

POLICY BRIEF:
**Creating Credible
Education Data Spaces
in Northwest Syria**

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co- construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

Disclaimer

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Key policy messages

Drawing on a detailed review of data systems in NW Syria (DSNWS) conducted by the ERICC research team, this policy brief highlights the key challenges around data systems in Northwest Syria (NW Syria) and makes policy recommendations to education stakeholders in the region:

- **Establish** independent spaces for producing and disseminating education data which will:
 - be owned by local institutions with inclusive governance systems, functioning as public institutions independent of current political governments
 - build on successful initiatives, promoting further cooperation among interested actors to expand capacities and reduce conflict-related risks.
- **Strengthen** the capacity of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) as a comprehensive and high-quality data system that could be a core institution in the proposed space.
- **Apply** participatory approaches to increase credibility and trust in the data produced, making it publicly available without compromising privacy.
- **Adopt** transdisciplinary approaches to produce multi-themed data, crucial for understanding complex conflict-related phenomena and educational processes.
- **Adhere** to high research ethics, which is essential at all stages of data production and use.
- **Produce** comprehensive data covering all of Syria or modify existing data to create comparable databases to bridge gaps across conflict lines.
- **Ensure** consistency with international data standards and partnerships with global technical bodies.
- **Utilise** new technologies to enhance quality and security.
- **Diversify** funding sources, as a crucial factor for sustainability, to:
 - shift from humanitarian to development strategies, create solidarity economy initiatives, develop crowdfunding platforms, and encourage volunteerism.

A. Introduction

There is growing awareness of the importance of producing and sharing reliable data to support evidence-based education policies and programmes. The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution generates massive amounts of metadata from various sources, yet this comes with challenges regarding the quality and relevance of the available data. In conflict contexts such as Syria, additional complexities arise concerning the purpose, scope, process, dissemination, transparency, and ethical considerations of data.

The ERICC programme aims to build and maximise uptake of evidence on the most effective approaches to education delivery in conflict and protracted crisis contexts. The desired impacts of the programme include producing research that drives: (1) more robust evidence-based policies; (2) more effective education interventions; and (3) better value-for-money programmes in conflict and protracted crises. ERICC is focused on building and maximising the uptake of evidence on the most effective approaches to education delivery in conflict and protracted crisis contexts.

The assessment of education data systems is a crucial component of the ERICC framework. The collection and analysis of data supports the education process by providing rigorous evidence for planning, implementation and evaluation, and enhances access to information, and accountability.

Based on the DSNWS paper, this policy brief addresses the key challenges involved in the effective collection and analysis of education data in NW Syria. It then goes on to explore policy options to create spaces that foster independent, high-quality and accessible education data to improve the education system and education outcomes for children in NW Syria.

1. Context of conflict and education data systems

The societal movement across Syria in 2011 was a revolt against political oppression, governance failures, inequality and marginalisation (SCPR, 2020). The Syrian government responded with a military-security approach, characterised by the use of armed violence, collective punishment, and the manipulation of identities for political control. This led to a brutal political tyranny, injustice, and gross violations of human rights and freedoms. The involvement of regional and international powers played a crucial role in militarising the movement and deepening societal divisions and dependence on external forces (SCPR, 2023). The intractable conflict has resulted in the fragmentation of the country by various political actors, creating different political and socioeconomic systems. The ongoing instability, coupled with the brutality of the conflict – including grave violations against civilians, destruction of infrastructure, targeting of health and education facilities, and forced displacement – has prevented the emergence of stable and consistent institutions needed to govern the education sector (SCPR, 2023).

NW Syria can be divided into two distinct regions:

- **The SiG region:** Controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SiG) and backed by Turkey, this area includes rural Aleppo (Azaz, Al-Bab, Jarablus, Mare', Afrin, Jandairis), parts of northern Raqqqa, and northern Hasakah. The SiG region has 1.9 million people, including 0.58 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and a basic education enrolment rate of 45% (ACU 2023; HNO 2023; SCPR 2023). Education processes here are supervised by Turkey through its education directorates, and coordinated in neighbouring Turkish cities.
- **The SSG region:** Controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), this area includes most of Idlib, parts of western rural Aleppo, and a small northern part of rural Latakia. The SSG region has 2.7 million people, including 1.1 million IDPs, and a basic education enrolment rate of 44% (ACU 2023; HNO 2023; SCPR 2023). Although the SSG largely governs the education sector, it is highly dependent on humanitarian support. More than half of the children in NW Syria have been deprived of education since the conflict started 13 years ago.

The 'Research Agenda' produced by the ERICC NW Syria Team shows that the conflict has led to distortion and politicisation of the governance of education; a shortage of qualified teachers; variations in curriculum, and a decline in the quality of education. Education facilities have been either significantly damaged or repurposed, often serving as shelters for displaced individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating earthquake of February 2023 have further exacerbated challenges to education, causing school closures without viable alternatives being put in place for continued learning, and health concerns with minimal preventive measures.

Additionally, lack of security and increasing poverty levels have raised school dropout rates (ACU, 2023). The deterioration of public education services has led to the expansion of the role of civil society and the private sector in education, though their contribution remains modest compared with the overall substantial education deficit. Low enrolment rates in basic education indicate that millions of children are deprived of education opportunities (to varying degrees) (ACU, 2023).

2. The main data systems in NW Syria

- **SiG region:** Administrative education data is collected by the Turkish Ministry of Education through local councils and shared with SiG in aggregated form. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) collect project-based data, mostly focusing on informal education in specific areas, and share it with SiG and donors.
- **SOG region:** The Ministry of Education governs the sector, producing administrative data through its departments. NGOs have more autonomy in data collection and share data with donors and the Education Cluster (led by the UN). However, these data are neither systematic nor comprehensive. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and private companies also collect project-specific data, which they share with donors and occasionally with the Syria Cross-Border Education Cluster and education departments.
- The only comprehensive and systematic data collection in both regions, beyond administrative data, is conducted by the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). Though technically independent, the ACU is registered under the Syrian National Coalition umbrella. The ACU publishes detailed results and shares data with education departments and the Education Cluster. Additionally, the Education Cluster, led by UNICEF and Save the Children, coordinates the Northwest Syria Response, involving many NGOs and donor representatives. The Education Cluster collects data and information from NGOs and relies on data from the ACU, the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), and the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Plan (HNAP).

B. Education Data Systems challenges in NW SYRIA

The DSNWS paper applies the ERICC conceptual framework. This focuses on identifying and explaining education systems and processes that affect children's outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings. In particular, this is where the state's function is disrupted and has become unsustainable to maintain and operate existing education systems (Kim et al. 2022). Data systems across the educational provision in NW Syria were mapped to inform the DSNWS paper as part of the research agenda process. Mapping activity included semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to identify what data were available and what gaps in data exist in relation to both host communities and IDP camps in NW Syria.

The study covered entities managing data collected from Idlib and rural Aleppo governorates (DSNWS, 2024). The results of the DSNWS paper showed that there are several challenges in relation to the data systems for education across NW Syria. These challenges include but are not limited to the divide between public and private provision, the dependency on humanitarian aid, and the lack of capacities and poor transparencies. This section explains these challenges and their effect on the data systems for education.

The education data systems suffer from weak and fragmented governance. During the conflict, the official education data system stopped working in much of NW Syria as the Syrian regime lost control of the region. The de facto authorities established administrative data systems to gather education data from schools. These emerging administrative data systems were set up by various and sometimes conflicting regulating actors, and this has resulted in a lack of integration and/or coordination between the different data systems in the region. Additionally, these administrative systems are strictly centralised in both SiG and SSG regions, and also lack transparency and accountability, which has jeopardised the quality of the data produced and restricted data-sharing.

Furthermore, there are other education data systems initiated by humanitarian actors delivering educational provision, including UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs, as well as research centres and private companies. These systems have been subject to several challenges, such as the security and political constraints imposed by de facto actors, as well as a lack of coordination between and within donors, UN agencies, and NGOs. Furthermore, the operation of different data systems in NW Syria has been impacted by shortages in personnel and qualified experts, together with a scarcity of resources.

Another challenge facing the effective operation of education data systems is limitation of geographical and thematic scope. The impact of this is that there are gaps in data across the main data systems in NW Syria regarding accessibility, quality, continuity and coherence. For instance, many aspects of the quality of education are missing from most of the datasets, such as the quality of curricula, and the relations within schools between teachers and students and administration staff. The ACU, as an exception, is the most comprehensive dataset in terms of its scope and coverage of the aspects of the quality of education.

Moreover, few data systems cover continuity across cohorts of children, or educational outcomes at local and policy level. Manahel, an education programme in NW Syria delivered by an INGO, is one exception in terms of the assessment of outcomes regarding reading and mathematics, although this had limitations in relation to geographical area and age scope. It is worth mentioning that most of the data systems concentrate on basic education rather than secondary and higher education or non-formal learning. Additionally, the data relating to the context of conflict is limited, with a lack of data on the conditions that might impact on the rates of children dropping out of education, and the impact of poverty, displacement and lack of security on drivers of learning and children's outcomes.

The methodological challenges of the way that data systems are implemented is critical in NW Syria. For example, there is limited data that is produced through participatory approaches with children, teachers and communities, and/or using qualitative methods to identify the dynamics and causality of needs and challenges. Furthermore, representative surveys are only rarely used to capture the challenges that 'out-of-school' children face. Finally, the quality of data varies between the data systems as not all actors implement formal protocols that consider codes of conduct and quality assurance.

A key challenge is the limited dissemination and sharing of results. Data-sharing faces many restrictions and this leads to poor transparency and cooperation. For example, the administrative data are not published, and are shared only within a limited number of stakeholders. Additionally, there are very few NGOs/donors that have published their data, although many projects produce data and share it with the Education Cluster, UN agencies and sometimes with education directorates. This has limited the impact of the work of the NGOs and donors in terms of gathering data for needs

assessment or impact evaluation. The ACU is an exceptional case where the detailed results have been published in comprehensive reports, and they have shared the data with interested stakeholders.

Finally, the dependency of data systems on humanitarian funds causes several challenges in relation to sustainability, independence and coherence. This dependency has affected the production and dissemination of education data and created different interests and therefore competition in relation to education data between civil society, UN Agencies and non-state actors. Also, the focus on humanitarian needs, for example the concentration on short-term versus longer-term education needs, dominates the production of data. The potential drop in humanitarian funds threatens the sustainability of current data systems and impedes investment in good governance data producers and their long-term capacities.

Given the challenges for the education data systems operating in NW Syria, this policy brief recommends that education authorities, civil society organisations and donors invest in independent and accountable initiatives to produce quality education data and evidence and establish a robust mechanism to share the data in order to implement the most appropriate education policies and programmes.

C. Policy options

Although many challenges remain in relation to the production and analysis of meaningful and useful data in NW Syria, many stakeholders have launched initiatives to address the absence of public institutions and the lack of human resources. Non-state actors have established ministries of education and education directorates, creating administrative education data systems. Donors, UN agencies and civil society organisations have also initiated efforts to collect and disseminate education data and indicators, most notably through the ACU and the Education Cluster. However, it is vital that the data collection and management processes follow high ethical standards and data is harmonised, accessible and shared for effective planning, implementation and evaluation of policy and programme interventions.

The following policy options are recommended for effective education data systems in NW Syria:

1. Expand independent spaces and develop institutional capacities and practices to improve education data systems in terms of ethics, governance, scope, methods, quality, accessibility, transparency and accountability.

The proposed independent spaces for producing and disseminating education data are an effective response to the growing interest in accessing quality education data from various local and external stakeholders, including parents, civil society, teachers, UN agencies, education directorates, and donors. Given the ongoing conflict and the need to ensure the independence of these spaces, they should be owned by local institutions that form inclusive governance systems and aim to serve the public good. They should function like public institutions with long-term strategies, and remaining independent from the current political governments. This quasi-public role ensures that the spaces are not fragmented like NGOs and are independent of political actors.

2. Strengthen the capacity of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) as a comprehensive and high-quality data system.

The ACU serves as an example of a comprehensive and high-quality data system in NW Syria, publishing detailed results and sharing data with educational directorates and the Education Cluster. The ACU could be a core institution within the proposed space, given its experience in dealing with various actors and stakeholders. However, it needs to expand its capacity to negotiate with political actors and donors.

3. Apply participatory approaches to increase credibility and trust in the data produced, making it publicly available without compromising privacy.

Engaging interested stakeholders such as parents, communities, teachers, children, and civil society initiatives in the governance of these spaces enhances their independence and facilitates the building of equal partnerships with UN agencies, donors, and educational directorates. Adopting participatory approaches enhances the space's credibility and the trust in the data produced. The space will minimise duplication over data production, as data, which avoids compromising participants' privacy, will be made publicly available.

4. Adopt ethical transdisciplinary approaches to produce multi-themed data (economic, social, institutional, demographical, environmental), crucial for understanding complex conflict-related phenomena and educational processes.

The data system should adopt transdisciplinary approaches and produce multi-themed data and evidence. This is crucial for conducting context analysis, understanding the complex conflict-related conditions, and identifying the factors that hinder or promote educational processes, drivers and outcomes. All stages of data production and use must adhere to high research ethics.

5. Produce comprehensive data covering all of Syria and ensure consistency with international data standards and partnerships with global technical bodies; and utilise new technology to ensure data quality and security.

The influence of data systems will increase by bridging gaps across conflict lines through data that covers all of Syria or by modifying available data from other regions to create comparable databases. Additionally, the space should ensure consistency with international standards for data systems and build partnerships with global technical bodies. New technologies and tools are essential for enhancing data quality and overcoming security constraints.

6. Diversify funding sources to ensure data sustainability and shift from humanitarian to development strategies to enhance solidarity economy initiatives, develop crowdfunding platforms, and encourage volunteerism.

The sustainability of funding is a crucial factor for these spaces. It is important to diversify funding sources, including shifting from humanitarian to development strategies to secure long-term resources, creating solidarity economy initiatives to support research and data systems, developing crowdfunding platforms, and encouraging volunteerism among younger generations.

The independent data space will capitalise on successful initiatives and promote further cooperation among interested actors to expand capacities and minimise conflict-related constraints and risks.

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