The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies: A new ally for education in emergencies

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Abstract   This article provides an overview of the current landscape and needs for education in emergencies, as well as challenges and opportunities in today's critical juncture, in particular with the creation of a new ally for education in emergencies: the Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies. It covers the disruption of education by the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated exacerbation of child-protection risks, as well as the pandemic's impact on the realization of the right to education of displaced children and youth and those living in humanitarian crises. While there is ample recognition at the international policy level of the importance of education in emergencies, major obstacles still prevail, such as continued underfunding and the underprioritization of education in humanitarian situations. As the world faces unparalleled needs, in particular during crises, and grapples to accelerate progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 and meet the commitments set out in the Global Compact for Refugees, new opportunities promise to tap opportune alliances, to inspire commitment, and to boost country-level impact.

Keywords   Child protection · Education in emergencies · Humanitarian aid · International Geneva · Sustainable Development Goal 4

The current humanitarian landscape

Today's world is facing the highest level of humanitarian needs experienced in decades (OCHA, 2020). Emergencies are happening at a larger scale and are lasting for longer; other "situations of violence" (ICRC, 2014) are having a devastating impact but receive

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insufficient attention; and the climate emergency and Covid-19 pandemic are exacerbating needs and threatening any progress previously made.

Globally, nearly 250 million children are living in countries affected by conflict, and millions more face hazards caused by the climate emergency, natural disasters, violence, and epidemics. In 2019, 33 million children were displaced by violence or conflict, including 19 million internally displaced children, 13 million refugee children and around 1 million children seeking asylum (UNICEF, 2021). Having fled their homes and been uprooted from protective environments such as schools, these children are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Of the world's approximately 257 million primary- and secondary-school-age children and youth out of school, 127 million live in countries affected by crises (INEE, 2020). With insufficient or no access to education, these most vulnerable children face increasing levels of threat, including severe impacts on their mental health, being forced into harmful child labor to support themselves and their families, child marriage, or becoming associated with armed groups and gangs. Amid ongoing violence, protracted conflict, rising hunger, and the effects of climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have an impact in 2021 and beyond.

With a decisive blow, Covid-19 disrupted the right to education for 1.6 billion children across the world from March to May 2020. According to UNICEF (2021), after one year of being unable to access education, it is estimated that 168 million children will fall further behind their peers, with the most vulnerable paying the heaviest price. School closures have disrupted the schooling of 91 percent of students worldwide. This has made learning even more difficult for displaced children and youth and those affected by humanitarian crises. Indeed, the world is facing a learning crisis. Globally, there are at least 90 countries where schools are either closed or offering a mix of remote and in-person learning, and it is estimated that 800 million children are still not fully back in school, with millions at risk of never returning as school closures persist (Grant et al., 2021).

The case of Venezuela illustrates the severity of the pandemic's impact: insecurity, violence, and threats created some 5.6 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide (R4V, 2021). The Venezuelan educational system was greatly impacted by the crisis with school dropouts estimated at 1 million, and there is an imminent threat that an additional 1 million children are "at risk of being left behind" (Save the Children & UNICEF, 2020). "Leaving no one behind" is the 2030 Agenda Universal Values Principle 2 and "represents the unequivocal commitment of all UN Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole" (UNSDG, 2021, p. 1). Covid-19 exacerbated the preexisting learning and protection crisis with nearly 7 million Venezuelan students missing at least three-quarters or almost all classroom instruction time between March 2020 to February 2021 (UNESCO, 2021).

Losing the protective school environment and related social services leaves children and youth particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. The most vulnerable students—including girls and children with disabilities—are especially at risk of not returning to school, which jeopardizes not only their education but also their protection, health and mental health, well-being, and the possibility of their achieving their full potential in life.

Additional hurdles caused by the pandemic further obstruct the achievement of the Global Goals, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). This concern was distinctly expressed at the Global Education Meeting in October 2020, where heads of state and government, ministers and delegates; representatives of UN agencies, humanitarian

and development partners, international and regional organizations, civil society organizations and the teaching profession; members of research communities and the private sector stated:

> We express concern that the unprecedented social, human and economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the world's fragility and interdependence, affecting every country, community and family, particularly the most marginalized. The Covid-19 crisis cannot be reduced to a public health emergency as it has imperilled fundamental human rights including the right to education. We face a major threat that risks hampering the progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and our joint efforts to leave no one behind. The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and affecting disproportionately vulnerable communities and learners, especially those living in poverty, women and girls, those impacted by crises and conflicts, and persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 78).

The recognition of the need for a more equitable framework in international cooperation to address these escalating requirements led to the UN General Assembly affirming the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in December 2018. The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies is the result of a pledge made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum to make a difference in the education of crisis-affected and displaced children and youth, to help accelerate progress toward SDG 4 in crises and to realize the commitments set out in the GCR. It was launched on January 25, 2021, and its creation was timely, keeping education in emergencies high on the international policy agenda.

The current landscape and needs with regard to education in emergencies, as well as the challenges and opportunities, are outlined below.

The impact of underfunding and underprioritization of education in emergencies

There is ample recognition within the humanitarian community of the importance of the right to education; however, this has yet to lead to adequate funding and prioritization when it comes to preparedness for emergencies and the response when they do occur. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2004) affirms that education in emergencies is primarily about ensuring safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities for people affected by humanitarian crises. The INEE *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery* broadly defines education in emergencies as encompassing "early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal [. . .] education" and providing "physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection that can sustain and save lives" (2004, p. 2). At the same time, education is key for many other sectors and has a strong protective role. As such, child protection and education in emergencies are interdependent and complementary.

Education is a right for all children in all circumstances regardless of their status, be they living in crisis-affected communities or internally displaced, refugee or migrant. What is more, education is a key concern stated by children and youth, parents, and communities living in crises. For instance, according to Save the Children (2015, p. 14), refugee children and young people around the world tell us that education "is the key to their futures, their protection, their happiness and their health—and that it cannot be delayed.

In recognition of its increasing children's resilience and ensuring their access to fundamental rights, education has earned a legitimate place within crisis response. Education's role as a core component of any humanitarian response was recognized with the creation of the Global Education Cluster (GEC) in 2007, as part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster approach. Today, the country-level education clusters coordinate the inter-agency humanitarian response targeting the education needs of nearly 26 million children in 27 countries.

In principle, it is recognized that the coordination of education in emergency responses enables practitioners to deliver timely and effective programming that saves lives and supports access to learning during crises. In practice, decision-makers and donor agencies still find it difficult to prioritize education in crisis responses, namely because education is considered by many as a long-term development goal rather than a rightful intervention in humanitarian situations (George et al., 2020). As a consequence, humanitarian spending on education continues to lag far behind other sectors. For instance, of the USD 1.2 billion requested for education in emergencies in 2021 for cluster settings, to date, underfunding is at 77 percent (GEC, 2021). [Cluster settings include situations under the leadership of a humanitarian coordinator and those with presence of internally displaced persons.]

After almost three decades of playing a critical role in crisis responses, education's position has not yet been justly reflected in corresponding funding and prioritization. In absolute and relative terms, humanitarian funding for education has increased in response to growing needs; however, while the share increased from a percentage as low as 0.9 percent in 2000, by 2018, education still received just 3.2 percent of total humanitarian spending, only to fall again to just 2.6 percent in 2019 (GPE, 2020). The underfunding and underprioritization in the education sector have become chronic.

In addition to education being one of the most underfunded sectors in humanitarian response plans, national education budgets are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. This is exacerbated through perennial marginalization and impacts millions of displaced and crisis-affected children and youth's lives in the most profound way. The magnitude of the situation cannot be overemphasized. According to a joint analysis by Save the Children and UNICEF (2020), it is estimated that 150 million additional children are living in multidimensional poverty—without access to education, health care, housing, nutrition, sanitation, or water—due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, 45 percent of children were severely deprived of at least one of these basic rights before the pandemic even erupted.

Furthermore, even though the current data reflects acute circumstances, the situation for children living in multidimensional poverty is likely to get worse unless national governments and the international community commit to mitigating the inevitable damage. Taking a multidimensional approach rather than only viewing the situation through a sectoral lens can generate a clearer picture of how multiple deprivations adversely affect children. Doing so highlights that poorer children and youth are at greater risk of experiencing several negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement; dropping out of school; abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect; and behavioral, socioemotional, physical and mental health problems—as well as developmental delays.

Growing needs require more efficient preparedness and responses

Recognition of the increasing global humanitarian needs and the dearth of resources led to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). The WHS aimed to get "more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the

humanitarian action" (IASC, 2016, p. 10). Humanitarian donors and aid organizations alike committed to more effective and efficient responses, more accountability, bringing local and national responders into the decision-making processes and sending more support and funding directly to them—later known as the "localization agenda" (Advancing the Agenda for Humanity, 2016). Moreover, the subsequent "triple nexus"—which promotes a stronger collaboration and coordination between the humanitarian, development and peace actors—led to "a shift in how the international community talks about violence and prevention—focusing more on equity and meaningful civil society participation and building cooperative behaviour" (ICVA, 2017).

In the period leading up to the WHS, the decade-long advocacy for increased recognition of the education of displaced children and youth and those living in crisis-affected countries crystallized (ODI, 2016). Consequently, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the first global fund for education in emergencies, was created "to help reposition education as a priority on the humanitarian agenda, usher in a more collaborative approach among actors on the ground and foster additional funding to ensure that every crisis-affected child and young person is in school and learning" (ECW, 2016). Since its inception, ECW Fund has mobilized nearly USD 560 million and has reached millions of children together with host governments, in-country UN agencies, and civil society (Nicolai et al., 2020, p. 15).

For refugees and host communities, in particular, the affirmation of the GCR in December 2018 signaled a strong commitment by the international community for more durable and predictable support, with education having a central role. Today, however, three years after the GCR and five years after the WHS, many challenges persist. With need outpacing albeit increasing resources, the work to elevate education in emergencies must continue and grow to galvanize increased attention for education in emergencies and to prioritize that education. Approximately 257 million primary- and secondary-school-age children are out of school, and their protection, development, health, and well-being depend on bringing education in emergencies high onto the agenda of decision-makers.

Covid-19 threatens progress in education in emergencies

Children's learning was already in crisis before the pandemic, and Covid-19 has severely exacerbated inequities, disparities, and risks—in particular for the most vulnerable children and youth, such as girls and children with disabilities. In terms of government spending on education, Covid-19 has adversely affected national budgets, with projections showing that governments are facing education budget cuts of eight percent on average (van Fleet, 2021). The World Bank and UNESCO (2021) estimate that two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries have cut their education budgets since the onset of the pandemic. In comparison, only a third of upper-middle and high-income countries have reduced their budgets. On top of that, the world will face more challenges in the next decade due to the climate emergency, which already triggers more than twice as many forced displacements as conflict and violence (United Nations, 2021), with families being displaced or unable to continue to pay school-related costs and with schools being closed for longer periods or being used as shelter by affected communities.

The World Bank and UNESCO (2021) have highlighted in *Education Finance Watch* that education systems in many countries face significant challenges in using funding effectively, and the pandemic has brought these spending inequalities and inefficiencies into sharp focus. Over the medium term, it is vital that spending be aligned more tightly to improvements in education outcomes. The pandemic's negative effect on domestic

spending combined with the looming challenges will profoundly impact education as many countries lag behind achieving the SDGs by 2030. This is relevant for SDG 4, for inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as for the other SDGs, which are critical for children's education and well-being. For example, SDG 16.2 aims to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

The case of Sudan demonstrates the challenges to implementing the 2030 agenda. About 13.4 million people—29 percent of the population—including some 7.3 million children, endure complex and intersecting challenges. The economic crisis is causing widespread malnutrition; ethnic tensions are erupting into violence; flooding remains life-threatening and repeatedly damages schools; and diseases, including Covid-19, add to the complexity of the situation. Similarly, most countries affected by crises, including Colombia, Honduras, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and others, are at great risk of not meeting the SDGs.

In light of these seemingly insurmountable challenges, in September 2019, with only ten years left to implement the 2030 Agenda, world leaders called for a decade of action to accelerate progress and solutions. Leaders pledged to mobilize further resources, enhance implementation, and strengthen institutions—all urgently needed to achieve the ambitious 2030 Agenda. However, economic stagnation, worsened by the current global recession caused by Covid-19, is predicted to lead to the pandemic's impacts being more severe and long term than those of the 2008–2009 global economic crisis. Even though the UN is optimistic—its plan is to "defeat the virus and build a better world" (United Nations, 2020), the negative impacts will seriously threaten any headway made toward the SDGs, particularly in low- and lower-middle-income countries (World Bank & UNESCO, 2021).

As a result, decision-makers who are already tasked with responding to complex public-health and education crises, have to confront a daunting array of factors and dilemmas. Testament to the need for urgent action in order to protect the progress that has been made, UNESCO is consulting on a global multi-stakeholder approach, known as the Global Cooperation Mechanism, to provide strategic guidance to member states and the education community in achieving SDG 4. Today, the pandemic offers "an opportunity for better cooperation, coordination and collaboration among education stakeholders and beyond; it has contributed to an unprecedented level of multilateral and multi-stakeholder joint advocacy, consultation and country support" (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 5).

Shaping global policy to include key considerations regarding displaced and crisis-affected children and youth is vital to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all children. Moreover, decision-makers at the country level must consider the multiple effects of the closing and reopening of schools. Many governments and communities still agonize over how and when to reopen schools, some urging immediate reopening while others supporting delays. For this reason, back-to-school or back-to-learning strategies must ensure the readiness of education systems for school reopening and learning continuity as well as for system resilience to anticipate, reduce the risk of and address a possible resurgence of the virus—or other crises.

While Covid-19 has been devastating in many aspects, it has provided the opportunity to accelerate the implementation of alternative learning methods, such as digital learning, ensuring the continuity of education. Although students with access to digital devices and the internet are the minority in most countries—and girls and children with disabilities face additional hurdles—supporting governments in establishing effective forms of online education warrants institutional capacities and resources to redirect their focus on delivering alternative learning methods for those students who do not have similar opportunities (Reimers et al., 2020).

Technology is one of the most critical tools in supporting remote learning when children and youth need to remain outside their classrooms. With many different approaches being taken by different countries, the Covid-19 crisis provides an opportunity for policymakers to learn from each other and to cooperate to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, for one, will be encouraging cross-sectoral opportunities to promote debates and innovative thinking to shape trends and strategies for inclusive and equitable quality education in emergencies.

Leveraging International Geneva to respond to the education crisis

The city of Geneva is often referred to as the "world's humanitarian capital". The UN office there is the second most important in the UN system after the New York headquarters and serves as an operational base for many multilateral activities. Geneva also hosts 35 international organizations, more than 170 state and permanent missions, over 350 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and many academic institutions of excellence that collaborate closely with academia in developing countries.

The city is also home to key entities such as the IASC (Inter-Agency Standing Committee), which is the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system, bringing together the executive heads of 18 UN and non-UN organizations to ensure coherence of preparedness and response efforts, formulate policy, and agree on priorities for strengthened humanitarian action (IASC, 2022). It also hosts the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Office of the UNHCR, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as many other organizations in the sphere of education and related fields from humanitarian to development, human rights to migration, peace to climate, and health to water.

Given the untapped opportunities in this unique scene of expertise and influence, as well as the global crisis in education, Switzerland pledged at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum to promote Geneva as the Global Hub for Education in Emergencies. The pledge was co-signed by ECW, the GEC, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, the ICRC, the INEE, UNICEF, the University of Geneva, UNESCO, and the UNHCR. Since the Geneva Global Hub's launch in January 2021, 13 additional internationally renowned organizations have joined the co-signatories in their commitment. Arigatou International, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Enfants du Monde, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), Humanitarian Development Partnerships International (HDPI), Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Norwegian Capacity (NORCAP), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), People in Need (PIN), Plan International, and World Vision International. Further engagement from donors and crisis-affected countries seeks to add capacity to achieve the outlined goals and to play a key role in advancing the education-in-emergencies agenda.

Overall, the Geneva Global Hub is an auspicious ally for education in emergencies. Its location is vital to the formation of new ties across sectors and to bringing the education of displaced and crisis-affected children and youth high onto the humanitarian, human rights, development, and peace agendas. What is more, with many humanitarian organizations being tied to a specialized mandate, it is encouraging to note that the Geneva Global Hub members envision that "all children and youth affected by humanitarian emergencies, protracted crises, and forced displacement have their right to a quality education fulfilled, respected and

protected" (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, 2021, p. 1). As such, the members have committed to work for the education of crisis-affected and displaced children and youth, regardless of their status—be they refugee, host community, internally displaced children and youth, and those affected by conflict, violence, disasters, and epidemics. This is a great opportunity for joint action across organizational concerns.

The members have laid out an ambitious agenda and will work together toward three main goals, outlined as follows:

- Growing demand for change: The Geneva Global Hub is a catalyst for partners to come together to increase their prevention and response to education needs in emergencies. It will strengthen policy and integrate approaches across the humanitarian, development, migration, and peace spectrum, as well as with other sectors to better prioritize and deliver quality, inclusive education in emergencies for displaced and crisis-affected children and youth through increased collaboration of International Geneva actors and beyond. For this, the Geneva Global Hub will amplify and ensure the voices of the affected children, youth, and populations in its work and advocacy stand out. The Geneva Global Hub will also encourage systematic and coordinated opportunities so that local partners and frontline workers participate in debates and innovative thinking with policymakers in Geneva to ultimately shape strategic decision-making and improve in-country preparedness and response.
- Inspiring commitment: Bringing together the Geneva strategic community of committed thought leaders will inspire political will and influence agenda-setting to ensure that governments and partners see education as a top priority before, during, and after emergencies and in protracted crises. For instance, within the Global Cooperation Mechanism discussions, the Geneva Global Hub is hosting an ECW-led consultation process among education-in-emergencies actors to ensure that displaced children and youth and those living in emergencies are not left behind. Besides, taking advantage of the Geneva Global Hub's location is a major opportunity to unleash new potential resources for education in emergencies.
- Boosting country-level impact: The Geneva Global Hub aims to increase the country-level impact of emergency-preparedness measures and responses through better field data, evidence, and innovative research and solutions—including learning from the Covid-19 crisis—that support the delivery of safe and quality education while building resilient education systems. Academia, in particular, also has a role to play to contribute with critical thinking on educational policies in emergencies and to suggest alternative solutions, by elevating and integrating the voices of researchers from crisis-affected countries.

Ultimately, this political influence of key UN agencies in the field of education, government, civil society organizations, networks, and research institutions can contribute to igniting debate and innovative thinking among Geneva decision-makers and beyond. Importantly, extensive recognition of education and its multiplying effects as a top priority and correlated funding and prioritization will eventually bring about change at the country level.

Conclusion

At a time of unparalleled humanitarian needs, with Covid-19 eradicating gains in education in emergencies and exacerbating protection risks, the work to elevate education in emergencies needs to continue and to intensify in order to galvanize increased attention

for and prioritization of education in the humanitarian response and in global development processes. Such a shift demands an intervention of the chronic underfunding and marginalization of education in emergencies beyond ample recognition of its importance.

By spending more now, governments can prevent the worst-case education outcomes of the crisis, thereby lessening later costs as well as securing better futures for the learners of the Covid-19 generation, including for displaced children and youth and those living in crisis. Millions of children and youth risk being left behind unless world leaders, philanthropists, and private actors take bold action. The challenge today is to maintain the momentum gained through processes such as the GCR and to sustain governments' commitments to international solidarity and protection for the most at-risk children and youth.

Going forward, access to quality and continued education for displaced children and youth and those living in the harshest places on Earth will largely depend on the commitment of governments, leaders, and organizations toward education in emergencies and their ability to forge critical coalitions to shape global trends. The new Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies serves as one promising ally in the current landscape, aiming to motivate much-needed action. It plays an important catalytic role in facilitating joint action and collaboration across the triple nexus. Its three goals of growing demand for change, inspiring commitment, and boosting country-level impact are clear and focused and designed to contribute to tackling the pre- and post-Covid education crisis with a particular focus on the most at-risk children and youth.

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Petra Heusser   has worked for the past 14 years in the international humanitarian field for the protection of children, refugees and migrants. She has professional experience from field locations in Latin America, Africa and Asia and worked with NGOs and UN agencies. Prior to joining the Global Hub for Education in Emergencies as the Coordinator, Petra held the role of Deputy Coordinator at the UNICEF-led Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility, where she also worked to advance initiatives for increased collaboration between education and child protection in emergencies and deployed to over ten emergency contexts.