



## Crisis Education and Children with Disabilities

### What is the situation of children with disabilities in conflict and humanitarian crisis settings?

Millions of children around the world have their education disrupted due to conflict and natural disasters. Although all children in crisis situations are at risk of learning loss, children with disabilities are uniquely vulnerable to being permanently denied an education when their support systems are affected. Children with disabilities include those with physical, sensory, developmental, and cognitive conditions. In addition, conflicts and natural disasters may cause some children to acquire a disability due to physical injury, trauma, malnutrition, or preventable conditions, such as polio or tuberculosis.<sup>i</sup>

Conflicts and natural disasters pose unique challenges for children with disabilities, for example:

- Children with mobility difficulties are often unable to flee a crisis due to a lack of assistive devices and inaccessible terrain<sup>ii</sup>
- Children who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to hear warning announcements or communicate with humanitarian workers<sup>iii</sup>
- As a child flees a crisis, assistive devices such as wheelchairs may be left, lost, or damaged<sup>iv</sup>
- Children with disabilities may lose access to services such as education, healthcare, benefits, and sign language interpretation<sup>v</sup>
- Families may abandon children with disabilities while fleeing a crisis because they fear their claim for asylum could be rejected due to the child's disability<sup>vi</sup>

### What is the situation of inclusive education during emergencies and crises?

Schools provide many valuable services in addition to education during crisis situations. Such services include feeding, immunization, public health awareness efforts, and mental health and psychosocial support (MPHSS) services.<sup>vii</sup> School communities also protect children from sexual exploitation and from being recruited as child soldiers.<sup>viii</sup> However, many schools are not accessible to children with disabilities, preventing these children from accessing services and supports.<sup>ix</sup>

Examples of barriers children with disabilities encounter in crisis education include:

- School buildings, especially those selected to educate students temporarily during times of crisis, often lack accessible features such as ramps and accessible water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities<sup>x</sup>
- The lack of accessible transportation<sup>xi</sup> can make travel difficult from remote refugee settlements<sup>xii</sup> to schools
- Teachers may not be trained to educate children with disabilities<sup>xiii</sup>
- Long waiting lists may exist for placement in regular schools because of limited funding for disability-inclusive education<sup>xiv</sup>

Furthermore, many humanitarian efforts often do not actively plan for the inclusion of children with disabilities. For instance, only 20% of USAID solicitations for funding in 2012–2013 mandated the inclusion of people with disabilities.<sup>xv</sup>

## How are learners with disabilities affected by crisis?

As a result of a crisis, children with disabilities may become more at risk of being out of school. Families may keep children with disabilities at home for many reasons, including unsafe routes to school and fear that their child would be unable to flee if the school were attacked.<sup>xvi</sup> Children with disabilities who are out of school due to conflict may also be at risk of early marriage<sup>xvii</sup> or being forced to directly participate in armed conflict.<sup>xviii</sup>

Like their peers without disabilities, children with disabilities are susceptible to trauma after experiencing violent events.<sup>xix</sup> They may also experience poorer psychological wellbeing than their peers without disabilities due to disability discrimination.<sup>xx</sup> However, children with disabilities may not be able to access school-based MPHSS supports because of inaccessible environments and social exclusion.<sup>xxi</sup> Stigma surrounding mental health may also discourage children with disabilities and their families from seeking MPHSS services.<sup>xxii</sup>

## What can be done to improve education for learners with disabilities in crisis and conflict?

All stakeholders can improve the lives of learners with disabilities in crisis and conflict. Some suggestions are as follows:

- Donors should mandate the inclusion of learners with disabilities in all education-related funding proposals.
- Disability initiatives should specifically include children who become disabled due to crisis or humanitarian conflict.
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices should be implemented in instruction for schools in crisis settings to include children with disabilities and those experiencing trauma.
- Children with disabilities should be included in social and emotional learning (SEL) support programs.

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<sup>i</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2013). *State of the world's children: Children with disabilities*.

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<sup>ii</sup> Von der Assen, N., Euwema, M., & Cornielje, H. (2010). Including disabled children in psychological programmes in areas affected by armed conflict. *Intervention*, 8(1), 29–39.; United Nations Children's Fund. (2013). *State of the world's children: Children with disabilities*. <https://www.unicef.org/media/84886/file/SOWC-2013.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Takayama, K. (2017). Disaster relief and crisis intervention with Deaf communities: Lessons learned from the Japanese Deaf community. *Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation*, 16(4), 247–260.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1536710X.2017.1372241>; Human Rights Watch. (2015). *Central African Republic: Persons with disabilities left behind*. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting\\_resources/car0515\\_brochure\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/car0515_brochure_lowres.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2015).; United Nations Children's Fund. (2013).

<sup>v</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2013).; United Nations Children's Fund. (2017). *Including children with disabilities in humanitarian action: Education*. [https://inee.org/system/files/resources/UNICEF\\_Education\\_English.pdf](https://inee.org/system/files/resources/UNICEF_Education_English.pdf); Human Rights Watch. (2015).

<sup>vi</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2013).

<sup>vii</sup> Trani, J. F., Kett, M., Bakhshi, P. & Bailey, N. (2011). Disability, vulnerability, and citizenship: To what extent is education a protective mechanism for children with disabilities in countries affected by conflict? *Brown School Faculty Publications*, 36; United Nations Children's Fund. (2017).

<sup>viii</sup> Nicholai, S. & Triplehorn, C. (2003). *The role of education in protecting children in conflict*. Humanitarian Practice Network. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/96795/networkpaper042.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2017); Trani, et al. (2011).

<sup>x</sup> Trani, J et al. (2011).

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

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- <sup>xii</sup> Crock, M., Saul, S., McCallum, R., Smith-Khan, L., & Çorabatır, M. (2021). *Syrian refugees with disabilities in Jordan and Turkey* [Unpublished manuscript].
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