

Syria Country Spotlight

In this Spotlight, the main focus is on children affected by conflict.

Introduction

The Syrian conflict has created the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world today with almost 11 million people forced from their homes and 13.5 million inside Syria now in need of humanitarian assistance.¹ Currently 8.7 million people in Syria are unable to meet their basic food needs, 70% lack access to clean water, 5.3 million people need shelter support, 10 million people need livelihoods support and three in four Syrians are living in poverty.² However, it is the gross disregard for human rights and international humanitarian law that is characterizing the current conflict. Inside Syria 486,700 people are trapped in besieged areas with little access to humanitarian assistance including food and healthcare.³ One quarter of schools have been damaged, destroyed or are occupied, while 42% of the population lack access to healthcare, largely because clinics and hospitals have been attacked and destroyed. At least 654 health workers have been killed since the start of the conflict⁴.

Children are most affected by the extreme violence of the Syrian conflict, with thousands of children having been killed, maimed or injured as a result of indiscriminate or targeted attacks, as well as being detained, tortured and forced to take up arms. Children are at risk of hazardous labour, recruitment by armed groups, violence, and early marriage, with one in four children now at risk of developing a mental health disorder.⁵ Intertwined with these complex protection concerns is the denial of access to education for Syrian children, with more than two million children in Syria now out of school and 4,000 schools having been attacked since the start of the conflict. Consequently Syria now faces a situation where a whole generation of children are at risk of losing out on their right to education, with long term impacts for their development, their communities and the future of the whole country.

The situation inside Syria is highly volatile with numerous national, regional and global actors involved in the conflict, and rapidly shifting frontlines and population movements on the ground. This context makes it largely impossible to make broad statements that are applicable to the whole of Syria. This Spotlight is intended to provide a snapshot of the education situation based on Save the Children's programmatic experience and field analysis; we recognise that this may not be the situation at all times, across all areas of

¹ UNOCHA, *Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report*, 2015

² UNOCHA, *Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report*, 2015

³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Overview of hard-to-reach and besieged Locations (As of Jan 2016)

⁴ UNOCHA, *Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report*, 2015

⁵ UNOCHA, *Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report*, 2015

the country but hope to raise the key challenges facing children in their ability to access education. Given the current security situation and Save the Children's access within Syria, it should also be noted that it is not possible to conduct national level advocacy, and thus the national campaign for Syria will focus on increasing grassroots advocacy on issues related to access to education as well as strengthening global level advocacy related to the protection of schools and the need to ensure better funding for education activities in Syria.

Barriers to education

A downward spiral

Prior to the conflict, Syria was a middle income country with good access to basic services. After five years of conflict, all development indicators have rapidly declined so that the near 100% pre-conflict school enrolment rates have plummeted to less than 50%, with enrolment rates amongst displaced children even lower at 17%. An assessment undertaken by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in June 2015 has shown that only 33% of assessed villages in Syria reported all children were in school,⁶ and in Aleppo, where 40% of schools have been attacked, enrolment dropped from 97.5% in 2011 to less than 10% in 2013, and is now expected to be even lower.

There are multiple reasons why so many children in Syria are now out of school linked to the highly volatile, fractious and dangerous context in which they live. However, what is clear is that the ongoing conflict has dramatically reversed development progress and the near universal school enrolment in Syria. The continued denial of education threatens to exacerbate the cycle of conflict and de-development in the country and across the region, as young people face the prospect of futures without employment and the ever increasing possibility of recruitment into armed groups.

Attacks on education

Between 2011 and 2014 more than half of all attacks on schools worldwide occurred in Syria, and on an ongoing basis, schools, students and teachers are under threat. Since the conflict began, more than 4,000 schools have been destroyed or damaged in attacks, including airstrikes, barrel bombs, shelling and through the use of Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED).⁷ Save the Children's own schools have not been immune from the impact of the conflict. Over the last two years, Save the Children has tracked incidents of attacks on and military use of the 53 schools supported through Save the Children programs in Aleppo, Idleb and Hama governorates, reporting 51 separate incidents. These include 32 airstrikes affecting Save the Children supported schools, as well as incidents of

⁶ <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/assessment-needs-and-humanitarian-situation-within-syria-thematic>

⁷ Save the Children analysis of data in the UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict for the following years: 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015.

arson, the forced entry of armed men into schools, shootings and threats against teachers and students.

The cost of replacing damaged, destroyed or occupied schools and lost school equipment is vast; in March 2015 Save the Children estimated it could be as high as £2 billion (\$3 billion), and is rising as schools continue to be put out of use by the conflict. While not as well documented, there have also been numerous incidents of the military use of schools.⁸ This not only denies children access to their classrooms, but places schools at increased risk and deters students from coming to class for fear of attack because of the schools' association with armed forces or groups.

The destruction and occupation of schools in Syria is denying children safe access to education because their learning spaces have been taken away, and also because parents are too afraid to let their children attend school and children themselves are too traumatized to go back to class. In addition, as more schools are put out of use, those that are still operating are becoming more and more overcrowded, and children are being forced to travel longer and longer distances to find a school where there is space for them to learn. This is creating serious security concerns, as children have to cross multiple checkpoints, and face the risk of injury, kidnap and detention on the route between home and school. This explains why unsafe routes to schools are reported to be one of the main reasons why children are out of school.⁹ As well as the threat of military conflict, schools in Syria are also subject to looting and vandalism. Teachers are vulnerable to abuse or armed interference, and it is not uncommon, for instance, for armed men to enter school premises threatening the wellbeing of the students and undermining schools' protective status.

Curriculum and school environment

In Government-held areas of Syria, schools are still teaching the standard Government of Syria curriculum. However, in opposition-held areas, there is a split between schools using the Government of Syria (GoS) curriculum, the Interim Government of Syria (IGoS) religious curriculum, and even the Libyan and Jordanian curriculum. Recently the authorities in the Kurdish held areas instigated three parallel curricula; Kurdish, Arabic and Assyrian. Ostensibly this was to ensure children had access to education in their mother tongue. but issues related to ensuring there are sufficient teachers trained in these curricula and the certification of these curricula, are still outstanding.

⁸ “The military use of schools also continued, with nine verified cases: YPG/YPJ (4), FSA (3) and ISIL (2). ISIL appropriated schools for child indoctrination, and in late 2014 all schools in ISIL-controlled Aleppo, Deir-ezZor and Raqqa were closed pending adoption of a “modified” curriculum.” <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/syria/>

⁹ UNOCHA, *Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report*, 2015

Certificates issued in areas controlled by opposition groups are not recognised in other parts of the country or in other countries in which students might wish to further their education, and presently pupils are only able to sit exams and obtain the paperwork they need to continue their education in government schools. In May-June 2015, nearly half a million students in Syria attended the national end of year exams for ninth and twelfth grades, and at least 20% of children were forced to cross active lines of conflict just to take their exams, placing their lives at serious risk. The previous year, on 29 May 2014, 153 students were kidnapped in Ain al-Arab as they returned from taking their end-of-year exams in Aleppo. Around 1,000 children had been forced to make this perilous journey to take the official school exams because they were not being administered in their town.

If children choose not to take the risky journey to get their learning certified, their education simply comes to an end. The certification problem has led to an increase in school dropout and lower enrolment rates, a trend likely to continue until this issue is resolved. This is being made more complicated by the fact that various versions of curricula are being used by different education actors. Finding alternative solutions to certification must therefore be a vital component of any education response that claims to support children's learning and development as well as their protection.

As in many other fragile contexts around the world, education in Syria is often used as a propaganda tool to spread the ideology of the various parties to the conflict. There have been frequent incidents of armed groups attempting to interfere with the curriculum and running of schools by for example seeking to separate male and female students and teachers. For example, in August 2014 the Islamic State (IS) reportedly issued a statement to all education and teaching institutions in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor governorates, including references to abolishing the current Ministry of Education and implementing a series of structural curricular changes. These included the abolition of subjects such as history, physics, chemistry, musical and artistic education and sport.¹⁰ The teaching hours for math have been reduced, and geography presents the Arab region from an Islamic perspective. References to the Syrian Arab Republic have been banned, and patriotic anthems and lyrics have been declared as "polytheism and blasphemy". All pictures deemed inappropriate by ISIS have been stripped from textbooks.¹¹

The lack of separation between the delivery of education and the various parties to the conflict means that even when there are no direct threats to students, the knowledge that

¹⁰ http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/696

¹¹ UNICEF (2015). *Curriculum, Accreditation and Certification for Syrian Children in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt*. New York: UNICEF.

schools are being scrutinized and modes of schooling interfered with, may be sufficient to deter children from attending class.

Displacement

As a result of the ongoing conflict, Syria is experiencing the largest displacement crisis in the world; not only have more than 4 million Syrians – half of them children - fled the country, mainly settling in neighbouring countries, but inside Syria there are 6.5 million people – including 2.8 million children - who have been forced from their homes, with many displaced on multiple occasions. It is not uncommon for children displaced by the conflict to repeatedly drop out of school as their families move around, interrupting their education and each time eroding the likelihood that they will re-enrol, resulting in students losing out on months if not years of schooling. If these children are to return to school and complete their education they need access to specialist support in the form of psychosocial assistance, as well as catch up classes, access to accelerated learning programmes, vocational skills training and life skills classes.

Only 17% of displaced children are enrolled in school¹² and Save the Children's own education programme data shows that the drop-out rate from schools in IDP camps and in areas with high numbers of displaced people is twice as high as in other schools. There are several reasons for this, including overcrowding in schools, lack of paperwork to allow children to enrol in new schools, financial pressures of displaced families that may see children being compelled to work rather than attend school, as well as heightened psychosocial pressures as a result of the displacement and conflict they have experienced.

In addition, as the displacement crisis has deepened, increasing numbers of people are moving to camps or into vacant buildings, including damaged schools, with 1,000 schools currently being used as collective shelters for displaced people, hampering the ability of children to access education.

Quality of education

Displaced children who do try to enter school in their new location are routinely turned away because the classes are full. The influx of new families coupled with the destruction of school buildings means that many schools are now routinely operating a double or triple shift system, putting enormous strain on limited resources and overworked teachers. The Ministry of Education has reportedly lost more than 52,500 teaching staff from its ranks since the beginning of the crisis – 22% of the pre-conflict workforce – although the true number, including those from opposition-held areas, is thought to be much higher. In many instances, teachers who are still working in schools may not have had formal training and specifically do not have the skills to support highly traumatised children. This affects the quality of education children have access to and is discouraging children from attending

¹² Syria Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA), December 2013, p.33

class, even when schools exist. Even when teachers are well trained and supported, the fact they are dealing with such large class sizes and such a wide range of complex issues is affecting the delivery of education. An assessment¹³ shows that the lack of teachers and lack of school material was a key barrier to children's education in Syria.¹⁴

While an unknown number of teachers have fled the country – or have been killed or injured in the conflict – many others have been forced to give up the profession for financial reasons. In areas no longer under Government of Syria control, the government is not providing teacher salaries. This means that local communities are forced to try and find funding to allow teachers to continue their work, or individuals have to accept to work for free. In Kurdish controlled areas of Hasakeh, the development of a new curriculum by the Kurdish authorities in mid-2015 led the Government of Syria to remove financial support from schools where they had been paying teacher salaries. While the Kurdish authorities have attempted to fill the gap and provide remuneration to these teachers, gaps remain which have forced some teachers to seek other income opportunities.

Apart from the need for schools to be rehabilitated following attacks and for additional classrooms in functional schools, there is now also a shortage of other facilities such as libraries and laboratories and IT equipment. This can particularly impact secondary education for older children. There is also a lack of sufficient classroom furniture, adequate water and sanitation facilities and heating for the winter months across all schools. Robust school safety strategies must be in place to mitigate the impact of conflict in the classroom including risk-reduction measures such as planning for physical safety and practising school safety drills. Given the fact that so many children are coping with psychosocial distress, it is vitally important that schools are protected as zones of peace but also that they are child friendly, equipped with the resources needed to encourage children to attend class and offer the students appropriate psychosocial support.

Psychosocial distress

While the physical destruction of school buildings and equipment clearly restricts children's access to education, the psychological impact of conflict on boys and girls significantly affects their ability to learn and develop academically, and is much harder to overcome.

As a result of the traumatic events that children in Syria have experienced, teachers are reporting that children in class are exhibiting emotional and behavioural problems including being easily scared, frequently unhappy, aggression towards other students or isolation from their peers, and an inability to concentrate in class or respond to the teachers' instructions. Similar signs of anxiety and stress are displayed at home with

¹³ REACH/UNICEF, June 2015. Eastern Aleppo Food Security And Livelihoods Household Assessment Report, p56

¹⁴ UNOCHA, June 2015. Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report

children experiencing problems sleeping, bad dreams, bed wetting, loss of appetite and heightened anger.

Children who are experiencing such psychosocial trauma are less likely to continue with education, or if they are in class, are more likely to experience difficulties in progressing academically, which in itself may push children to drop out of school. It is thus essential that teaching staff are appropriately trained to be able to support traumatised children, with psychosocial care built into the school's normal routine to enable vulnerable children to continue with their education. As well as having well trained teachers who can offer children the right support, parents must also be supported to ensure their own mental wellbeing and that of their children.

As well as ensuring that traumatised children do not drop out of school, support must be provided to children who are already out of school to enable them to re-enter the classroom. Children's well-being is at risk if they are not learning and not in school, as a lack of sustained access to education potentially creates a negative cycle of isolation and psychosocial distress. It is for this reason that a full spectrum package of psychosocial support is required, including training and activities specifically for parents and teachers, as well as targeted support for both out of school and in school children to keep them learning and prevent the escalation of psychosocial issues.

Families' financial vulnerabilities

The crisis has created and worsened vulnerabilities in Syria. One in four Syrians now live in poverty. As a result, child labour is a major, and growing, concern. The types of labour that children are involved in include smuggling goods across borders, begging, selling items on the street, collecting and selling oil, and working in other forms of manual labour, as well as working with armed groups. This labour is often exploitative and hazardous, with children aged between 9 and 16 years old working up to 12 hours a day for little pay, and with the fear of physical violence at work. As with most child protection concerns inside Syria, the extent of the problem is unclear, although anecdotal evidence suggests this is a serious pervasive problem, which is rapidly increasing as a result of increased strains on families' financial situations, and the uncertainty caused by the cycle of conflict and displacement.

For many children, school is therefore no longer an option as they are required to work to help support their family. Others frequently drop in and out of education depending on their families' financial circumstances and their ability to find work. On the other hand, it has been noted that the lack of education – especially secondary and tertiary – or the poor quality of education on offer, is actually driving older children into hazardous labour as they and their parents feel that it is providing them with some structure and skills

training when this is not available elsewhere. In Aleppo, many families judged it more valuable for children to work than to get low quality education.¹⁵

Policy analysis – how education can continue in Syria

International support to avoid a lost generation

Education is chronically underfunded as part of humanitarian aid and Syria is no exception. On average, the Syrian humanitarian appeals have been only 50% funded, but education fares far worse, receiving on average 32% of the amount requested over the past 4 years.

Possible graph using this data:

Education appeals	Requested	Funding	Coverage
2012	13,530,800	1,263,974	9%
2013	45,720,901	37,525,820	82%
2014	103,163,335	38,368,122	37%
2015 (as of 25/11/2015)	224,000,000	45,695,569	20%

Education was under-prioritised by donors from the onset of the crisis: education received only 9% of the amount requested in 2012 as part of the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Plan (SHARP). In 2013, education exceptionally received 82% of the funding requested, but there is evidence that the needs may have been significantly underestimated. The initial 2013 SHARP estimated that only 567,000 children were in need of education assistance in Syria, and whilst the number of beneficiaries targeted was increased to 1.2 million in May 2013 as part of the revised SHARP, this seems remarkably low when we consider that the UN reported that by the end of 2012, one in five schools in Syria were damaged, destroyed or being used as IDP shelters, and 1.6 million children were displaced and faced significant barriers to accessing education. Ever since, the proportion of education needs covered by funding has been declining, and with only a month left before the end of the current appeal period, education has received only 20% of the funding requested as part of the 2015 Syria HRP.

To respond to the lack of prioritization of education as part of the humanitarian response, the No Lost Generation Initiative (NLGI) was launched in September 2013 with the aim to galvanise support from the international community to fund education and protection inside Syria and in the region, and protect the futures of an entire generation of Syrian children. Since its launch, the NLGI was successful in getting 440,000 more children inside Syria enrolled in school in 2013/2014 than in 2012/2013, but progress has stalled for the

¹⁵ REACH/UNICEF, June 2015. Eastern Aleppo Food Security And Livelihoods Household Assessment Report, p56

past year as the number of out-of-school children inside Syria remains the same, with 1 million more at risk of dropping out. Without any centralized tracker for NLG funding, it is also difficult to estimate how much funding was raised by the initiative, and the recent decline in proportion of funding received for education indicates that it may not have played a significant role in increasing support for education inside Syria.

Programmatic approach

Save the Children is working directly, and through partners, in Syria to provide conflict affected children and their families with access to immediate assistance and longer-term support to build resilience and aid recovery. Since 2012, Save the Children programs have helped support more than 1.6 million people, including 1.09 million children. Save the Children is currently supporting 53 learning spaces, providing teacher incentives and training, providing learning materials and recreational equipment, and rehabilitating war damaged classrooms.

It must be noted that many of the areas where Save the Children works do not have formal governance structures with which NGOs can engage, and the dynamics of the conflict means that it is not possible to undertake national level advocacy. Thus the focus of this section will not be on policy level change but on what education interventions need to be scaled up, based on Save the Children's operational experience, in order to increase access to quality, safe education for Syrian children.

Community-led service provision

Ensuring robust community engagement is critical in a context like Syria. This is especially relevant in areas currently controlled by armed opposition groups and where Ministries are no longer functioning, and there has been an erosion of traditional governance bodies with which NGOs would normally engage. In the absence of governorate-level support, NGOs have been working with local or village councils to identify needs and priorities, ensuring ground-level support for NGO activities and responding to incidents that threaten the provision of services. In some areas where governorate level civil structures do exist, these are often new or under-resourced, or linked to dominant armed groups. There is therefore a need for more localised support to community-based structures to be able to deliver local services, with the support of NGOs.

Save the Children has taken this approach to its support for education in northern Syria. As well as training and supporting teachers, and providing hardware such as books and desk, Save the Children works to build and strengthen community-led education systems. Community involvement and ownership enhances accountability, facilitates the identification of education issues particular to the local context and ways to address them,

mobilises local resources and supports the maintenance of education services in the long-term. This is particularly important for ensuring sustainability in service provision, as for example, building the capacity of local communities to deliver services ensures that this can continue even if NGOs cannot work in specific areas and ensures that services can move with populations if they are displaced by the conflict.

This approach is also critical in mitigating risks to students and teachers. Save the Children works with communities to develop safety and security plans which could include relocating the school to a safer location, making adaptations to learning spaces such as creating safe rooms in basements or replacing glass in windows with plastic, conducting mock evacuation drills with children, and creating plans to ensure that education can be continued even if a school is no longer functional by, for example, shifting to home based schooling.

Support for education staff

As the conflict in Syria has intensified, so have the attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure including schools, threatening the lives of children and denying them the right to education, and leading NGOs to call for an increase in funding to make adaptations to school infrastructure to try and mitigate risk. However, of equal importance to ensuring the ability of communities to access services by providing classrooms, is the need to support key workers such as doctors, nurses and teachers with capacity building, training and appropriate remuneration. This support is critically important as access to services can be maintained even if infrastructure is destroyed and communities displaced. However, this support must go beyond ensuring funding for skills training. It must also include activities to ensure key workers and communities are involved in the design of projects to ensure that they are able to adapt to changing contexts through, for example, the development of contingency plans to shift services following an attack.

Save the Children is focused on delivering support to teachers through its education programme by training teachers to deliver quality education, as well as supporting them to deliver alternative education services. These include, where necessary, distance and/or home-based learning, and training of teachers in conflict-sensitive approaches to education including the provision of psychosocial support to students, as well as paying teacher incentives. Longer-term psychosocial distress can be minimised when teachers and communities are empowered to address issues around children's well-being in a way that also builds resilience to traumatic experiences, therefore donors should support the provision of psychosocial support, mentoring and professional development, appropriate remuneration and other measures that contribute to the well-being and retention of teachers.

Integrated approach

In Syria, many families have now exhausted all viable coping strategies, which impacts on their children's education as they may not be able to afford to send them to school or may need them to work to support the family. Failure to address the financial needs of families and to build their resilience will mean an increase in the dangers that children face and a continued climb in the number of children dropping out of school. Improving families' resilience and reducing dependence on food aid can be achieved by funding livelihoods interventions, especially those that support agricultural productivity. These may include the provision of labour opportunities, agricultural inputs and support to repair damaged infrastructure, as well as ensuring the delivery of immediate assistance to the most vulnerable families as a means of removing children from situations of harmful labour. Wherever possible there should be an integrated approach towards livelihoods programming, in particular with education and child protection programmes, to reduce the need for families to remove their children from school to partake in labour activities while also providing adolescents with suitable skills training to allow them to enter the labour market after they have completed their education.

Measures to address Syrian children's psychological wellbeing as part of an integrated education and child protection programme are an essential component of any response. They must be included alongside education measures in order to improve children's ability to learn, as children's well-being is at risk if they are not learning and not in school. A lack of sustained access to education potentially creates a negative cycle of isolation and psychosocial distress. Given the interconnectedness of child protection and education, attention should be paid to placing education at the heart of a holistic approach to improving children's protection. This could include practical initiatives such as using schools as community centres where protection issues can be addressed, and health and nutrition programming can be rolled out.

Recommendations

- All parties to the conflict must ensure that schools and learning spaces in Syria are protected as zones of peace to ensure the safe continuation of children's education. Where attacks do occur, these must be monitored, perpetrators held accountable and the UN must work with the parties to develop and implement time-bound actions to prevent and end violations.
- The UN and the international community should continue to push for an immediate end to the conflict to ensure all children inside Syria are protected and their right to education can be fulfilled.
- Donors must prioritize and fully fund education programming, short-term humanitarian funding must be complemented and gradually replaced by longer-term funding to ensure continuity of children's access to quality education to allow NGOs/CBOs to conduct capacity building work with community structures to ensure the sustainability of education activities. With funding also sufficiently flexible

to respond to the changing dynamics on the ground, allowing for example activities to shift as populations move, while also being of sufficient duration

- As well as investing in ‘bricks and mortar’ activities, there should be increased attention on the need to train, support and ensure remuneration for more teachers in Syria. This will ensure children have access to quality education in an environment where their emotional needs are met and, teachers can deliver alternative education services including, where necessary, distance and/or home-based learning. Because of the psychosocial impact of the conflict on Syrian children and the many risk factors they face as a result of the situation they are living in, the integration of child protection and education programming inside Syria must be given priority and scaled up wherever possible.
- Acknowledging the impact that families’ diminishing financial resources are having on children’s ability to attend school, greater attention should be paid to supporting livelihood activities inside Syria to reduce the need for children to drop out of school to engage in potentially harmful labour or in early marriage.
- NLG champions should develop and agree on a new “No Lost Generation” strategy for 2016 that identifies, tracks and addresses the education and protection needs of children inside Syria.
- Efforts should be made for children to be taught in a curriculum they understand that results in certification that ensures that their learning counts.