. In the era of forced "hyper-prioritisation", comprehensive, timely and granular information on the educational needs of crisis-affected children is a prerequisite for effective response. Knowing who these children are, where they are, the relative prevalence of the barriers they face accessing education, not progressing through the grades or not achieving minimum proficiency and the degree to which their education has been disrupted is essential for prioritising interventions and allocating resources where they are most needed.

2. Objectives

This is the fourth global update in this series, after those issued by ECW in 2022, 2023 and 2024. It aims to:

1

Estimate a duly disaggregated global headcount of children and adolescents whose education is affected by crises, globally.

2

Assess educational deprivations of crisis-affected children in terms of access, progression, barriers to schooling and foundational learning.

3

Provide a suite of open resources, including an updated database on the education outcomes of crisis-affected children, to support further learning, research, advocacy and action.

It is equally important to clarify what this study *does not* set out to do. Its focus is the global picture: indicative, evidence-based estimates designed to proxy the scale of the challenge, not to produce or replace official country-level statistics. Country-level figures in this report should be treated as informed approximations and not used as substitutes for official data produced by national governments or UN bodies.

3. Dataset

This report is built on an evidence base without precedent in the field. Drawing on primary data from over half a million household interviews across more than 25 crisis contexts – linking 20 MSNAs, the latest PAL Network learning assessments, the latest UNICEF MICS in crisis-affected countries, as well as the latest research on the interplay between crises, displacement and disability – it represents the largest cross-country dataset of education information ever assembled for emergencies and protracted crisis. This depth allows a simultaneous examination of who is out of school, why they are out, the extent to which they progress and transition into education cycles, and what they are learning.

TABLE 1. Main data sources

Data source	Contribution
UNESCO Institute of Statistics (https://data.uis.unesco.org/)	Population of children of school age in each country, by education cycle; learning outcomes in reading and mathematics, data on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 4.1.1.
INFORM Severity Index (ACAPS) (https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/INFORM-Severity)	Severity, duration and affected populations for each crisis.
PAL Network (https://palnetwork.org/ican-icar/)	Proportion of children achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics in grade 4 for selected countries, aligned to SDG indicator 4.1.1.(a); attendance and enrolment (ages 5 to 16)
UNICEF	OOSRs for children aged 3 to the legal age of start of primary education; OOSRs for children with disabilities; data on SDG indicator 4.2.1.

UIS-UNESCO GEM Report (https://education-estimates.org/)	Estimation of underlying curves for OOSC rates.
UNHCR	Estimates of school-aged refugee population by country and connected age splits; out-of-school (OOS) rates amongst refugee children.
IDMC (https://www.internal-displacement.org/)	Estimation of the number of internally displaced persons.
UN/DESA (https://population.un.org/wpp/)	Countries' population estimates disaggregated by age.
OCHA (https://humanitarianaction.info/)	Interagency response plans' coverage.
EM-DAT (https://www.emdat.be/)	Estimation of the number of people affected by extreme weather events.
MSNAs (REACH) (https://www.impact-initiatives.org/)	OOS rates for specific subcategories of crisis-affected children, such as IDPs or refugees.
ACLED (https://acleddata.com/)	Estimation of the number of people affected by conflict and violence.

BOX 1.
How this report sits alongside other frameworks

Several frameworks measure distinct dimensions of education in crises. They are best read together, rather than against each other. The table below clarifies what each captures and where this report fits.

Framework	What it measures	Primary use
GCPEA – Education under attack	Documented incidents of attacks on education and military use of schools	Evidence base for the Safe Schools Declaration; legal accountability
UN MRM (SRSG-CAAC)	Verified grave violations against children in armed conflict, including attacks on schools	Reporting to the Security Council; protection advocacy
Education Clusters – People in Need (PiN)	Children requiring humanitarian education support within the geographic scope of response plans (Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans)	Planning baseline for humanitarian response plans in countries with Education Clusters
ECW Global Update	School-age headcounts, out-of-school rates and learning outcomes across all crisis-affected areas, irrespective of response-plan boundaries	Internationally comparable prevalence estimates for advocacy, further research, prioritisation and planning

Two distinctions matter most for interpretation. First, GCPEA and the MRM track incidents: what has happened to schools, teachers and students in crises. This report tracks outcomes: how many children are out of school, progressing too slowly or failing to acquire foundational skills in crises. Incident tracking and outcome estimation answer different questions and rely on different evidentiary standards; neither substitutes for the other. This report uses ACLED data for their near-real-time frequency and high-resolution geocoding, which capture the shifting frontlines of early 2026 with the granularity needed for population-exposure calculations.

Second, PiN and OOSCiE figures are sometimes conflated but measure different things. PiN signals what the humanitarian system has been scoped to consider "in need of assistance" within prioritised geographies. OOSCiE estimates how many crisis-affected children are outside the classroom, regardless of HRP catchment. The two diverge most sharply where response plans cover only subnational conflict zones while crisis conditions extend further, and in the opposite direction where enrolment is relatively high but learning or protection needs affect large numbers of children who remain in school. Read alongside each other, they trace the distance between the operational reach of humanitarian education response and the wider educational toll of crises.

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PART 2

258 million children globally have had their education affected by crises

Estimating how crises affect children's education is fraught with methodological challenges.[1] This study advances that effort with an update through March 2026 and a series of improvements on the 2024 ECW Global Estimates.

1. Screening and classification of crisis-affected countries

The term "crisis-affected" encompasses children whose education is disrupted by armed conflict, forced displacement, climate and geophysical hazards, or acute socio-economic shocks – whether they are displaced or in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. The range of lived experiences behind this definition is wide. In conflict-affected settings such as Syria or Yemen, children may remain in their communities yet face damaged infrastructure, absent teachers and unsafe learning environments. In drought-stricken regions like the Horn of Africa, economic pressure on households can quietly push education down the list of priorities – not through sudden disruption, but through the cumulative effects of prolonged economic hardship. not through crisis visibility, but through accumulated hardship.

Critically, being crisis-affected does not mean being out of school. Many crisis-affected children attend overcrowded classrooms, persist through disrupted school years or remain enrolled while learning little – casualties of underfunded and overstretched education systems. The term therefore captures something broader than access alone: it reflects a spectrum of educational vulnerability, spanning both barriers to entry and the erosion of quality once children are inside the classroom.

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This update leverages a cumulative INFORM Severity Index (ISI) value to single out crises, defined as the sum of monthly ISI values from January 2024 to January 2026. This measure captures both the intensity and duration of a crisis in a single index, better reflecting the compounding effects of prolonged emergencies on education outcomes. In another novel approach, this update adopts the following classification via "severity codes" to capture how different types of crises affect education outcomes. Categories are established using a dual approach: the top three quintiles of the cumulative ISI and the February 2026 value, ensuring recent developments are also reflected.

1. The estimates presented in this report are indicative and do not constitute official UN figures. They were produced by ECW drawing on peer-reviewed research, official UN data sources, multi-sector needs assessments (MSNAs), INFORM Severity Index classifications, citizen-led learning assessments and selected literature on education in crisis settings. While the primary data sources cover many crises, significant gaps in coverage remain, necessitating imputation and estimation. Country-level figures should accordingly be treated as informed approximations rather than substitutes for official national or international statistics, which may reflect more recent data or greater methodological precision. Given the rapidly evolving nature of humanitarian crises, these estimates are subject to change and may not reflect developments after the date of production.

TABLE 2. Severity codes

Severity code	Category	Parameters	Rationale	Example of affected group
1	**Extreme**	Top quintile of cumulative ISI and in addition, ISI > 7.5 in Feb 2026[2]	Most severe crises, with extreme and measurable effects on education outcomes, including near-complete destruction of education infrastructure.	Girls' education in Afghanistan
2	**High**	Second highest quintile of cumulative ISI, and in addition, ISI > 6 in Feb 2026	Crises that show increasing or persistent severity that compromise education outcomes. This is particularly relevant for chronically fragile contexts with overlapping shocks.	Children affected by conflict and violence in Northern Mozambique
3	**High (humanitarian food assistance, ISI is NA)**	Country has children in IPC Phase 3+ (Feb 2026) and does not already qualify under the two categories above	Crises whereby vulnerable subgroups of children require humanitarian food assistance, despite the crisis not being detected by the ISI. Including these slow-onset crises avoids the invisibility of "hidden" children who are nonetheless in need of humanitarian assistance.	Children in need of humanitarian food assistance in Guinea
4	**Medium**	Middle quintile of cumulative ISI or classified as "Medium" severity by ACAPS ISI in Feb 2026, excluding high-income countries.	Crises of sufficient intensity to disrupt the quality of education provision, even where access may be broadly maintained. Protracted low-intensity crises erode education continuity and learning outcomes over time. High-income countries are excluded since they have coping capacities that most lower- and middle-income countries do not.	Children affected by climatic shocks in Madagascar
5	**Forcibly displaced in other lower- and middle-income countries**	This residual category captures forcibly displaced children in lower- and middle-income countries that are not themselves crisis-affected according to the ISI.[3]	Forced displacement disrupts education regardless of crisis severity in the host country, as children miss extended periods of school and may face additional barriers to enrolment, language of instruction and certification if they re-enter school.	Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in South Africa

2. March 2026 is the most recent validated month at time of analysis. Starting February 2026, the ISI is expressed on a scale out of 10, no longer out of 5.
3. The primary mechanism for identifying crisis-affected contexts is the INFORM Severity Index, which classifies countries rather than displaced populations within them. Without severity code 5, forcibly displaced children hosted in countries that do not meet the criteria for inclusion under severity codes 1 to 4 would go uncounted.

Remaining low-intensity crises or crises driven by forced international displacement to high-income countries are not deemed sufficiently severe to significantly affect education outcomes, despite the fact that some such crises do stress education systems, at least locally/temporarily and for already vulnerable subgroups.

Once crises are identified, the headcount of crisis-affected children is calculated according to each crisis driver, drawing on the most appropriate data source in each case. Conflict and violence are captured through ACLED organised violence and conflict data, while natural disasters are identified using EM-DAT, with ISI core indicators serving as a fallback. Slow-onset crises such as droughts rely primarily on Integrated Food Security Phase Classification data, again supplemented by ISI core indicators where needed. In contexts where multiple drivers overlap and reinforce one another, estimates are derived from a combination of these sources, net of double counting. This approach addresses the longstanding challenge posed by ACAPS reporting entire countries as affected in the ISI when the effects on crises on education provision may be geographically concentrated, leveraging the ISI's flagging value without forcing interpretations on ACAPS-specific definitions of "affected" children that may not align well with EiEPC-specific concepts.

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2. Rationale for using ACLED's data

ACLED's conflict exposure methodology designates several standard thresholds for high-intensity events. Each incident is geocoded indicating location confidence. The 5 km buffer accounts for inherent spatial uncertainty in conflict data while capturing the impact zone around violent events. For this update, we are only considering "organised violence" events, as defined by ACLED, which include:

- **Battles** – Violent interactions between two organised armed groups
- **Explosions/remote violence** – One-sided violent events using remote weapons (airstrikes, shelling, etc.)
- **Violence against civilians** – Organised armed groups deliberately inflicting violence on unarmed non-combatants.

The category does not include mob violence, or similar events that may affect education provision or education outcomes only sporadically. The "organised violence" category represents the core of what ACLED considers to be armed, political conflict that directly threatens civilian populations, and in turn, is likely to affect education provision. The 5 km buffer aligns with ACLED's geocoding precision, provides computational feasibility for large-scale spatial analysis, integrates well with WorldPop population datasets, and avoids arbitrary administrative boundary approaches. The 5 km radius is large enough to capture meaningful exposure while maintaining analytical precision for distinguishing exposed versus non-exposed groups of children. We included "organised violence" over the period January 2024–January 2026.

Multiple studies and several geocoded analyses reveal multiple and overlapping effects of conflict activity at a range of about 5 km on education:

- **Physical security.** Schools within 5 km of organised violence face risks of infrastructural damage, closures and direct security threats.
- **Attendance.** Within a range of 5 km, families can directly observe or hear about conflict events, receiving information that influences immediate decisions about sending children to school. This localised information flow creates direct effects on attendance within days of conflict events.
- **Teacher shortages.** Conflict within 5 km is close enough to threaten teaching staff who must make safety calculations about reporting to work. Teacher shortages in conflict zones create cascading effects on educational quality that persist beyond specific events.
- **Infrastructure disruption.** Conflict disrupts electricity, water, roads and telecommunications within at least a range of 5 km, likely much further in countries with low infrastructure, directly affecting school operations and household economic capacity to support education.
- **Psychological trauma.** Students exposed to organised violence within a few kilometres likely experience psychological effects including post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression that directly impair learning capacity and classroom engagement.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Analysis of 28 African countries found that conflict events within as large a range as 25 km of a girl's home during her primary school years were associated with a reduction of about 0.4 years of schooling by adolescence, with negative effects detectable even for conflicts occurring up to 50 km away. Studies in Kenya found that 65% of school-going children lived within 24 minutes travel time (approximately 2-5 km walking distance) from schools in 2009, increasing to 89% by 2020. We conclude that the 5 km radius represents a conservative estimate to calculate how many school-aged children suffer from conflicts from an educational standpoint.

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Given the sensitivity of results to local conflict dynamics, including conflict density, geographic spread and duration, figures are cross validated against the ISI at country level to ensure analytical consistency. Where ACLED-derived estimates appear implausibly large relative to the broader conflict profile of a country, or where the spatial distribution of events renders population exposure estimates non-comparable across contexts, the ISI classification is used as the primary reference. This case-by-case approach reflects a broader limitation of applying uniform conflict exposure methodologies across highly heterogeneous crisis settings and prioritises interpretive validity over mechanical comparability.[4]

3. Rationale for using EM-DAT data

The Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT) provides standardised global disaster impact data maintained by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the University of Louvain. EM-DAT compiles disaster data from UN agencies, NGOs, reinsurance companies, research institutes, and press agencies through daily monitoring and manual processing of textual documents. The database contains over 27,000 disaster

4. Refer to the database for a full justification at country level.

events from 1900 to present, with systematic recording since 1988. EM-DAT classifies disasters following the 2014 IRDR Peril Classification, organising natural hazards into five categories: geophysical (earthquakes, mass movements, volcanic activity), hydrological (floods, landslides, wave action), meteorological (storms, extreme temperatures, fog), climatological (droughts, wildfires, glacial lake outbursts) and biological (disease, insect infestations). For each event, EM-DAT records total deaths, injured, homeless, and total affected populations alongside economic damage estimates and temporal/geographic metadata. EM-DAT is one of the very few available global datasets that allows cross-country comparison and aggregation with precision and granularity.

EM-DAT records each climatic event as a discrete entry, capturing the estimated number of people affected per event. When these figures are aggregated at country level, the resulting totals represent a simple summation of all recorded climate shocks within a given period. Because multiple climatic events may affect the same geographical areas and populations – for instance, successive floods, cyclones and droughts striking overlapping regions within a single year – this summation in certain circumstances produces double- or multiple-counting of affected individuals (EM-DAT does not apply de-duplication across events, nor does it distinguish between populations affected by one shock versus several concurrent or sequential shocks). Consequently, in certain countries (e.g. Philippines) subjected to overlapping climatic shocks, country totals derived from EM-DAT are not usable "as is" for our research goal.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The literature identifies three principal channels through which disasters disrupt education: physical destruction of infrastructure, household economic shocks, and the psychological toll of displacement and loss – finding that these pathways cut across disaster types and contexts (Bourquard et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2022).

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Tropical cyclones, floods, droughts, and earthquakes all reduce school participation and attainment, though through different mechanisms (Nguyen Cuong and Pham Nguyet Minh, 2018; Gust and Raschky, 2024). Cyclone exposure across 13 low and middle income countries prevented an estimated 79,000 children from ever starting school between 2000 and 2020, with effects concentrated in already disadvantaged communities (Andrabi et al., 2025). Floods consistently cause more damage compared to other weather shocks in how they affect completed grades and cognitive outcomes (Nguyen Cuong & Pham Nguyet Minh, 2018). Droughts reduce attainment by roughly a quarter of a year and lower the probability of ever attending school – effects driven almost entirely by girls, whose schooling is sacrificed while boys' agricultural labour value falls (Mariussen, 2021; Andrabi et al., 2025). Earthquakes leave particularly long shadows: children in northern Pakistan scored the equivalent of 1.5–2.0 years of schooling behind unaffected peers four years after the 2005 event, despite substantial household compensation that restored adult health and income – pointing to deep developmental and nutritional pathways rather than purely economic ones (Andrabi, Daniels and Das, 2020; RISE Programme, 2020).

Across every context studied, disasters widen pre existing inequalities (UNICEF, 2022; Plan International, 2020); girls are disproportionately withdrawn from school (Andrabi et al., 2025; Plan International, 2020), and children of uneducated mothers, households in poverty and marginalised minorities bear the heaviest burden, while wealthier and better educated households are comparatively less affected (UNICEF, 2022; Bourquard et al., 2022). The evidence is unambiguous: the effects of disasters on education outcomes are serious and not equally distributed (Mitchell et al., 2023; Gust and Raschky, 2024).

4. Using Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) to single out effects of food insecurity on education outcomes

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a standardised framework to classify the severity of food insecurity on a five-phase scale, from minimal (Phase 1) to famine (Phase 5). It provides internationally accepted evidence for determining how many people face acute or chronic food insecurity, and at what level of severity, in a country. IPC analyses are produced at sub-national level through multi-stakeholder technical consensus, making them a widely referenced input to humanitarian needs overviews and response planning. Choosing the appropriate IPC threshold for identifying households whose children are at risk of educational disruption involves a fundamental trade-off between specificity and sensitivity. IPC Phase 3 and above (Crisis, Emergency, Famine) captures households facing acute consumption gaps and emergency coping strategies, where evidence of dropout, child labour substitution and enrolment collapse is most unambiguous. However, this threshold systematically undercounts the diffuse but cumulative educational effects experienced by children in IPC Phase 2 (Stressed) households who may meet minimum food needs only by reducing non-food expenditures, selling productive assets or reallocating household labour. These coping mechanisms carry direct consequences for children's education, including diversion of school fees and learning material budgets towards food, withdrawal of children from school to contribute to household income, and deterioration of the nutritional and psychosocial conditions that underpin a child's capacity to learn.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

A substantial body of evidence supports the use of IPC Phase 2+ as an education-relevant threshold. Longitudinal studies consistently find that household food insecurity, conceptually aligned with IPC 2+, is associated with 0.1–0.2 standard deviation lower test scores in reading, mathematics and vocabulary (Jyoti et al., 2005; Argaw et al., 2023), poorer executive function and working memory, and increased behaviours that impair school engagement. In protracted crises, where IPC Phase 2+ conditions may persist for years, cumulative exposure amplifies deficits in grade progression and learning quality. These effects often peak at the primary-to-secondary transition, where rising opportunity costs render continuation untenable for stressed households: adolescents from food-insecure households exhibit lower secondary enrolment, completion rates and post-secondary expectations, driven by labour substitution and cost barriers (Masa and Chowa, 2021). School feeding interventions, which offset household food insecurity effects, have been shown to yield 0.1–0.2 standard deviation gains in achievement, confirming the causal pathway.

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Given this evidence, IPC Phase 2+ is adopted as the primary threshold for identifying the crisis-affected education population in countries with established crises, as picked up by the ISI (severity codes 1, 2 and 4). A separate category (severity code 3) is created for countries which, despite having significant populations in IPC 3 requiring humanitarian intervention, are not picked up by the ISI.

Wholly-affected countries

Our classification may not systematically capture countries experiencing systemic crises where overlapping and mutually reinforcing drivers have fundamentally compromised national education systems. To address this gap, we identify contexts where the full school-aged population is considered "affected" following a nationwide breakdown of the education system, according to the following criteria (minimum 2 of 3 criteria required).

1 Widespread insecurity affecting education access

At least 40% of the population resides within 5km of conflict or violent events with high likelihood of education disruption (ACLED data, 24-month rolling window for organised violence).

2 Protracted crisis with generational implications

Complex emergency characterised by multiple and reinforcing drivers, and sustained duration with INFORM Severity Index consistently above 4 since 2021.

3 Extensive humanitarian need

The most recent Global Humanitarian Overview or comparable authoritative UN assessment indicates at least half of the population requires humanitarian assistance, or at least a third of the population is estimated to be in IPC levels 3+.

These thresholds are set at elevated levels to ensure that the classification captures only those contexts demonstrating clear evidence of systemic education collapse rather than localised disruption. This approach prioritises specificity to avoid misclassification while acknowledging that some affected populations may remain underestimated in countries narrowly missing these criteria (like South Sudan). This results in the following list of "wholly-affected countries" in March 2026: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

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FINDINGS
Crisis-affected children – crisis drivers, severity and displacement

An estimated 258 million children and adolescents of school age live in crisis-affected areas across 87 countries. Half of these children (135 million) are affected primarily by conflict and violence, from full-scale wars in Sudan and Ukraine to protracted insurgencies and gang-controlled territories where schools have ceased to function. A further 29 million are affected by natural disasters, including catastrophic flooding in South Asia and drought across the Sahel and Southern Africa. The remaining 90 million face crises rooted in widespread socioeconomic collapse: governance failures, sudden economic shocks and the cascading consequences of forced displacement. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounts for nearly half the global total, with 128 million crisis-affected children of school age spread across 38 countries.

FIGURE 1. Global totals by primary crisis driver

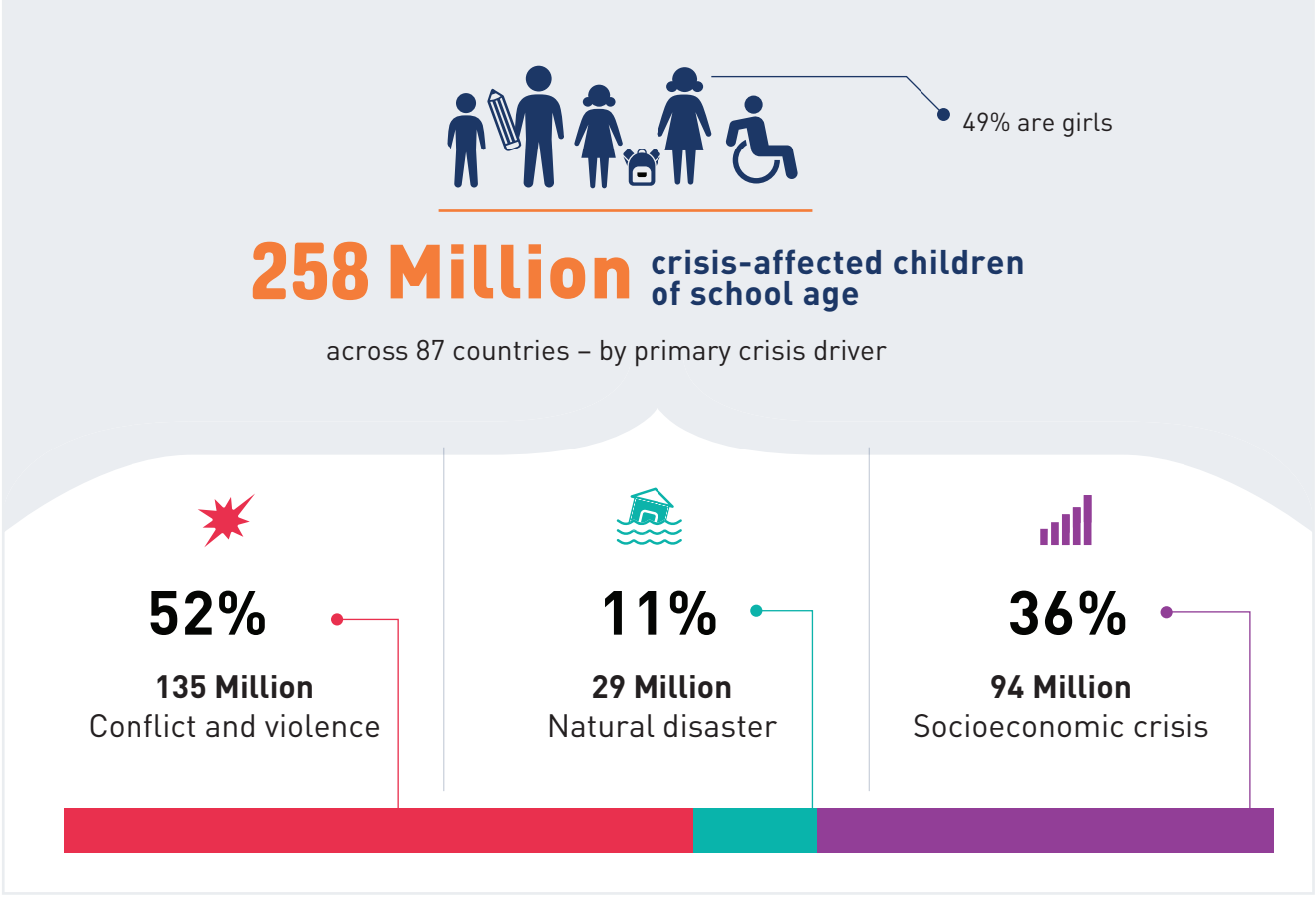
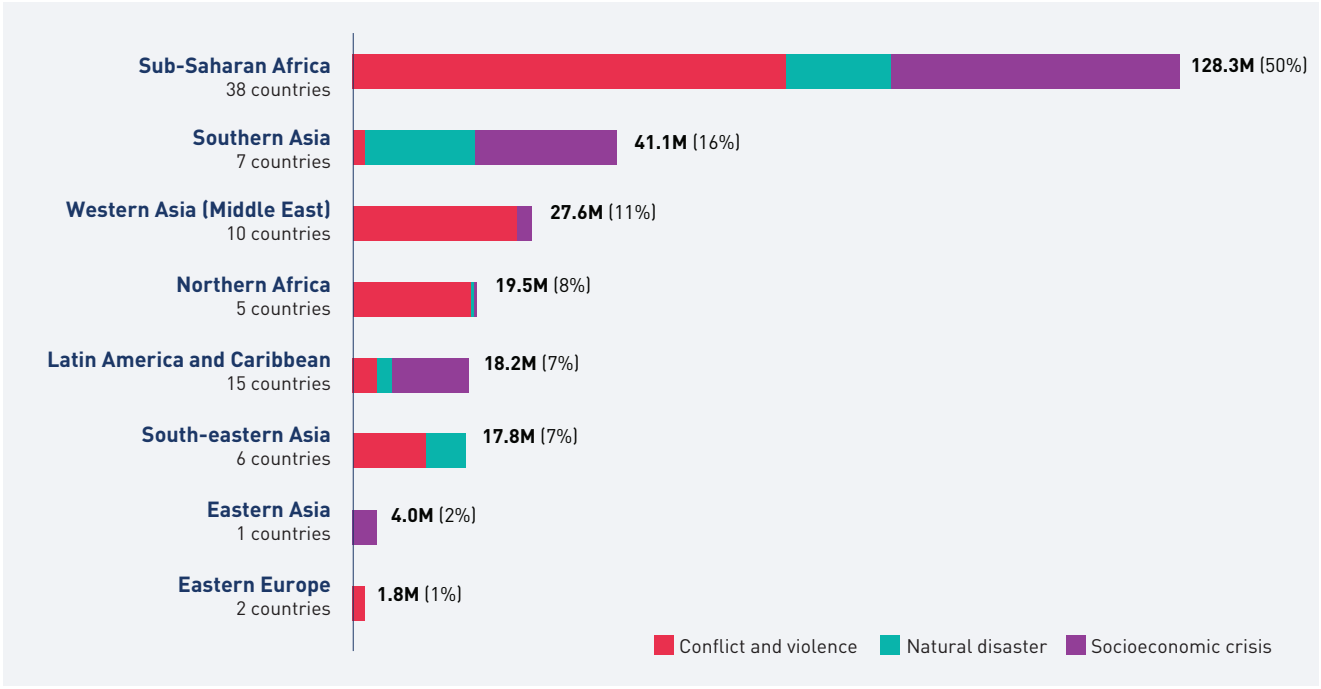


FIGURE 2. Regional breakdown by crisis driver



Most crises do not have a single cause. Nigeria, for example, faces armed insurgency in the northeast, widespread flooding across the middle belt, and chronic food insecurity driven by inflation and poverty, all at the same time. Attributing each crisis-affected child to a single driver is therefore a simplification, but a necessary one if the global picture is to be made legible and actionable.

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The approach taken in this report assigns each country's affected population to one of three primary drivers: **conflict and violence**, **natural disaster** or **socioeconomic crisis**, based on the dominant cause underpinning the crisis-affected estimate for that country. Where a crisis is driven overwhelmingly by armed conflict, as in Sudan, Yemen or Ukraine, the full population is attributed to conflict. Where the estimate rests on food insecurity caused by drought or flooding, as in Zambia or Malawi, it is attributed to natural disasters. Where the drivers are mixed, an indicative split is applied based on the available evidence: conflict exposure data from ACLED, natural disaster impact figures from EM-DAT and food insecurity classifications from the IPC. The residual, that is populations affected by economic collapse, governance failures or displacement hosting that cannot be attributed to a specific conflict or disaster event, is classified as socioeconomic crisis. This method produces a useful approximation, not a precise partition. There are many plausible ways to assign crisis-affected children to a driver, and different analytical choices – for instance, whether conflict-induced food insecurity is counted under conflict or under socioeconomic crisis – would shift the balance between the three categories. The figures should be read as indicative of the shape of the crisis landscape, not as exact boundaries between its causes.

Girls represent just over 49% of the crisis-affected school-age population. This proportion reflects the underlying demographic composition of school-age populations in crisis-affected countries, as derived from the latest available United Nations World Population Prospects estimates disaggregated by sex and year of age. While there is near-parity at aggregate level (boys and girls are equally "exposed"), in contexts governed by discriminatory policies – most notably Afghanistan, where girls are barred from secondary education – or in settings where early marriage, gender-based violence and displacement disproportionately curtail girls' access to schooling, the educational consequences of crises fall more heavily on girls than headline figures convey. Gender differentials are thus more explicit in the analysis of out-of-school rates (see Part 3) which are higher for girls across the board.

Since the 2024 Global Update, the number of affected children has risen by approximately 21 million, a stark indicator of the accelerating pace at which conflict and climatic shocks are devastating education systems worldwide. A breakdown by crisis severity code, with a comparison with 2024 ECW estimates, is given below.[5]

TABLE 3. Breakdown by severity code

Severity code	Category	Rationale	Estimated (school-aged)	Comparison vs 2024 update
1	**Extreme**	Most severe crises, with extreme and measurable effects on education outcomes, including near-complete destruction of education infrastructure.	182 million in 20 countries	Included if ISI > 3 for even 1 month

5. Previous global updates did not provide a breakdown by severity code and did not include the equivalent of this year's code 5. Hence, the 21 million delta is calculated as the sum of crisis-affected children in severity codes 1, 2 and 4, minus the 2024 estimate of 234 million.

2	**High**	Crises that, while not extreme, show increasing or persistent severity that compromises education outcomes. This is particularly relevant for chronically fragile contexts with overlapping shocks.	49.5 million in 17 countries	Included if ISI > 3 for even 1 month Excluded
3	**High (humanitarian food assistance, ISI is NA)**	Crises in which subgroups of children require humanitarian food assistance, despite the crisis not being detected by the ISI. Including these slow-onset crises avoids the invisibility of "hidden" children who are nonetheless in need of humanitarian assistance.	1.1 million in 5 countries	Included if ISI > 3 for even 1 month
4	**Medium**	Crises of sufficient intensity to disrupt the quality of education provision, even where access may be broadly maintained. Protracted low-intensity crises erode education continuity and learning outcomes over time. High-income countries are excluded since they have coping capacities that most low- and middle-income countries do not.	24.5 million in 27 countries	Included if ISI > 3 for even 1 month
5	**Forcibly displaced in other low- and middle-income countries**	Forced displacement disrupts education regardless of crisis severity in the host country, as children miss extended periods of school and may face additional barriers to enrolment, language of instruction, and certification if they re-enter school.	1.3 million in 18 countries	Excluded

In similar fashion to previous updates, our methodology identifies crisis-affected populations disaggregated by sex, disabilities, education cycle and forced displacement status, resulting in 50 distinct subgroups of crisis-affected children

TABLE 4. Available disaggregation of crisis-affected children

Displacement status	Presence of disabilities	Sex	Education cycle
Affected, yet not forcibly displaced (NFD)	With and without disabilities[6]	Male, Female	Age 3 to one year before primary, one year before primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary
Internally displaced	Not disaggregated	Male, Female	Age 3 to one year before primary, one year before primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary
Refugees	Not disaggregated	Male, Female	Age 3 to one year before primary, one year before primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary
Asylum seekers and other people in need of international protection	Not disaggregated	Male, Female	Age 3 to one year before primary, one year before primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary

6. We apply a conflict-specific premium that accounts for the effects of conflict on prevalence of disabilities, based on the latest evidence and research. See Annex 1 for details.

FIGURE 3. Breakdown of crisis-affected children by forced displacement status

- NFD without disability: **166.0M** (64.4%)
- NFD with disability: **58.4M** (22.6%)
- Refugees: **7.0M** (2.7%)
- IDPs: **24.3M** (9.4%)
- Asylum seekers: **2.2M** (0.9%)

Most crisis-affected children are not on the move. Roughly one in six is forcibly displaced, while the remaining majority, though rooted in their communities, suffer educational effects from crises. The predominance of non-displaced children is an expected consequence of methodology; by including households classified at IPC Phase 2 and above, and by counting the whole school aged population in "wholly affected" countries, the estimate captures a far wider population than displacement alone would suggest. This has been a consistent feature of the global estimates across successive updates.


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Globally, UNHCR counts approximately 12.4 million school-age refugees. That figure is the authoritative global headcount of refugee children. This report counts fewer – 7 million refugees and 2.2 million asylum seekers – and the difference is deliberate. The report's scope is children whose education is being disrupted by crisis, which is not the situation of most refugees hosted in wealthy countries. Germany, for example, hosts around 400,000 refugee children, of whom roughly 90% are enrolled in school. Their right to education is largely being met and including them alongside refugee children in contexts such as Chad or Bangladesh would dilute the analytical focus of this report. The same logic applies to internally displaced children in upper middle-income countries that fall below the crisis threshold of the INFORM Severity Index. They are excluded because the surrounding system is generally, though not always perfectly, able to keep them in school. This report is therefore not a global headcount of every forcibly displaced child. It is a count of forcibly displaced children whose access to education is at risk because of the context in which they live.

Among non-displaced crisis-affected children, approximately one in five lives with a disability. In the 2024 Global Update, estimates for children with disabilities did not account for the fact that conflict actively raises disability prevalence. Yet, there is mounting evidence that mental health disorders affect more than twice the share of conflict-exposed populations compared to the global baseline, and physical disability rates in protracted crises can reach 30% or more, as documented in Syria, where displacement is associated with even higher rates. In this update, an improved framework applies a disability prevalence premium, adjusting upward the share of children living with a disability in conflict-affected settings, using MICS-CFM data. Full methodology and sources are provided in Annex 1.

PART 3

93 million children do not access education in crises

Being crisis-affected does not automatically mean being out of school, but it significantly raises the risk. This section estimates the population of school-age children in crisis settings who are out of school, drawing on the framework illustrated in Part 2 and country-level data disaggregated by crisis driver, displacement status and education level. These figures provide the foundation to understand where educational exclusion is most acute.

1. A matrix of out-of-school rates in emergencies (OOSRiE)

OOSRiEs are estimated according to the disaggregation illustrated in table 4, using the most recent data and research across all crisis-affected countries. This process produces a 50-by-87 matrix of OOSRiEs (87 countries, 50 subgroups of crisis-affected children), offering granular insights into country- and subgroup-specific gaps in education access. Each set of OOSRiE is also accompanied by a reliability rating (see below). The matrix is available for download here.

Crisis premia

National out-of-school rates, including those produced through the UIS-GEM report Bayesian estimation model (2024), capture educational exclusion for the general population; yet, in crisis-affected countries, these baseline figures tend to understate the true scale of the problem. Crises concentrate their effects on specific population groups, and crisis-affected areas are frequently underrepresented in household surveys and administrative data due to access constraints. To correct this, the methodology applies a series of adjustments to baseline out-of-school rates, referred to as premia, calibrated against MSNA data. Two distinct premia are applied.

Internal displacement premium

Internally displaced children face additional barriers to education beyond those experienced by the non-forcibly displaced population in the same crisis. Importantly, the size of this differential is not driven by the intensity of the crisis but by how distinct the conditions of displacement are from those of the surrounding population. In Iraq, for example, the crisis is classified as medium intensity, yet the educational profile of internally displaced children diverges sharply from that of non-displaced households. In South Sudan, Syria or Haiti, where the crisis affects virtually everyone, the gap between displaced and non-displaced populations is comparatively narrower. The IDP premium is calculated as a global arithmetic average of the observed differentials between the OOSR of non-forcibly displaced yet affected children and IDP children, across all available MSNAs, disaggregated by sex and education level. It ranges from roughly 9 to 14 percentage points depending on cycle and sex, and is applied across all severity codes, subject to the 85% ceiling. Premia for refugees and asylum seekers are not needed since the study is drawing on OOS rates from either UNHCR or MSNA data specific to refugee populations.

Disability premium

Children with disabilities in conflict settings face compounding disadvantages. Accordingly, the disability adjustment operates in two steps. First, for countries affected by conflict (severity codes 1, 2 and 4), a corrected disability prevalence rate is applied to account for the elevated incidence of disability caused by conflict-related injury and trauma, based on anchors found in recent studies and only to the subpopulation affected by conflict in each country. Second, an additive out-of-school premium is derived from available MICS data in countries at each severity level (for instance, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic for high-severity crises). This premium captures the additional probability that a child with a disability in a crisis-affected area is out of school, over and above the non-forcibly displaced OOSR for children without disabilities.

FINDINGS
OOSCiE

About 93.2 million children are out-of-school in crises worldwide (51% girls). The same figure for children starting at age 3 until the legal age of completion of upper secondary exceeds 132.6 million. As in previous rounds of global updates, estimates for the age group "3 to one year before primary" are less reliable in crisis settings, mainly because MSNAs cover children aged 5 to 17 and other surveys have limited coverage in crises.

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TABLE 5. OOSCiE by education cycle and displacement status

Education cycle	Not displaced (no disability)	Not displaced (with disability)	Refugees	Internally displaced	Asylum seekers/need international protection	Total
1 year before primary	6.2 million 49 % girls	2.7 million 49 % girls	0.4 million 50 % girls	1.3 million 51 % girls	0.1 million 50 % girls	**10.6 million** **49 % girls**
Primary	16.7 million 51 % girls	8.8 million 52 % girls	1.3 million 51 % girls	4.5 million 51 % girls	0.2 million 49 % girls	**31.6 million** **51 % girls**
Lower secondary	11.8 million 52 % girls	6.0 million 53 % girls	0.9 million 51 % girls	2.9 million 51 % girls	0.2 million 50 % girls	**21.8 million** **52 % girls**
Upper secondary	16.9 million 52 % girls	7.8 million 53 % girls	1.1 million 50 % girls	3.2 million 51 % girls	0.2 million 50 % girls	**29.2 million** **52 % girls**
Subtotal (school aged)	51.5 million 51 % girls	25.3 million 52 % girls	3.7 million 51 % girls	11.9 million 51 % girls	0.7 million 50 % girls	**93.2 million** **51 % girls**

From primary onward, girls consistently make up more than half of all OOSCiE across all categories. The disparity is sharpest among children with disabilities in secondary, where girls reach 53%, due to the compounding effects of gender, disability and crisis exposure. The current out-of-school estimate represents an increase of over 8 million versus the 2024 update, which placed the total at approximately 85 million children of school age. At least four factors account for the change.

1. The number of crisis-affected countries has grown. More countries now meet the inclusion criteria, adding populations that were not affected by crises in the previous round.

2. There is an underlying global growth trend in out-of-school numbers. The 2026 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report finds that the number of children and young people out of school has increased for the seventh consecutive year.

3. The methodology now applies a more granular premia structure. The additive adjust-ments for internal displacement, and effects of conflicts on disability produce estimates that more accurately reflect the compounding disadvantages faced by the most excluded children, particularly at secondary level and among forcibly displaced populations.

4. In many crisis-affected countries, school-age populations have grown significantly between estimation rounds, mechanically increasing the absolute number of out-of-school children.

Counting children out of school in a crisis: two ways to measure, and why the choice matters

Out-of-school rates are highly sensitive to how attendance is defined. Under the broad SDG 4.1.4 participation measure — a child counts as in school if they attended any level — out-of-school rates for lower-secondary-age children often appear low, sometimes under 15%. Applying the net, on-level definition, which counts children as in school only if they are attending the level appropriate to their age (or above), reverses the picture entirely. For intermediate-secondary-age children the gap between the two measures is dramatic: it exceeds 80 percentage points for refugee adolescents in Uganda and refugee children in Kenyan camps, and exceeds 55 points for displaced and returnee populations in South Sudan, Mozambique, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic. The mechanism is over-age enrolment: large numbers of crisis-affected adolescents are still in primary school well past the official age, so they register as "attending" under the "broad" definition while remaining far below the grade expected for their age. The implication for the OOSRiE estimates is twofold — the choice of definition is not a technical footnote but a driver of headline figures, and a net, on-level measure is essential to expose the scale of learning disruption among older children in emergencies, which a participation-based measure systematically conceals. **Globally, in addition to the 93.2 million children out of school entirely, an additional estimated 19 million crisis-affected children are attending education at a level below that expected for their age, reflecting substantial delays in progression. For example, many lower secondary school-aged children remain enrolled in primary education rather than progressing to the next level of schooling.**

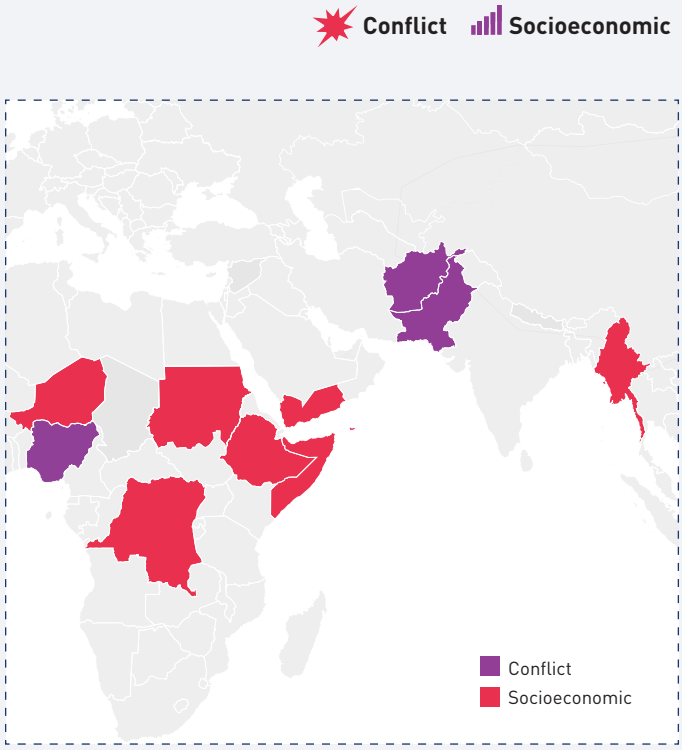
Comparison of OOSR for crisis-affected groups in secondary school under different OOSR definitions, MSNAs 2024-2025"

#	Country	Year	Sex	Population group	OOSR SDG 4.1.4	OOSR net-adjusted	Delta (pp)
1.	Uganda	2024	Boys	Refugees	8%	90%	+81%
2.	Uganda	2024	Girls	Refugees	11%	92%	+81%
3.	Kenya	2025	Girls	Refugee communitiesin camps	12%	89%	+78%
4.	Kenya	2025	Boys	Refugee communities in camps	10%	86%	+75%
5.	Uganda	2024	Boys	No disaggregation	12%	85%	+73%
6.	Uganda	2024	Girls	No disaggregation	13%	85%	+72%
7.	Ethiopia	2024	Boys	Returnees	6%	76%	+70%
8.	South Sudan	2024	Girls	IDP	25%	94%	+69%
9.	South Sudan	2024	Boys	IDP	23%	91%	+68%
10.	Mozambique	2025	Boys	IDP	16%	83%	+67%
11.	Mozambique	2025	Girls	IDP	15%	82%	+67%
12.	Kenya	2025	Girls	No disaggregation	17%	80%	+64%
13.	South Sudan	2024	Boys	Returnees	32%	93%	+61%
14.	South Sudan	2024	Girls	Returnees	33%	94%	+60%
15.	Kenya	2025	Boys	No disaggregation	15%	76%	+60%
16.	South Sudan	2024	Boys	No disaggregation	33%	92%	+60%
17.	Central African Republic	2025	Girls	IDP is camp/site	25%	84%	+60%
18.	Kenya	2025	Girls	Host community	19%	77%	+59%
19.	Mozambique	2025	Girls	Returnees	17%	75%	+58%
20.	South Sudan	2024	Girls	No disaggregation	35%	93%	+58%

The following infographic offers an overview of the largest 10 countries by stock of OOSCiE, by displacement status. Combined, these 10 countries make up for about 70% of the global OOSCiE total, highlighting a clear pattern of concentration of needs in a few large, protracted crises.

FIGURE 4. Top 10 countries with the highest headcounts of OOSCiE

1.	Sudan	**12.3M**
2.	Nigeria	**11.4M**
3.	Democratic Republic of the Congo	**9.8M**
4.	Yemen	**6.0M**
5.	Afghanistan	**6.0M**
6.	Ethiopia	**4.8M**
7.	Somalia	**4.4M**
8.	Pakistan	**3.5M**
9.	Niger	**3.4M**
10.	Myanmar	**3.3M**



The boundaries, names and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations, Education Cannot Wait or partner countries.

ANALYSIS BY SEVERITY CODE

Focusing on the out-of school population from pre-primary through upper secondary age, the 20 countries in "extreme" crises (Severity 1) account for **74 million** out-of-school children in emergencies (OOSCiE). This represents 79% of the 93.2 million global total. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounts for 38 million children in crises of extreme severity.

TABLE 5a. OOSCiE distribution by severity

Severity code	Category	Countries	OOSRiE (1y before prim. to upper sec.)	Share of global OOSCiE (%)
1	Extreme	20	73.7M	79.1%
2	High	17	13.5M	14.5%
3	High (humanitarian food assistance, ISI is NA)	5	0.3M	0.3%
4	Medium	27	5.3M	5.7%
5	Forcibly displaced in other lower- and middle-income countries	18	0.3M	0.3%
TOTAL		**87**	**93.2M**	**100%**

ANALYSIS BY DISPLACEMENT STATUS

Non-forcibly displaced cohorts dominate the stock in volume (84% in severity 1), but out-of-school rates are consistently higher for forcibly displaced children. In crises of extreme severity, refugees face an OOSRiE of 74%, IDPs 52% and non-forcibly displaced children without disability 35%. Refugee OOSRiE remains the highest displacement-group rate across severity codes, confirming that the structural barriers to education facing refugee children persist across host settings.

TABLE 5b. OOSCiE stocks, by severity and displacement status

Severity code	Category	Non-displaced, no disability	Non-displaced, with disability	Refugee	IDP	Asylum seeker	Total OOSCiE
1	Extreme	38.9M 52% girls	21.9M 52% girls	1.9M 51% girls	10.8M 51% girls	0.3M 50% girls	73.7M 52% girls
2	High	9.2M 47% girls	2.8M 49% girls	0.7M 50% girls	0.7M 49% girls	0.1M 49% girls	13.5M 48% girls
3	High (humanitarian food assistance, ISI is NA)	0.2M 49% girls	0.1M 50% girls	0.0M 47% girls	0.0M 49% girls	0.0M 43% girls	0.3M 49% girls
4	Medium	3.2M 48% girls	0.6M 50% girls	1M 50% girls	0.4M 49% girls	0.2M 50% girls	5.3M 49% girls
5	Forcibly displaced in other lower- and middle-income countries	- -	- -	0.1M 49% girls	0.1M 50% girls	0.1M 48% girls	0.3M 49% girls
TOTAL		**51.5M 51% girls**	**25.3M 52% girls**	**51.5M 51% girls**	**11.9M 51% girls**	**0.7M 50% girls**	**93.2M 51% girls**

TABLE 5c. OOSRiE, by severity and displacement status

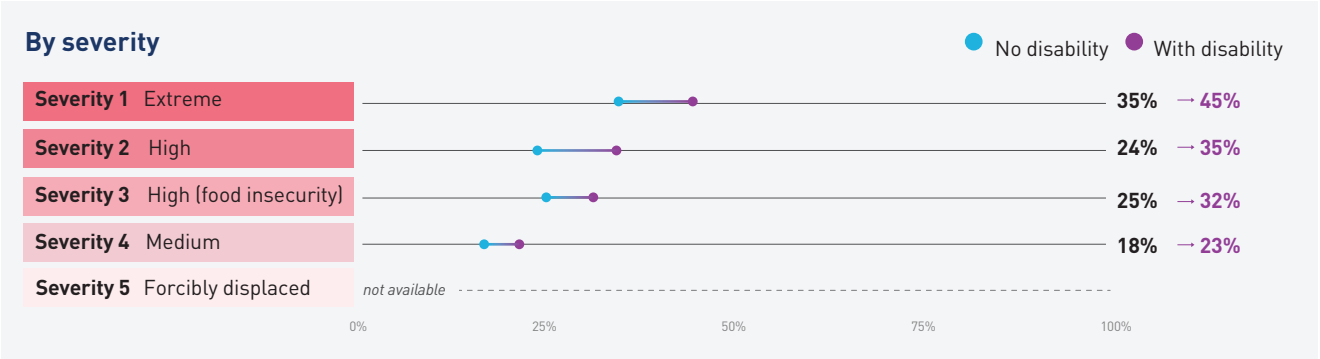
Severity Code	Category	Non-displaced, no disability	Non-displaced, with disability	Refugee	IDP	Asylum seeker	Total OOSCiE
1	**Extreme**	35%	45%	74%	52%	30%	**40%**
2	**High**	25%	35%	32%	36%	36%	**27%**
3	**High (humanitarian food assistance, ISI is NA)**	25%	32%	57%	45%	52%	**27%**
4	**Medium**	18%	23%	48%	23%	28%	**21%**
5	**Forcibly displaced in other lower- and middle-income countries**	–	-	41%	23%	42%	**36%**
TOTAL		**31%**	**43%**	**52%**	**49%**	**32%**	**36%**

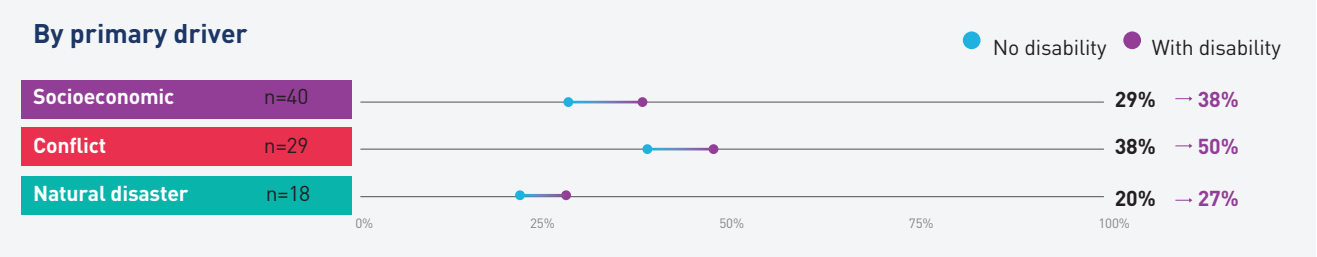
ANALYSIS BY PRESENCE OF DISABILITIES

Beyond the specific figures of each severity tier, the key finding is the 12 percentage-point differential that separates children with disabilities in crises from their peers without disabilities. The gap is visible and positive in every severity tier; the consistency of the disparity across all higher-burden tiers confirms disability as an independent axis of educational exclusion that operates on top of crisis severity.

About half of crisis-affected children with disabilities globally are out of school. Given the limitations in data availability, quality and consistency on children with disabilities (see Annex 1), these figures should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than precise absolutes. The rates presented are weighted averages across crisis-affected countries and broad population categories; within them, OOSRiE vary substantially in function of the type of disability considered, the dominant crisis driver, the wealth quintile and the specific subnational geography. Where data systems are weakest, children with disabilities are most likely to go uncounted, which means the true burden of educational exclusion may exceed the estimates in this report.

FIGURE 5. Disability-related disparities, OOSRiE, affected yet non-forcibly displaced children





Reliability ratings for OOSRiE were assigned based on the strength and recency of the underlying data source, applied consistently across population groups. For both non-forcibly displaced and internally displaced populations, countries with recent MSNA data were assigned high reliability, reflecting the robustness and contextual grounding of that evidence base. Countries where data availability presented major limitations, such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Libya were assigned low reliability. All remaining countries in these two groups received a medium reliability rating since the rely on the 2024 UIS estimates, which can be considered representative at national level and hence a conservative estimate of the OOS rates expected of crisis-affected children. For refugees, high reliability was assigned where MSNA data was available (excluding Lebanon, since the MSNA is outdated). UNHCR data provided adequate coverage for primary OOS rates (medium reliability); where direct data were unavailable or where country-level estimates required imputation to ensure internal consistency, a low reliability rating was assigned. Rates for children with disabilities were assigned low reliability since they do reflect a premia structure (see Annex 1) that may be considered conservative. All OOS rates for children aged three to one year before primary were assigned low reliability, since this age group was not covered by MSNAs, and all data points are either somewhat outdated or reflect national-level estimates rather than estimates specific to children affected by crises.

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DEEP DIVE ❶
Barriers to education in protracted crises

Understanding why crisis-affected children are out of school is a prerequisite for bringing them back into education. The estimated 258 million school-age children living in contexts affected by conflict, displacement, disaster and socioeconomic crisis are not a uniform population, and aggregate enrolment figures cannot, on their own, indicate where interventions should be targeted. A household priced out of school requires a different response from one whose nearest school has been destroyed, or whose daughter is prevented from attending. This deep dive disaggregates the barriers that crisis-affected households themselves report to identify the patterns that should inform programming choices in education in emergencies.

The findings presented in this deep dive draw directly on the perspectives of crisis-affected communities. Across MSNAs in twenty countries, households consistently identified the main barriers preventing children from accessing school through the lived realities of displacement, insecurity, and exclusion. These accounts carry important operational implications. When families identify affordability as the reason their children are out of school, these responses constitute direct expressions of need and, by extension, indicate where our policy and programming responses may need to begin. If the aid architecture is to remain credible in its commitments to education in emergencies, interventions must be grounded in the priorities articulated by affected populations themselves.

The analysis of barriers to education draws on MSNA household survey data collected from parents and caregivers of out-of-school children. A series of heatmaps presents the relative prevalence of each barrier by country, sex, and population stratum – distinguishing internally displaced persons, refugees and crisis-affected populations who have not been forcibly displaced. This level of disaggregation makes it possible to identify not only which barriers are most widespread, but also how their intensity shifts across displacement status and gender, revealing distinct barrier profiles that would otherwise be obscured in aggregate reporting.

Financial constraints dominate nearly all population groups and geographies. The inability to afford direct education costs is the single most prevalent barrier, reaching 70–80% among IDP and non-displaced affected households in countries such as the DRC, Haiti and Somalia, with relatively limited variation between boys and girls. Uganda stands out among refugee-hosting countries, where over 60% of refugee households cite cost as a barrier, considerably higher than in Kenya or Mali. The consistency of this finding across displacement types suggests that affordability functions as a structural, system-level constraint rather than one specific to displacement status alone.

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Demand-side barriers reveal important gender asymmetries. Personal or family responsibilities appear almost exclusively in the female matrices (around 5–13% among IDP and non-displaced girls in Afghanistan and Burkina Faso), while child labour is consistently more prevalent among boys, particularly in Ethiopia (22% for IDP males versus 5% for females). In Niger, the "education is not a priority/lack of interest" barrier reaches 51–63% for both sexes across displacement types, suggesting an entrenched norm-based constraint operating relatively independently of gender.

Conflict-driven destruction creates sharp, localised spikes in exclusion. In Myanmar and Somalia, school closures due to conflict affect 60–70% of IDP households, far exceeding any other single barrier in those countries. These values are among the highest recorded across all six matrices, underscoring how armed

conflict can effectively eliminate education supply in affected areas. Notably, these barriers barely register in countries where the primary crisis driver is socioeconomic or climate-related, reinforcing the specificity of conflict as a distinct barrier archetype.

Legal and institutional exclusion. Bans or legal barriers preventing attendance are most visible in Afghanistan, while being entirely absent from the male matrices. This represents the clearest example of a gender-specific, policy-driven barrier identified across the analysed contexts. Legal barriers are also binding for refugees in several other countries.

Infrastructure gaps – such as distance to school, natural disaster-related closures and absence of programmes – cluster within specific country-crisis combinations. Afghanistan and Burkina Faso show the highest rates of schools being too far away (11–21%), while Sudan records significant natural disaster-related closures (10–17%). These barriers tend to remain relatively gender-neutral, reinforcing their predominantly supply-side character.

FIGURE 8. Barriers to education in MSNAs from 2024 and 2025, all crisis-affected subgroups

Barrier profiles across 18 crisis-affected countries

Mean share of caregivers citing each barrier. Countries sorted by total barrier burden. Darker = higher prevalence.

Economic | Conflict / disaster | Demand-side | Supply / access | Displacement | Protection

Country	Affordability	Education not a priority	No school nearby	Child labour	Displacement barriers	Conflict closures	Conflict disasters	Safety risks
Sudan	18.2%	2.4%	4.6%		6.8%	66.9%		3.1%
South Sudan	57.5%	12.7%	17.6%		3.9%			
Haiti	74.4%	2.1%	1.9%	1.7%	3.7%		4.5%	1.9%
Ethiopia	41.3%	9.7%	8.0%	16.2%	12.5%			1.8%
Niger	11.3%	58.0%	6.3%	3.4%	4.9%		4.9%	
DRC	73.3%	2.0%	0.6%	2.9%	3.7%	3.4%		1.3%
Myanmar	22.6%	6.3%	3.0%	5.6%	2.5%	43.9%		1.5%
Syria	32.1%	24.2%	17.2%	4.8%	3.1%			1.9%
Uganda	66.5%	8.6%	1.7%	1.8%	1.3%			1.8%
Somalia	64.6%	4.2%	10.9%	0.5%	0.7%		0.8%	
Mozambique	40.8%	18.7%	12.5%	3.0%	3.1%		2.4%	
Lebanon	34.5%	5.1%		5.3%	10.0%		21.1%	2.6%
CAR	52.5%	12.1%	3.2%	2.4%			3.6%	
Burkina Faso	41.7%	10.1%	4.6%	4.0%	2.1%		3.1%	
Mali	26.2%	18.8%	5.5%	1.9%	1.1%		2.9%	
Ukraine	20.6%	4.0%	4.9%					20.8%
Afghanistan	4.7%	8.9%	9.9%	3.6%	13.4%			
Kenya	20.7%	6.6%	3.0%	6.0%	0.9%			1.6%

Barrier profile by population group

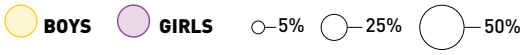
Mean percentage for each barrier across four main population groups. Darker shading = higher prevalence.

Country	Host community	IDP	Refugees	Returnees
Cannot afford education costs	41.1%	35.9%	34.1%	38.0%
School closed (conflict)	36.4%	68.5%		26.9%
Education not a priority	12.2%	11.3%	24.2%	19.8%
No school nearby	9.9%	6.7%	2.1%	6.9%
School closed (conflict/disaster)	8.1%	4.3%	1.0%	5.7%
Child labour	4.6%	4.3%	2.3%	5.6%
Displacement barriers	4.6%	6.1%	5.5%	12.6%
School hosting displaced	21.5%	20.9%		9.0%
Safety risks	1.3%	2.3%	2.0%	2.0%

FIGURE 8. Barriers to education in crises of extreme severity (households not forcibly displaced[7])

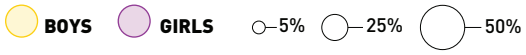
7. Unable to enrol (displacement) means that the household may have been temporarily displaced, just not forcibly displaced.

FIGURE 9. Barriers to education (IDP households)



Affected non-forcibly displaced children	Afghanistan	Burkina Faso	Central African Republic	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Ethiopia	Mali	Myanmar	Mozambique	Sudan	Somalia	South Sudan	Syria
Cannot afford direct costs												
Closed (conflict)												
Lack of interest in formal ed.												
Child too young												
No appropriate/accessible school												
Unable to enrol (displacement)												
Child in income-gen. activities												
Lack of interest / not a priority												
Closed (natural disaster)												
Hosting displaced people												
Not a priority (child/HH)												
Legal limitation												
Cannot afford education costs												
Personal/family resp. (F)												
No school nearby / too far												
Closed (damaged/disaster)												

FIGURE IV. Barriers to education (refugee households)



	Kenya	Lebanon	Mali	Nigeria	Uganda
Cannot afford direct costs					
Child too young					
Lack of interest / not a priority					
Not a priority (child/HH)					
Lack of interest in formal ed.					
Child in income-gen. activities					
Prefer not to answer					
Unable to enrol (displacement)					
No appropriate/accessible school					

The evidence points to **three distinct barrier archetypes** across crisis contexts: **affordability-dominated profiles** (DRC, Haiti, Somalia, Uganda), which are by far the most common; **conflict-supply disruption profiles** (Myanmar, Sudan, Somalia); **and norm-driven demand profiles** (Afghanistan). Effective programming responses will need to be calibrated to these archetypes rather than applied uniformly across crisis-affected settings.

BOX 2.

Nigeria: Intersecting drivers of exclusion compound household financial constraints

Nigeria has the largest out-of-school population among crisis-affected children according to our estimates. The single most cited reason in the latest MICS Plus round, by a wide margin, was cost: **51%** of out-of-school children came from households reporting that they lacked the financial means to send their child to school.

The burden falls disproportionately on poor, rural households. In rural areas, the out-of-school rate reaches **34%**, nearly triple the rate observed in cities (12%). Among households in the poorest wealth quintile, more than one in three children (35%) are out of school, compared with fewer than one in twenty among the richest households. Where the household head has no formal education, the rate climbs to **45–51%**, pointing to deep intergenerational cycles of exclusion.

Gender disparities are less visible in aggregate rates but sharply differentiated in their underlying drivers. Among girls who are out of school, **6.6%** do not attend because they are considered not to need education, a barrier that is essentially absent for boys (0.4%). Ethnicity further concentrates risk: Hausa-headed households report an out-of-school rate of 35%, compared with 7–8% among Igbo and Yoruba households, reflecting the country's entrenched north–south education divide.

Among adolescents aged 15–17, the out-of-school rate reaches **38%**, with a quarter of barriers classified as "other", likely capturing early marriage, migration and livelihood pressures that standard MICS categories do not fully capture.

In sum, poverty remains the dominant driver of exclusion from education, compounded by low household education levels – themselves a consequence of structural poverty – as well as by the urban-rural divide and gendered social norms.

Source: Nigeria MICS Plus 2023–2024, Wave 1.

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Taken together, the findings support a typology-driven approach to response design. The dominance of cost barriers across the majority of crisis contexts argues for the systematic integration of cash transfers, fee waivers and household-level economic support into education in emergencies portfolios – instruments that remain comparatively underused relative to the strength of the available evidence regarding their impact. Where conflict-driven supply destruction represents the binding constraint, priorities shift towards school protection, temporary learning spaces and rapid teacher redeployment. Where norm-driven and policy-driven exclusion dominates, effective entry points may lie outside the school itself: in negotiated access, alternative learning pathways and protection-led responses tailored to the children most explicitly excluded. Calibrating response architectures to the actual barrier profile of each context – rather than applying a generic education-in-emergencies template – is likely to be a necessary condition for recovering a meaningful share of the out-of-school population before exclusion becomes entrenched.

DEEP DIVE ❷

Transition across grades and cycles in protracted crises: Selected deep dives in Sub-Saharan Africa

Out-of-school estimates capture the children who are not in education today, but they do not, on their own, reveal how the education systems lose the children who initially enrol. In protracted crises, schooling trajectories are shaped less by initial entry than by what happens at successive grade transitions – whether children progress on time, repeat, drop out or re-enter. This deep dive examines these internal flows in five Sub-Saharan African crisis contexts – Burkina Faso, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and Somalia – drawing on harmonised MSNA microdata to approximate progression patterns through the primary and lower-secondary grades. The objective is to identify where, and for whom, the education systems fail to retain children who are nominally enrolled, with particular attention to the differential impact of internal displacement.

BOX 3.

Methodological note: Synthetic cohort progression analysis

In this deep dive, we explore transition and progression patterns among crisis-affected children. In the absence of repeater data, a classical survival rate analysis cannot be performed. Instead, we apply a synthetic cohort progression approach, complemented by a grade-by-grade attendance analysis disaggregated by sex and displacement status for selected MSNAs.

We apply a diagonal cohort reconstruction approach, leveraging the fact that all five datasets contain both grade and age for each child. In a cross-sectional snapshot, a child aged a in grade g and a child aged a+1 in grade g+1 can be treated as approximating a progressing cohort. Aggregating these diagonal flows yields an apparent progression ratio for each grade. The complement (1 minus apparent progression) reflects discontinuity in progression, which may include dropout, repetition, temporary interruption, migration or other disruptions. To approximate the role of repetition, we compute overage rates: the share of children two or more years older than the expected entry age for their grade, a cumulative indicator of age-grade distortion arising from delayed entry, repetition, or interrupted schooling. This decomposition helps distinguish whether discontinuities in progression are more consistent with school exit or with persistent grade delay and repetition.[8]

The method assumes that adjacent age cohorts are broadly comparable in size and composition, such that differences observed along diagonal age-grade trajectories primarily reflect educational progression rather than demographic or displacement-related changes in the underlying population. In crisis contexts, where displacement, school closures and population movements distort enrolment patterns, this assumption is often violated. Overage can also reflect late school entry rather than repetition alone. Results should therefore be interpreted as indicative structural patterns rather than precise estimates.

8. MSNA survey weights are normalised within each population group so that the weighted total equals the group's sample size, preserving geographic representativeness while removing between-group population scaling. This allows the grade distributions of displaced and non-displaced populations to be compared on a common scale.

Cross-country findings

Patterns vary across countries, yet three consistent findings emerge:

1. **Transitions between primary and lower secondary education emerge as the most critical attrition points in the education continuum.** In Burkina Faso, diagonal progression from CM2 to 6ème is 73%. In the DRC, progression from Primaire 6 to Secondaire 7 is 75%. In the Central African Republic, progression from 3ème to Seconde is 65%. In these countries, transitions into lower secondary education represent structural breaks where a third to a fourth of the enrolled population appears to leave the education system.

2. **Grade repetition and delayed progression are pervasive across crisis-affected education systems.** Across all countries, overage rates are strikingly high, suggestion that delayed progression is a systemic feature of crisis-affected education systems rather than a marginal phenomenon. In tthe Central African Republic, over 60% of crisis-affected children in upper primary (CM1–CM2) are two or more years older than expected. In Burkina Faso, overage exceeds 40% from CE1 onward. In Mali, overage is above 45% from Année 1 through the deuxième cycle. The Democratic Republic of the Congo shows comparatively lower overage at primary entry (8%), but this rises steadily, reaching 30% by Primaire 6. Somalia's overage profile is more compressed, reflecting its younger-skewing enrolment population.

3. **Internal displacement affects both school progression and progression pace.** In Burkina Faso, 30% of IDP children in CP1 are two or more years overage, double the non-displaced rate of 15%. By CM2, IDP overage reaches 67% versus 46%. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, IDP overage at Primaire 1 is 13% versus 6% for non-displaced. In Mali, IDP overage at Année 1 is 50% versus 45%. These patterns suggest that internal displacement disrupts not only whether children attend school, but also how effectively they progress through it. Displaced children who remain enrolled appear more likely to accumulate delays that may increase the risk of eventual school withdrawal.

Displacement compounds educational disadvantages through **two simultaneous mechanisms**: lower progression and higher repetition among those who remain enrolled. In Burkina Faso, IDP diagonal progression from CM2 to 6ème is 49%, compared to 75% for non-displaced children – a 26 percentage point gap at the primary-to-secondary boundary. In Somalia, IDP progression from Primary 1 is 47% versus 77% for affected populations, a 30 percentage point gap at the very first transition. In the Central African Republic, IDP progression from 3ème to Seconde falls to just 15%, compared to 73% for non-displaced children, the starkest single-grade gap observed across all five countries.

IDP children who remain enrolled appear to progress through the education system more slowly. **Across the analyzed countries, IDP overage rates are 5–15 percentage points higher than non-displaced rates at equivalent grades.** This suggests that visible IDP enrolment at a given grade may overstate the effective progression of displaced children through the system: a substantial share of forcibly displaced children are advancing through grades at the delayed pace.

TABLE 6. Diagonal promotion rates and overage shares at key grades, by displacement status

Country	Grade code	Position in cycle	Promo (all)	Promo (IDP)	Promo (NFD)	Over age 2+ (all)	Over age 2+ (IDP)	Over age 2+ (NFD)
Burkina Faso	CP1	Primary year 1	81.5%	72.7%	82.3%	16.5%	30.2%	15.2%
Burkina Faso	CM2→6ème	Primary year 6 → Lower secondary year 1	73.4%	49.4%	74.7%	46.8%	66.6%	45.8%
Burkina Faso	3ème→2nde	Lower secondary year 4 → Upper secondary year 1	69.1%	34.3%	69.8%	48.1%	69.9%	47.7%
Mali	A1	Primary year 1 (premier cycle)	62.6%	55.2%	64.3%	46.2%	49.9%	45.4%
Mali	A5→A6	Primary year 5 → Lower secondary year 1	90.8%	85.5%	91.5%	50.6%	59.2%	49.2%
Mali	A9→A10	Lower secondary year 4 → Upper secondary year 1	53.1%	38.9%	54.0%	47.2%	44.8%	47.3%
DRC	P1	Primary year 1 (primaire)	100%	100%	100%	8.3%	13.3%	6.3%
DRC	P6→S7	Primary year 6 → Lower secondary year 1	75.0%	58.4%	77.3%	30.5%	31.7%	30.2%
DRC	S8→H1	Lower secondary year 2 → Upper secondary year 1	49.9%	38.6%	51.5%	26.8%	33.9%	26.2%
CAR	CP1	Primary year 1	100%	100%	100%	26.0%	26.1%	25.8%
CAR	CM2→6ème	Primary year 6 → Lower secondary year 1	66.8%	65.7%	67.2%	63.6%	64.6%	63.2%
CAR	3ème→Sec	Lower secondary year 4 → Upper secondary year 1	65.0%	15.2%	73.0%	62.9%	62.4%	63.6%
Somalia	P1	Primary year 1	69.9%	47.2%	76.6%	8.9%	12.1%	8.0%
Somalia	P7→P8	Primary year 7 → Primary year 8	75.8%	50.3%	79.9%	18.2%	21.0%	17.7%

Note: Arrows (→) indicate a cycle transition.
Promotion rate = diagonal flow from grade g at age a to grade g+1 at age a+1, capped at 100%. Overage 2+ = share of children two or more years older than expected age for their grade.

Gender differentials are present and vary significantly by country, although they remain smaller than the displacement effect observed across the analysed contexts. Across the five countries, the gender gap in end-of-primary progression varies considerably: Mali M +4.8pp, Democratic Republic of the Congo F +2.1pp, Central African Republic M +9.3pp, Somalia M +4.8pp. Central African Republic shows the largest differential, with boys progressing through primary at 74% versus girls at 65%. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, girls slightly outperform boys at secondary level, possibly reflecting higher male dropout linked to income-generating activities. Overall, the pattern suggests that educational inequities are shaped by both forced displacement and gender-specific drivers, although displacement appears to be the stronger constraint on progression in these crisis contexts. This may reflect the reduced capacity of displacement-affected households to absorb the direct and indirect costs of schooling after livelihoods have been disrupted. This does not imply that gender differentials are negligible or unimportant, nor that they would not become more pronounced if household economic vulnerability were reduced.

BOX 4.

Burkina Faso: Displacement magnifies cost-related barriers

The Burkina Faso MSNA 2024 provides a detailed lens on the mechanisms through which displacement disrupts education. In addition to the grade-by-age enrolment cross-tabulations produced for all countries, the Burkina Faso dataset includes a single-select barrier-to-enrolment question administered to every non-enrolled child. This demand-side analysis complements the progression findings by examining how barriers vary across ages and grades.

Cost barriers and displacement interaction. Inability to afford school fees is the dominant barrier across all groups, but displacement amplifies it substantially. Among IDP households, 50% of households with non-enrolled children cite school costs as the main barrier, compared to 34% among non-displaced households with non-enrolled children, a 17 percentage point gap representing the largest displacement differential observed across the barrier profile. This gap remains relatively consistent across ages: cost is cited by similar proportions of 7-year-olds and 17-year-olds, suggesting a persistent exclusion mechanism rather than one concentrated at specific transition points.

Conflict-specific barriers. School closures due to damage, conflict or disaster account for 3.5% of non-enrolment among IDPs versus 2.0% among non-displaced children. Among enrolled IDP children, schools being used as shelters were reported by 3.1%, compared to 0.8% among non-IDPs. Teacher absence – the most reported disruption at 1.9% – was also relatively higher among IDPs. These context-specific, supply-side disruptions compound financial barriers and affect both the continuity and quality of education.

Age-differentiated barrier profiles. The barrier landscape shifts substantially across the age spectrum. For ages 5–6, "child not considered school age" dominates (82% at age 5, becoming negligible by age 8), likely reflecting late-entry norms and limited perceived need for education before age 6. From ages 7 to 14, school costs become the dominant barrier. At ages 15–18, costs remain the primary factor, but dropout linked to income-generating activities (17% at age 18) and lack of interest in schooling (12% at ages 15–17) emerge as secondary drivers.

Displacement reshapes the barrier mix. Displacement affects which barriers become most salient. When "too young" responses are excluded, the IDP barrier profile is overwhelmingly dominated by costs (62% of remaining barriers), followed by conflict-related factors (school closures and inability to register, 7% combined). For non-displaced children, costs account for 50% of the barriers, with disengagement playing a more prominent role. These findings support the hypothesis that the dominant mechanism through which displacement undermines education in Burkina Faso is primarily economic rather than physical or norm-based.

TABLE 7. Barrier shares by displacement status, Burkina Faso (% of non-enrolled children aged 5–18)

Barrier	IDP	Non-IDP	Total	Δ (pp)
Cannot afford school fees	50.3%	33.5%	36.2%	+16.8
Child not considered school age	19.3%	33.8%	31.5%	−14.6
Lack of interest/not a priority	5.5%	9.6%	9.0%	−4.1
No accessible school	4.1%	5.4%	5.2%	−1.3
Child in income activities	3.7%	4.3%	4.2%	−0.6
School closed (conflict/disaster)	3.5%	2.0%	2.3%	+1.5
Unable to register (other reason)	2.3%	2.7%	2.6%	−0.4
Child works at home/farm	2.1%	2.2%	2.2%	−0.1
Lack of teachers	1.0%	1.2%	1.1%	−0.1
Disability or health issues	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%	−0.1
Other	7.3%	4.2%	4.7%	+3.1

Normalised weighted counts. Barriers below 1% grouped into "Other." Δ = IDP share minus non-IDP share in percentage points.

The cross-country evidence converges on a clear programming priority: the transition between primary and lower-secondary education represents the most acute attrition point in crisis-affected systems, while internal displacement compounds educational disadvantages at every grade leading up to it. Children from displaced households who remain enrolled appear to progress more slowly, experience higher levels of delayed progression and exit the system earlier than their non-displaced peers – suggesting that repetition and delayed progression may function not as alternatives to dropout, but as pathways leading towards it. The Burkina Faso case study sharpens this diagnosis. Where the demand-side barrier data are available, the evidence suggests that the dominant mechanism through which displacement undermines education is primarily economic, rather than physical or norm-based. Addressing these gaps will likely require a combination of measures that current education-in-emergencies portfolios fund only partially: targeted financial support at the points where transition costs increase sharply, accelerated and remedial learning programmes for overage children, and recognition that the cumulative costs of inaction increase year by year as cohorts move through the system. Where such measures are absent, gains achieved in initial access are likely to continue dissipating before children reach the end of basic education.

PART 4

Over 90% of children do not reach minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary education

Crises do not always close schools, yet they compress what children learn, widening proficiency gaps, and opening a growing disconnect between the years of schooling completed and the skills acquired. This section examines how different types of crises shape the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy, drawing on the latest available data, with a focus on the heart of the learning crisis, that is Sub-Saharan Africa. It then extends the analysis to attempt a global estimate of the share of crisis-affected children who fail to reach minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics by the end of the primary cycle.

1. Learning trajectories in crisis-affected countries: MICS

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The first strand of analysis draws on MICS6 foundational reading data for 19 crisis-affected countries, covering grades 2 through 6. Reading proficiency is measured via the UNICEF MICS Foundational Literacy and Numeracy module, which assesses whether a child can read and comprehend a short, age-appropriate text.[9]

Weighted mean proficiency rates are computed for each crisis driver (conflict, natural disaster, socioeconomic crises) by weighing country-level MICS6 reading scores by the estimated number of crisis-affected school-age children in each category: conflict and violence, natural disaster and socioeconomic crisis, as identified in Part 2. This ensures that the trajectories reflect the learning conditions under each crisis driver.

The results are unambiguous. Children living in contexts of conflict and violence face the steepest learning deficits. Across the five countries in this category (the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, the State of Palestine and Chad), representing 40.1 million crisis-affected school-age children, the weighted mean reading proficiency rises from just 7.1% in grade 2 to 30.6% in grade 6. Children affected primarily by natural disasters (22.7 million across 15 countries) reach 63.0% by grade 6. Those affected by socio-economic crises (52.2 million across 13 countries) reach 46.9%.

9. The FLN module uses a foundational reading benchmark, which is not identical to the minimum proficiency levels for SDG 4.1.1(a) in early grades.

FIGURE 10. Learning trajectories by crisis primary driver (national level, MICS FLM)

The gap between conflict-affected and other crisis-affected children is not static: it widens at every successive grade. Between grades 2 and 6, the conflict trajectory gains 23.5 percentage points; the natural disaster trajectory gains 47.4, more than double the rate of improvement. This pattern suggests that armed conflict does not merely delay learning. It actively suppresses the conditions under which schooling translates into foundational skills: teacher presence, instructional continuity, safety in and around schools, and the cognitive and psychosocial readiness of children exposed to violence.

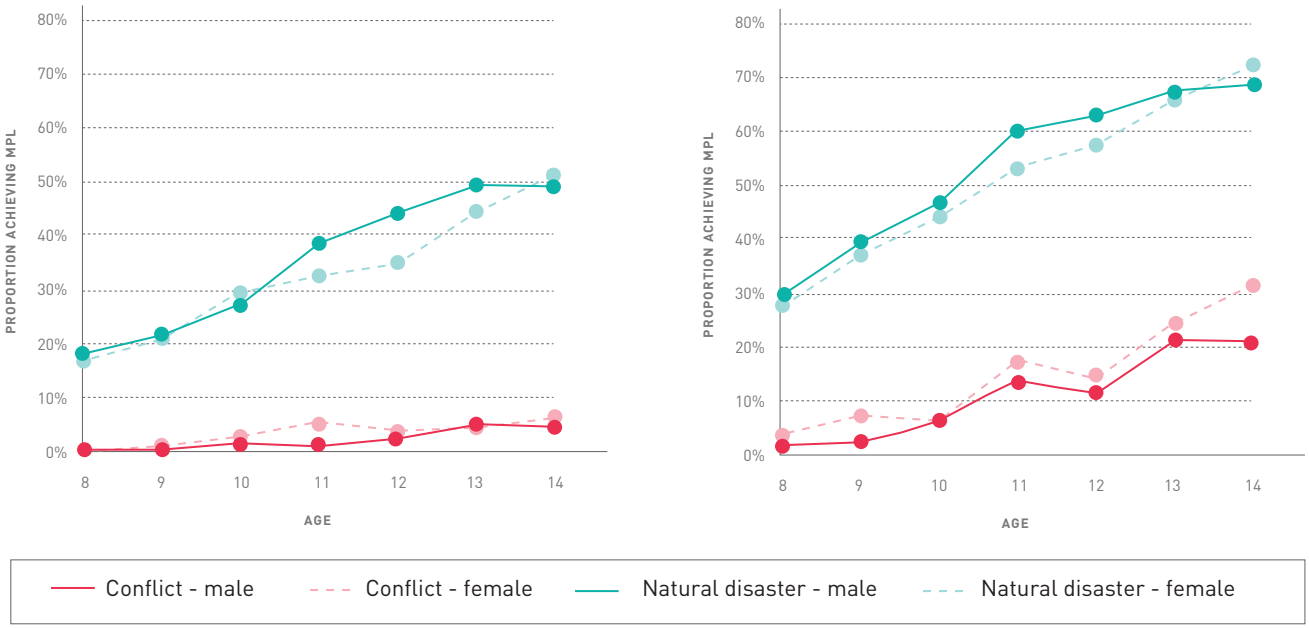
2. Subnational evidence from ICAN-ICAR

The second strand of analysis moves from national to subnational resolution, using household-level assessment data to measure learning where crises occur. It draws on the 2025 PAL Network ICAN-ICAR survey, covering approximately 54,000 children aged 8 to 14 across six sub-Saharan African countries: Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda. The survey uses standardised instruments administered during home visits, capturing children both in and out of school. Each child is classified as achieving or not achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics, corresponding to SDG indicator 4.1.1(a). This is a key difference from the analysis in the previous section: ICAN-ICAR measures the MPL standard. The message, however, is consistent.

Crisis classification. Each first-level subnational administrative unit (L1) was classified as conflict-affected, disaster-affected, or unaffected using a reference dataset. Conflict exposure was determined through analysis of ACLED event data and ISI scores: to qualify, a subnational unit had to belong to a country identified as conflict-affected by ISI crisis drivers and to have experienced more than 25 events of organised violence in the preceding 12 months. Natural disaster exposure was derived from the EM-DAT International Disaster Database, matching 2024–2025 event location descriptions to first-level administrative boundaries. Where a subnational unit was affected by both conflict and natural disaster (the case only for Cabo Delgado and Nampula provinces in Mozambique), it was included in both categories. The matched dataset retains 33,387 children aged 8 to 14 across 228 subnational units. For each combination of crisis status, sex, subject and single year of age, the proportion of children achieving minimum proficiency was computed as the weighted mean of the binary MPL indicator, using household survey weights.

Findings. The gap between conflict-affected and disaster-affected areas is very large. In conflict-affected subnational units in Mali and Mozambique, fewer than 7% of children at any age achieve minimum proficiency in reading, and fewer than 32% in mathematics. In disaster-affected areas in Kenya, central and southern Mozambique, parts of Uganda, Tanzania and Senegal, the proportion achieving minimum proficiency is substantially higher at every age, reaching above 50% in reading and above 70% in mathematics by age 14.

FIGURE 11. Proportion of children achieving MPL in areas affected by conflicts and natural disasters (L1 units in Kenya and Mozambique, ICAN-ICAR)



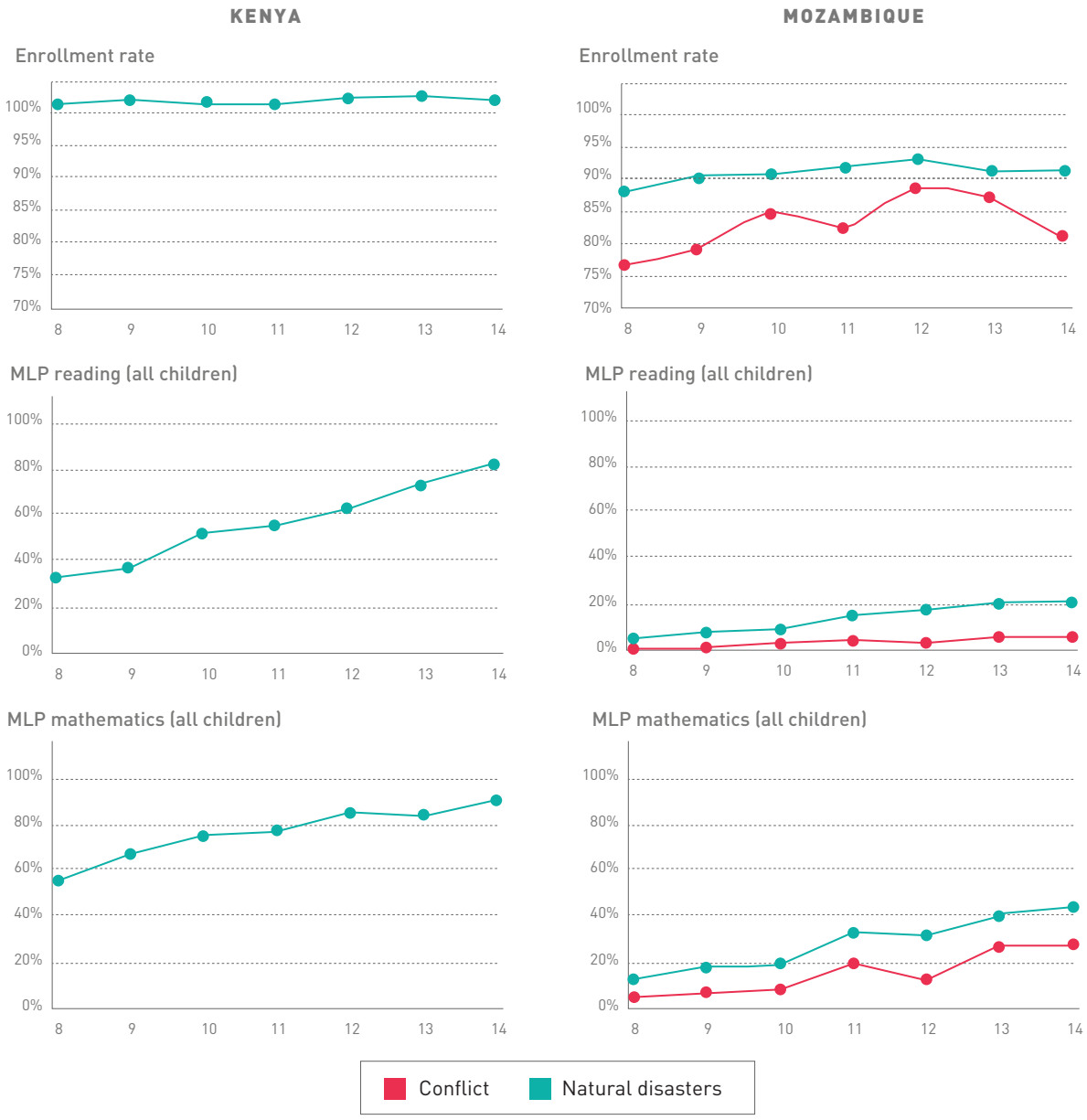
This gap is not simply a function of crisis severity. The conflict-affected group is dominated by countries and regions with chronically weak education systems, compounding the direct effects of insecurity and institutional fragility on learning. The disaster-affected group, conversely, includes subnational units with stronger baseline education infrastructure, such as the Kenyan ASAL counties. The observed patterns therefore reflect both the direct impact of crisis and the pre-existing conditions of crisis-affected education systems.

Both crisis categories show rising proficiency with age, consistent with the accumulation of learning over years of schooling. In disaster-affected areas, reading proficiency rises from approximately 17 to 18% at age 8 to 49 to 51% at age 14, while mathematics proficiency rises from 28 to 29% to 69 to 72%. In conflict-affected areas, the gradient is far shallower: reading proficiency rises from under 1% at age 8 to just 5 to 6% at age 14. The mathematics gradient in conflict areas, while steeper in relative terms, still reaches only 21 to 32% by age 14. Gender gaps in foundational learning appear modest throughout: the male and female curves track each other closely in both subjects.

To place these findings in context, the results can be compared with regional averages for sub-Saharan Africa derived from SDG indicator 4.1.1(a). Weighted by school-age population, the regional averages stand at 60% for males and 56% for females in mathematics, and 31% for males and 32% for females in reading, measured at grade 2 or grade 3. In natural disaster-affected areas, learning levels fall short of these early-grade regional benchmarks even at age 14. In conflict-affected areas, learning outcomes are an order of magnitude below the regional averages: reading proficiency peaks at just 5 to 6%. Children in crisis-affected areas are not simply lagging the rest of the region: they are starting from baselines well below the sub-Saharan African average, and crises then compound a pre-existing, large deficit.

Adding enrolment data to the analysis brings out a few patterns worth noting. In Kenya, enrolment is essentially universal at 99–100% across all ages in disaster-affected areas, hence the challenge is entirely about learning quality. In Mozambique, enrolment is markedly lower in conflict-affected areas, highlighting both problems connected with late entry and adolescent retention in conflict areas. Enrolment starts at 77% at age 8, rises to nearly 89% at age 12 but then falls back to 81% at age 14. In disaster-affected areas, enrolment is more stable at around 91–93%. While the dominant story in Mozambique remains the learning crisis – even children who are in school are overwhelmingly not reaching minimum proficiency (reading below 7% in conflict areas, below 22% in disaster areas by age 14) – conflict is associated with notable gaps in access, too, with both late entry and an additional retention problem emerging from age 11 onward.

FIGURE 12. Proportion of children achieving MPL and enrolment rates in areas affected by conflicts and natural disasters (L1 units in Kenya and Mozambique, ICAN-ICAR)



3. Minimum proficiency at end of primary for crisis-affected children

To complement the analysis of foundational and early-grade learning, we estimate an interval for the minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics at the end of primary is derived from the latest available UIS data.

Upper bound (best case scenario). For each crisis-affected country classified under severity codes 1 to 4, the most recent national UIS data point for SDG indicator 4.1.1(b) is weighed by the total number of crisis-affected school-age children in that country. Where data were unavailable for one of the 87 crisis-affected countries, values were imputed using the closest regional match, namely a country in the same SDG region experiencing a crisis of comparable intensity. In total, 36 country values were imputed. Because UIS reports national averages encompassing both crisis-affected and non-affected populations, these figures overstate proficiency of crisis-affected children, outside the few cases where the entire school-age population is classified as affected: this estimate thus can be retained as an upper bound.

The **lower bound** (worst case scenario) is anchored by the Chad (PASEC, 2019), where almost half of the entire school-age population is classified as crisis-affected and MPL at the end of primary are the lowest on record. It is extremely likely that the global average falls within these two limits.

TABLE 8. Estimated interval for crisis-affected children reaching minimum proficiency level (end of primary)

Displacement status	Reading Males	Reading Females	Mathematics Males	Mathematics Females
Upper bound (global weighted average, national values)	14%	15%	9%	9%
Lower bound (lowest performing crisis-affected country, 2019 PASEC)	8%	7%	2%	2%

The global community committed, under SDG 4, to ensure that every child achieves at least minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school by 2030. For children caught in crisis, that commitment remains, at present, painfully unfulfilled, and not remotely in sight.

PART 5

A way forward

What do these findings mean for programming?

The evidence presented in this report points to a set of implications for education programming in crisis contexts. These implications are not intended as country-specific programming guidance. They are broad reflections grounded in the evidence presented in this report and informed by the wider literature on interventions with proven impact in education. Their relevance to any given crisis context will depend on local conditions, institutional capacity, and the nature of the emergency.

1 Prioritise foundational learning from the start of the emergency response, not after access has been secured.

When children in crisis settings do not acquire literacy and numeracy in the early grades, the opportunity for remediation is often lost. Children who fall behind in the first years of schooling rarely catch up without deliberate, targeted intervention (World Bank, 2019; Pritchett and Beatty, 2015). The GEEAP classifies structured pedagogy as one of the most cost-effective investments (GEEAP, 2023). Programming that treats foundational skills as a concern to be addressed once stability has been restored arrives too late for the children who need it most. In emergencies, too, timely foundational learning is the condition on which all subsequent educational outcomes depend.

2 Reduce financial and structural barriers to education through integrated and inclusive systems approaches.

The cost of education is the most frequently cited barrier to participation in crisis-affected settings. Programming that seeks to stimulate demand for education while ignoring these financial constraints misreads the problem. No supply-side investment in schools, teachers, or materials will sustain participation if families cannot meet basic needs and absorb the costs of schooling.

The wider evidence base confirms that reducing household-level financial barriers has the largest and most consistent positive effects on school participation in low- and middle-income countries. Several meta-analyses found that measures like cash transfers produce large and consistent gains in enrolment and attendance, though they do not, on their own, improve learning outcomes (Snilstveit et al., 2016). The GEEAP rates conditional cash transfers as a "good buy" for education (GEEAP, 2023). In humanitarian contexts specifically, evidence from the Emergency Social Safety Net in Turkey, one of the world's largest humanitarian cash transfers, shows significant effects on refugee children's school enrolment and reductions in child labour, driven by the program's ability to offset both the direct and opportunity costs of schooling (Aygün et al., 2024). Evaluations from cash-for-education programs in Lebanon point in the same direction, demonstrating that transfers of sufficient size can support retention, particularly at the secondary level (de Hoop et al., 2019).

At the same time, the findings in this report suggest that affordability alone does not fully explain exclusion among forcibly displaced children. Across the datasets analysed, refugee and other forcibly displaced children consistently show higher rates of exclusion and weaker progression trajectories than their non-displaced peers, pointing to structural constraints that extend beyond household poverty. In many crisis settings, displaced children face legal, administrative, linguistic, geographic, and capacity-related barriers that shape whether and how they can access national education systems. These constraints include restrictions linked to documentation and residency status, overcrowded host-country systems, differences in curriculum and certification, limited

recognition of prior learning, language-of-instruction barriers, insecurity and limited availability of accredited secondary pathways. As a result, barriers to education for refugee populations should not be understood solely through a demand-side lens, but also as a function of how education systems include, accommodate or exclude refugee learners during crises.

While evidence on the impact of humanitarian assistance on education outcomes remains thinner than in other sectors, trends are clear. By the same token, however, at current funding levels, cash assistance alone will not suffice. Households need the capacity to earn, stabilise and choose. This calls for a deliberate shift away from siloed education responses toward integrated programming that connects education with livelihoods promotion, local economic development, social protection and child protection. For displaced populations in particular, integrated responses must also address the institutional and policy barriers that constrain access to education, including recognition, accreditation, language support and inclusion within national systems. Reducing cost barriers will not resolve the learning crisis, but it is a necessary step to improve retention, and one that cannot be taken without confronting the economic pressures that force children out of school.

3 Invest at scale in EiE-specific, structured catch-up and remedial instruction that meets learners at their actual proficiency level, mainstreamed in national systems.

Evidence is strong that most children in crisis-affected settings reach the end of primary school without foundational literacy and numeracy, a pattern that is most severe in countries affected by armed conflict, where cumulative learning loss is greatest. In such contexts, curricula and instruction that assume grade-level proficiency systematically fail most learners (Pritchett and Beatty, 2015). The evidence base for teaching at the right level, assessed as a "great buy" by the GEEAP (2023) and validated across multiple randomised evaluations in India and sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrates that structured remedial approaches which assess children's actual proficiency and scaffold them toward missed competencies can produce large learning gains in a short time. In emergency settings, these approaches must be delivered within or alongside formal schooling and at scale, especially in areas affected by violence and conflict, where the learning gaps are largest. The goal is not to build parallel remediation systems, but to embed assessment-informed, level-appropriate instruction in the mainstream so that every conflict-affected child, that is those who have fallen behind the most, has a credible, time-bound route back to acquiring foundational skills.

4 Actively support the primary-to-secondary transition through bridging programmes and flexible pathways, especially for forcibly displaced children.

Across the REACH MSNAs, the primary-to-secondary transition emerges consistently as the most vulnerable point in children's educational trajectories. In crisis settings, this transition is weakened by forced displacement, economic pressures and protection risks. Our deep dives show that forcibly displaced children, on average, benefit from fewer years of schooling than their non-displaced peers and are significantly less likely to transition to and through secondary education—a finding that is gaining traction in the literature (Brookings, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

These disparities should not be interpreted solely as the result of household-level vulnerability. They also reflect structural features of displacement contexts, where refugees and other forcibly displaced learners often face fragmented education provision, limited access to certified secondary education, uncertain legal status, language barriers and weak alignment between humanitarian and national education systems. While this report analyses crisis-affected children as a broad category, the consistently poorer outcomes observed among forcibly displaced cohorts suggest that displacement itself functions as a distinct axis of educational exclusion requiring targeted policy and systems responses.

Programming should intentionally support this transition through bridging programmes, flexible learning pathways and sustained pedagogical support, particularly for displaced children, who face the widest gaps. Where remediation is needed, it should be embedded within these pathways rather than offered separately, giving learners a realistic chance to acquire foundational skills before leaving the education system.

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Annexes

ANNEX 1:
Disability premia in out-of-school rate estimation in conflict-affected countries

Standard OOS rate estimates do not fully account for the effects of disability on school participation in conflict. Conflict both increases the prevalence of disability and widens the pool of OOSC, producing a compounded undercount. This annex introduces two additive premia, a disability prevalence premium (α) and an OOS disability penalty (β) to adjust for this gap.

Conflict increases disability prevalence. Charlson et al. (2019) estimated that 22.1% of conflict-affected populations have a mental disorder at any point in time, against a global baseline of 10–13%. UNICEF estimates that 30% of Syria's population now has a disability, rising to 36% among IDPs (HNAP/EEAS 2021). The IMPACT/UNICEF (2025) cross-crisis MSNA analysis found a +3 pp increase in WG-SS 3 prevalence in Ukraine between survey rounds.

Conflict widens the disability-to-OOS gap. Mizunoya et al. (2018) found a median 31 pp disability gap in school attendance across 15 LMICs. Individual-level data from the 2023 MSNAs show a 31 percentage point gap in Ethiopia and a 21 percentage point gap in Syria (IMPACT/UNICEF 2025). In crisis settings, this gap widens as schools are destroyed, assistive devices lost, and psychosocial support collapses.
The premia proposed here are anchored in WG-CFM data. The IMPACT/UNICEF (2025) cross-crisis analysis found a median WG-SS 3 prevalence of only 3.5% across 17 crisis countries, well below WHO's global estimate of 16%. When two psychosocial questions were added to the WG-SS in the Mali 2022 MSNA, severity 3 prevalence nearly tripled (IMPACT/UNICEF 2025). The α values should therefore be understood as lower bounds of the true conflict-induced increase in disability prevalence, with the true value likely higher. Only Syria provides a robustly paired pre/post observation; for all other countries, α is inferred from cross-sectional comparisons and meta-analytic estimates.

The adjusted prevalence rate and OOS rate for children with disabilities (CWD) in each country and education level are:

$$P\_crisis = P\_baseline + \alpha$$

$$OOSR\_CWD = OOSR\_NFD + \beta$$

where OOSR_NFD is the OOS rate for children who are affected by crises, not forcibly displaced and without disabilities.

Disability prevalence premium (α). α is the percentage point increase in disability prevalence among children attributable to the conflict. The α premium comprises physical/sensory and psychosocial sub-components. In most crises, the psychosocial component dominates but is also the least visible to WG-SS measurement. These are deliberately conservative estimates.

Severity Code	α (pp)	Evidence anchors
1	13	Syria: 25–37% crisis vs. 10–12% baseline = 13–25 pp (HNAP/EEAS). Set at the lower end of the observed range.
2	9	Charlson et al. 2019: 9.1% moderate-severe mental disorder prevalence in conflict vs. ~4% baseline. Ukraine MSNA: +3 pp observed within-country (likely undercount).
4, 5	3	Lower-intensity or protracted low-level crises. K4D/DFID estimate of 3–5 pp increase in general conflict populations.

OOS disability penalty (ß). ß is the additive gap between the OOS rate for children with a disability and the OOS rate for children without, by education level. It is added to the OOSR for non-forcibly displaced children via the additive formula above. Values are derived from MICS6 WG-CFM data across 11 crisis-affected countries, with the MSNA figures from Ethiopia (31 pp aggregate) and Syria (21 pp aggregate) as external validation. The resulting adjusted OOS rate is capped at 90%.

Severity Code	OOS disability penalty (ß)				
	3 years of age until one year before primary	One year before primary	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
1	10	8	8	10	12
2, 3	8	5	5	8	10
4	4	3	3	5	5
5	6	3	3	7	10

The gap widens at higher education levels and with increasing crisis severity. Code 4 primary gaps are small (2–3 pp in MICS data), suggesting displaced children often access primary school in host countries but face sharply increasing barriers at secondary level. MSNA aggregate figures from Ethiopia and Syria are larger than most MICS deltas, likely because the MSNA captures more severely affected populations. These premia are conservative and should be understood as educated guesses for lower bounds. The ß values are anchored in MICS6 data from 11 countries and could plausibly vary by ±5 pp depending on a country's inclusive education capacity and the predominant disability types. The formula does not model the interaction between disability and other exclusion factors (gender, poverty, rural location). Disaggregation by disability type is not possible with available data.

ABOUT EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is the global fund for education in crises. The Fund provides rapid, flexible funding to locally-led education responses that protect the learning of the most marginalised children affected by crises, while strengthening education systems to sustain learning and resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. ECW works with governments, youth, civil society, United Nations agencies and community partners to reach children left furthest behind.

As global crises intensify and the education financing gap widens, ECW calls on public and private sector partners to scale up investments so millions more crisis-affected girls and boys can learn and rebuild their futures.

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