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EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES  
EVIDENCE FOR ACTION



POLICY BRIEF

# Supporting Quality Decision-Making for Children in Crisis

Results and Recommendations from a Field-Mapping Study  
of Stakeholders' Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research  
Practices and Needs

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## BACKGROUND

Nearly 62.5 million children are out of school in 32 countries affected by conflict.<sup>1</sup> Those in school often face poor quality and multiple risks that prevent them from regularly attending and completing school, and from learning the academic and social-emotional skills critical for successful futures. Globally, there are approximately 411 million children who despite being in school are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.<sup>2</sup>

Solutions often focus on innovative and increased funding for education, but greater investments alone will be insufficient to ensure crisis-affected children are in school, safe and learning. To truly achieve academic and social-emotional learning outcomes for children, we need more and better evidence—about how educational programs in crisis contexts are implemented, and the quality of these services; and about what programs are working, for whom, under what circumstances and at what cost to achieve holistic learning and development outcomes for children. This information, generated using rigorous research methods, can shine a light on the most urgent problems and offer solutions for reaching the most number of crisis-affected children with the greatest impact at the lowest cost.

The evidence base in education in crisis settings is weak and fragmented—a 2015 review found only five experimental studies on education in crisis-affected

countries. While there are commendable new efforts underway to build and improve it, we still lack a systematic understanding about what kinds of evidence are seen as most valuable across stakeholder groups; the greatest barriers stakeholders perceive to building an evidence base; and the specific child outcomes stakeholders prioritize. Without this information, the education community risks investing scarce resources in the wrong things, thereby continuing to generate fragmented, poor-quality evidence that fails to create a knowledge base to inform policies and programs that we know offer children a chance to build the skills they need to thrive.

From November 2017-March 2018, NYU Global TIES for Children, in partnership with the International Rescue Committee, conducted a scoping study to identify current data-driven practices, challenges and needs among diverse stakeholders working with children in crisis contexts, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey. Results indicated that while these stakeholders are generating and using evidence, there is significant variation in quality, and significant barriers to generating and acting upon high-quality data. This memo summarizes key findings and presents recommendations for policymakers and donors on how to improve the generation, communication, interpretation and uptake of high-quality evidence.



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# SCOPING STUDY BACKGROUND

## Scoping Study Objectives

The survey was designed to:

- Map how research, monitoring, and evaluation is being used to measure and achieve outcomes for children in crisis contexts
- Uncover stakeholders' perceptions of barriers to research, monitoring, and evaluation in crisis contexts
- Identify the skills and competencies of children about which stakeholders in crisis contexts perceive a need for more accurate and valid information

## Sample and Methodology

The survey was distributed electronically in both English and Arabic through a series of wide-reaching mailing lists.<sup>3</sup> The survey was also sent to a curated contact list of over 450 stakeholders working in fields related to education in emergencies.<sup>4</sup>

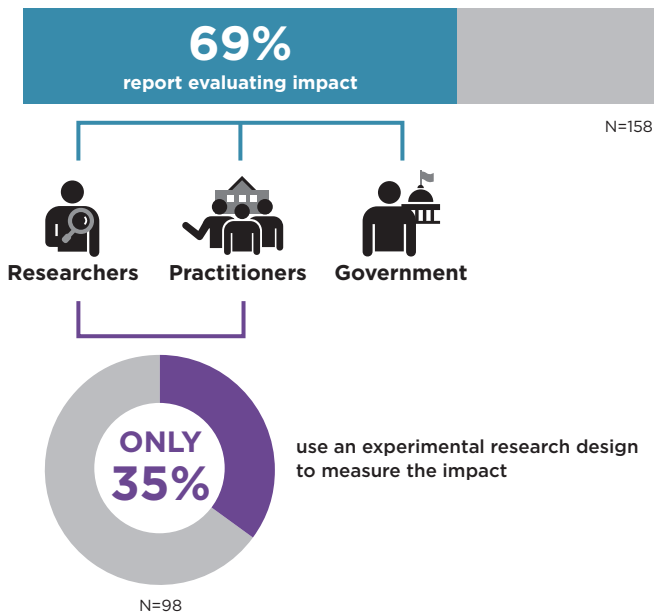
Results reported here reflect responses from a sub-sample of 176 respondents who reported working with children, youth, families, schools, and/or teachers and who answered sufficient questions to be included in the analysis. Despite limitations to the broader generalizability of these findings<sup>5</sup>, respondents' profiles indicate that this sample is reflective of the field of practitioners, researchers, donors, and government employees who are interested and invested in using evidence to inform decision-making on behalf of children living in crisis contexts.



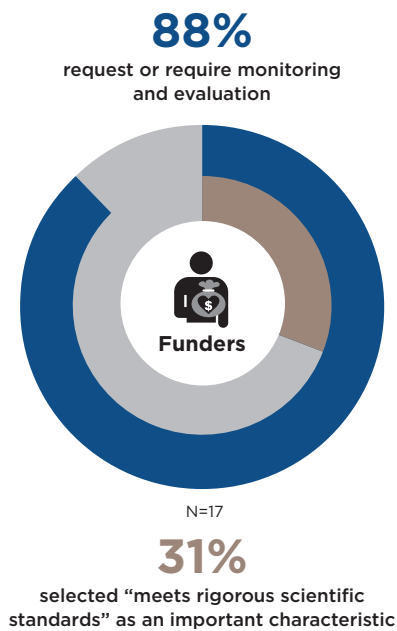
# ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

1. While the majority of implementers reported engaging in monitoring, evaluation and research of programs—and the majority of funders require it and value its use for decision-making—there is a lack of prioritization and use of rigorous methods amongst stakeholders.

- 69% of researchers, practitioners, and government employees report evaluating impact—defined as whether participants are better off after participating in a program—but only 35% of researchers and practitioners are using an experimental research design to measure the impact.<sup>6</sup>



- 88% of funders request or require monitoring and evaluation. 63% of funders value that monitoring and evaluation “shows impact/outcomes,” and 59% request or require impact evaluations. 77% report that one of the most important characteristics of research and evaluation is that it is “useful for program and policy decision-making.”
- Only 31% of funders selected “meets rigorous scientific standards” and 50% selected “high quality” as important characteristics of monitoring and evaluation.



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**2. Stakeholders identified multiple barriers to both doing and using research: a. Inability to identify the right measurement tools; b. lack of funding, and c. difficulty interpreting and applying information to policies and programs.**

- 58% of researchers and practitioners identified an inability to find measurement tools as a barrier
- Over three-quarters (78%) of practitioners and government employees identified not having enough financial resources as a critical challenge to doing research—only 21% of funders agreed
- 57% of funders identified “information is hard to interpret/act on” as a top barrier



**3. There is consensus across stakeholder groups on which child holistic learning development outcomes they need more information about, both within and across age groups (early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence).**

- When asked to identify from a list which sub-domains of children’s holistic learning and development which they would like to have more valid and reliable information on to inform their work:
  - The highest number of respondents in all three age groups selected interpersonal skills: early childhood (79%), middle childhood (81%), and adolescence (85%).



- Respondents to the early childhood and middle childhood prompts identified the same outcomes for which they wanted more reliable and valid information: cognitive regulation (early childhood: 76%; middle childhood: 70%), literacy skills (early childhood: 68%; middle childhood: 70%) and emotion processes (early childhood: 71%; middle childhood: 70%) and. A majority of respondents to the adolescent prompt also selected emotion processes (76%)
- Respondents to the adolescent prompts showed high consensus around the need for more valid and reliable measures around adolescents’ values (73%) and identity (66%).

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# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings illustrate that while the majority of stakeholders working with children in crisis contexts value, require and engage in research and monitoring, few seem to prioritize and use rigorous methods that can yield high confidence in the quality of impact evidence.

One of the underlying challenges to requiring, investing in and conducting rigorous research is a lack of understanding of its importance and what it takes to achieve it. As the above findings demonstrate, stakeholders value the usefulness of impact data but not that it is generated through rigorous methods.

Without the requirement and use of rigorous methods and reliable, valid measurement instruments, the quality of evidence will be in doubt, rendering evidence difficult to trust and take up. The result can be wasted resources and inefficiencies; lack of support for research and evidence; and, ultimately, a failure to achieve positive impact for children in crisis. While the education community has been pushing for more data and data-driven decision-making, the emphasis must remain on quality data-driven decision-making to ensure the quality of outcomes on children's lives.

Using rigorous methods to generate high quality impact evidence, however, does not automatically mean that this evidence can be translated into something useful, nor easy to use. As noted above, donors reported in the scoping study that information is hard to act upon—a key barrier to its uptake. In order for evidence to be useful and actionable, the users and intended uses of it need to be clearly defined, and findings translated and communicated so as to align with user and use. Achieving this requires time and dedicated resources, but these are worthwhile investments. Without considering and planning for the kinds of decisions and actions that need to be taken, and investing in communicating findings in a way to ensure they can be easily understood and taken up, even the highest quality evidence generated using the most rigorous methods risks going unused.

Finally, there is high consensus around the outcomes for which stakeholders wish to have more reliable, valid information. A common framework for children's learning and holistic development and a strategic research agenda for education in crisis contexts could serve the field well by establishing a pathway for coordinated efforts. This will prevent duplication of efforts, wasted resources and the collection of fragmented data. It will instead promote coherence, collaboration and communication amongst and between stakeholders; a better understanding of where the gaps are, and how to fill them; and better comparison, analysis and use of evidence.

To better enable the generation, communication and use of high-quality data to inform policies and programs for conflict-affected children, we recommend that donors and policymakers:

1. Dedicate a percentage of all program funding (10% or more) to research that includes evaluation, implementation and measurement research.
2. Direct funding to rigorous research to ensure high quality of evidence of what works, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost
3. Require grantees to conduct their impact evaluations and their monitoring using measurement instruments that are reliable and valid in the context in which they work.
4. Direct resources for strategic communications of research findings for different audiences to ensure that results are understood and accessible for uptake in policies and programs.
5. Fund consensus-building, strategic processes for identifying education research priorities in conflict and crisis contexts, and direct resources towards research that addresses these priorities.



SAM TARLING/IRC

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## APPENDIX

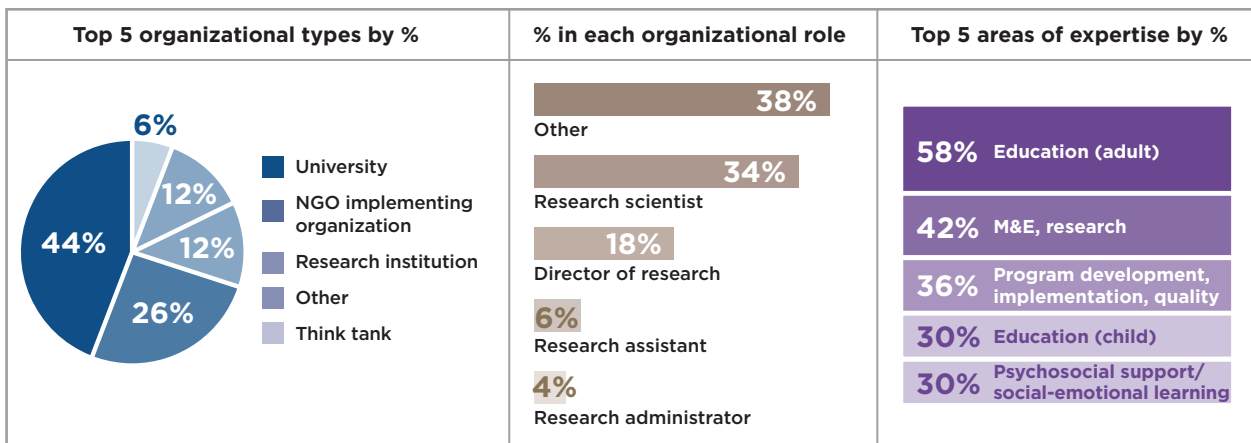
### Respondents' Profile

Respondents were first asked to provide background information about the types of organizations they worked in as well as their areas of expertise and roles within those organizations. Across all professional roles, over 50% of respondents report working in a non-governmental implementing organization, followed by 18% working in a university or research institution. Out of 22 possible thematic areas, the majority of respondents report expertise in “Education (adult)” (68%), followed

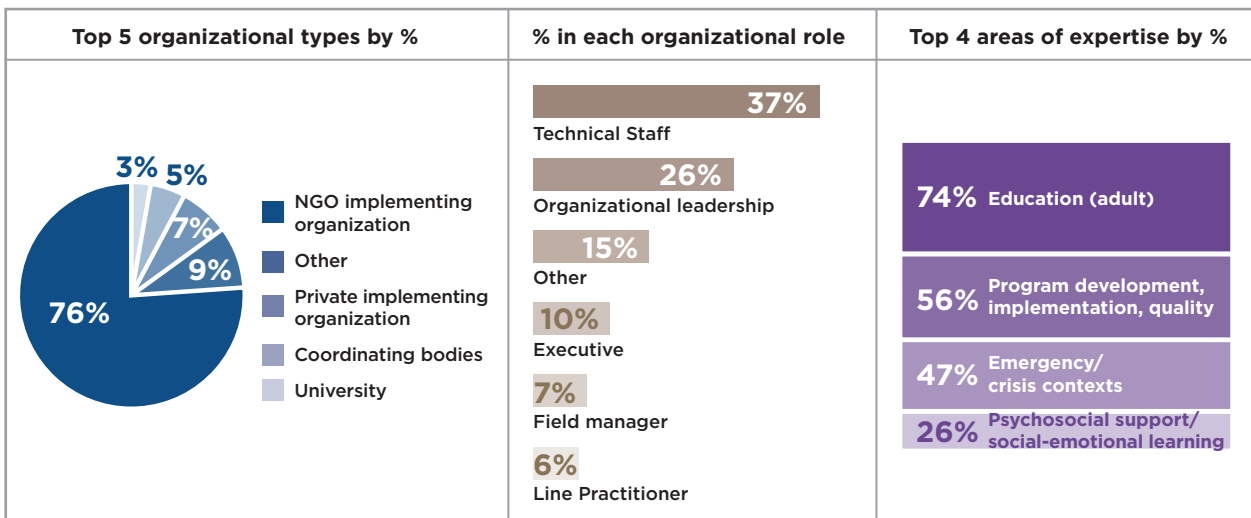
by “Program development, implementation, quality,” and “Emergency/crisis contexts” (47% and 40%, respectively). The following figures provide more detailed information about respondents' profiles by professional role.

The survey was designed to be adaptive, such that certain affirmative responses—for example, to questions about research, monitoring, and evaluation practices—elicited a set of additional queries. For those who received all questions, the survey took on average 45-60 minutes to complete. Question formats included forced choice responses, Likert-type scales, and open-ended responses.

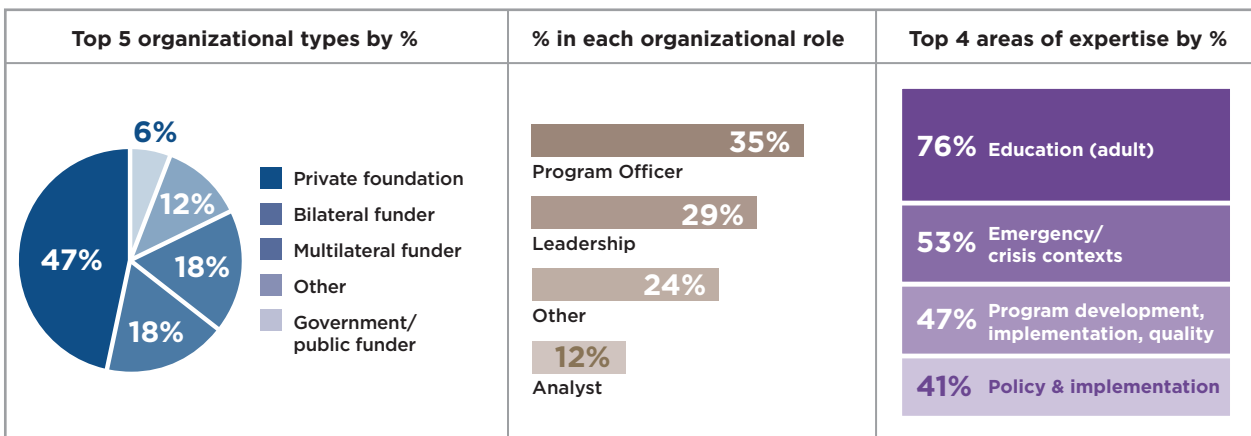
**50**  
Researchers



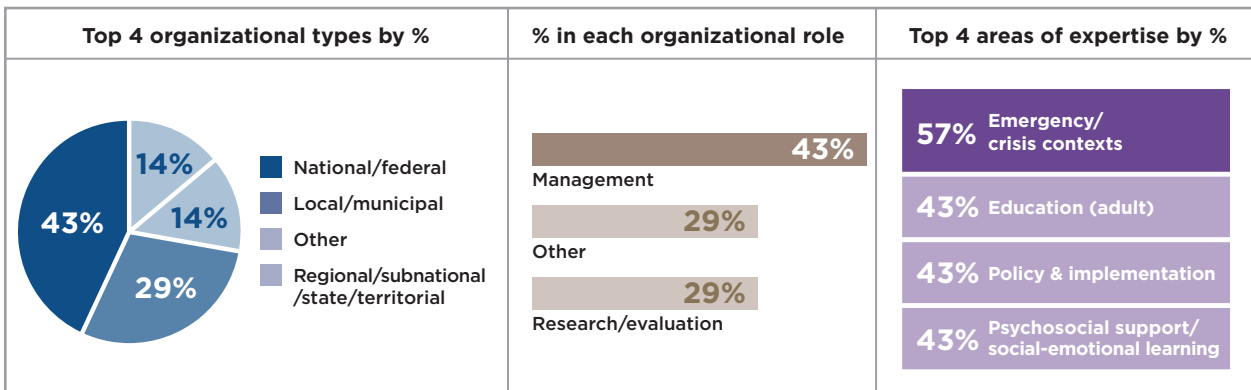
**102**  
Practitioners



**17**  
Funders



**7**  
Government

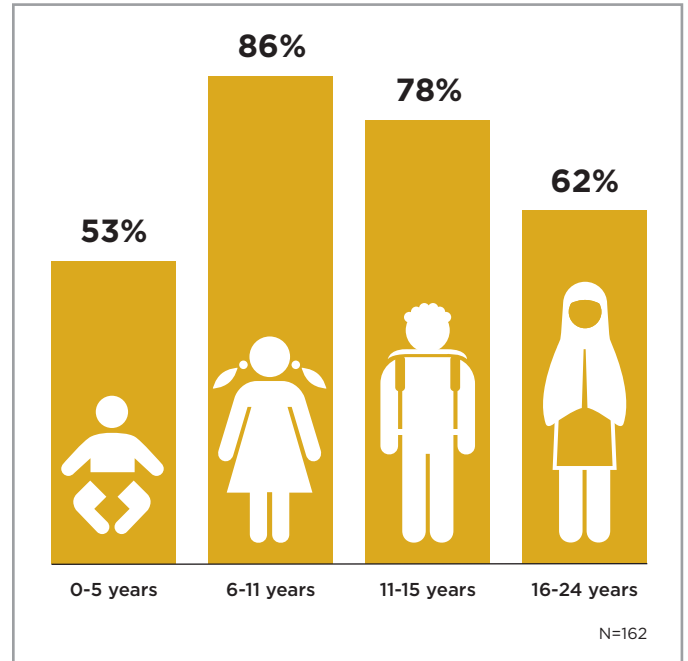




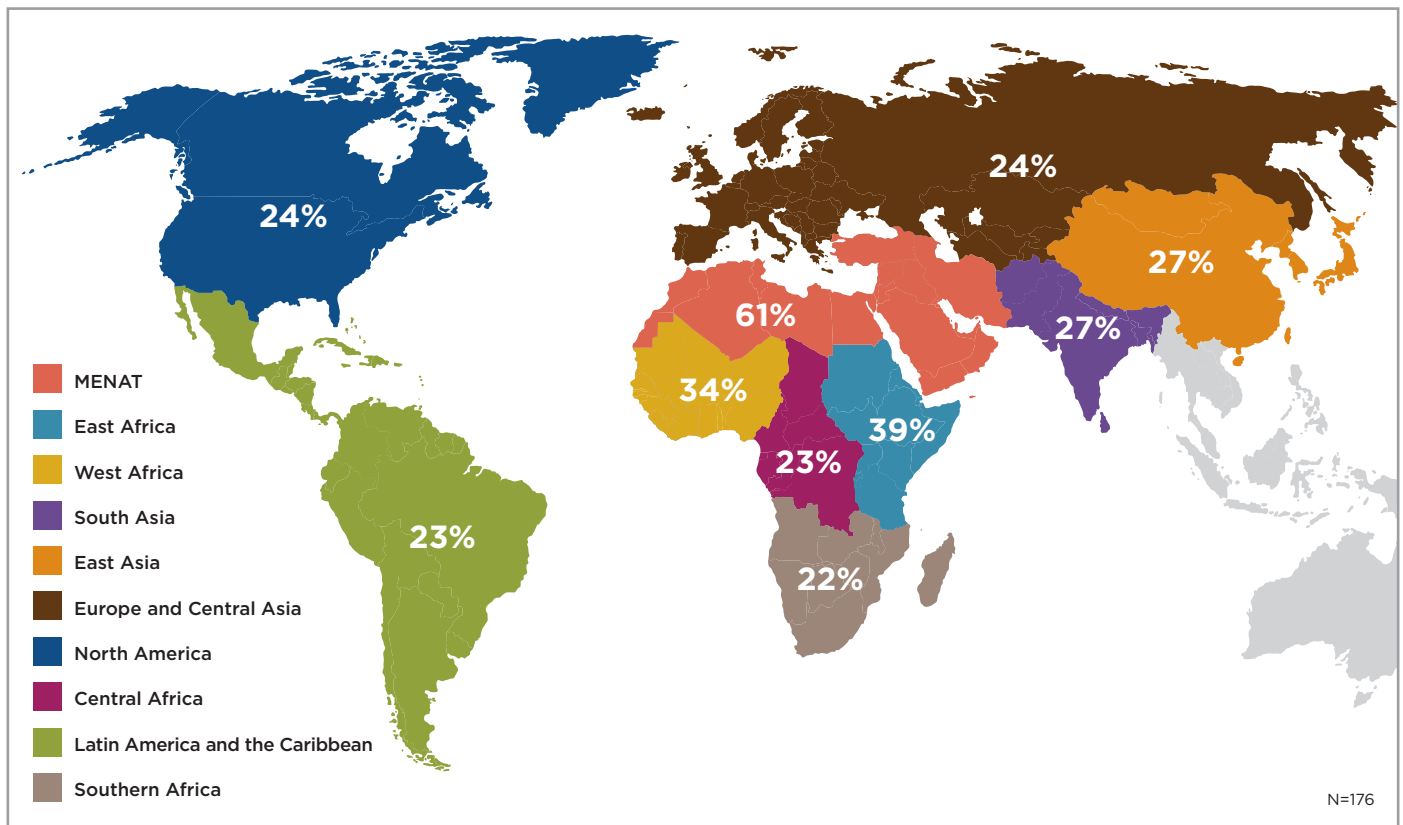
## Overview of the Respondents' Programs

Respondents were asked to describe the type of programming they work with or oversee. They were asked questions about the regions and contexts in which they work, the number of programs they oversee, and about the primary targets of their programming. Within the analysis sample, only 55% report that families are a primary target of their programs—even though all in this sample report working with children, schools, and/ or teachers. Seventy-three percent of respondent report working with or overseeing programs in crisis contexts, and 63% report working in the MENAT region. Of those working in crisis contexts the majority work in refugee contexts (77%), and the minority work in contexts of economic depression, famine, and/or epidemics (14%, 13%, and 10%, respectively). The following figures provide more information about the programs that participants work with or oversee.

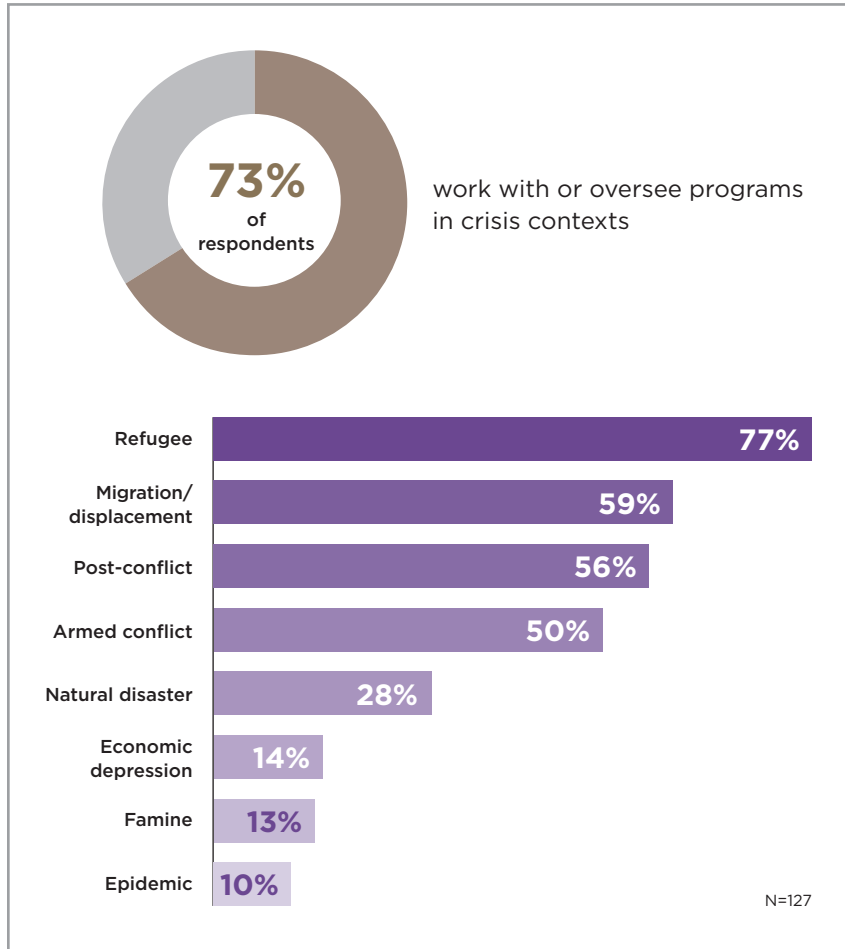
### Age Groups of Children and Youth Served



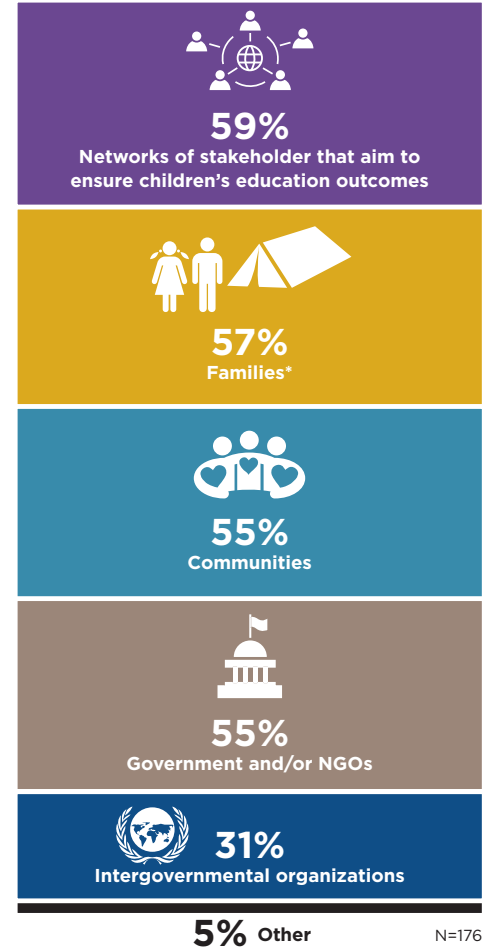
### Regions



## Type of Crisis Context



## Primary Targets of Programs/projects



\* All respondents within this analysis sample reported working with schools, teachers/school staff, and/or children/youth

## Skills and Outcomes

Respondents were asked to identify from a list which sub-domains of children's holistic learning and development they would like to have more consistent (i.e., valid and reliable) information on to inform their work. Respondents were asked to respond uniquely for each of up to three age groups they identified serving: early childhood, primary school-aged, and post-primary/secondary school-aged.

### How Did We Define Domains of Children's Holistic Learning and Development?

The domains listed in the survey were drawn from the seven learning competencies identified by the Learning Metrics Task Force through an extensive consultative process with 1,700+ participants across 118 countries. Within each broad domain, we identified a set of narrower "sub-domains" that may be particularly salient during each developmental stage, and provided examples of the skills and competencies that may be included in each

sub-domain at each stage. This approach allowed us to ensure relevance to each age group and context. For example, given the importance of psychosocial support (PSS) and social-emotional learning (SEL) in crisis contexts, we chose to include a number of sub-domains of SEL and mental health to generate a more fine-grained understanding of the specific social-emotional skills about which stakeholders require more accurate information. However, because the majority of PSS and SEL frameworks are derived from evidence generated in Western, Industrialized, Educated, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) contexts<sup>7</sup>, we defined these sub-domains broadly (e.g., "emotional processes," "inter-personal relationship skills") such that they could encompass stakeholders' perceptions of context-specific SEL skills and competencies. We provide a list of the domains, sub-domains, and skill examples included in the survey for each age group below. Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide text responses to these questions, which will be reported on once qualitative analysis of this data has been completed.

## Domains and Sub-Domains of Children’s Holistic Learning and Development

■ Physical well-being    
 ■ Language, literacy, and numeracy    
 ■ Cognitive functioning    
 ■ Social-emotional processes and mental health    
 ■ Other

Early Childhood	Middle Childhood	Adolescence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Physical health and hygiene</b></li> <li>• <b>Gross, fine, and perceptual motor skills</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Physical health and hygiene</b></li> <li>• <b>Physical activity</b></li> <li>• <b>Sexual health</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Physical health and hygiene</b></li> <li>• <b>Physical activity</b></li> <li>• <b>Sexual health</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Language skills</b> (e.g., letter recognition)</li> <li>• <b>Literacy skills</b> (e.g., phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading)</li> <li>• <b>Numeracy skills</b> (e.g., numbering, numerical relations, mathematical operations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Literacy skills</b> (e.g., oral and reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary)</li> <li>• <b>Numeracy skills</b> (e.g., number concept and operations, mathematics operations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Literacy skills</b> (e.g., reading, writing, speaking)</li> <li>• <b>Numeracy skills</b> (e.g., mathematics applications)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cognitive regulation</b> (e.g., attention control, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cognitive regulation</b> (e.g., working memory and planning, attention control, executive functioning)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cognitive regulation</b> (e.g., working memory, executive functioning)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Internalizing and externalizing behavior</b> (e.g., depression, hyperactivity)</li> <li>• <b>Emotion processes</b> (e.g., emotion and behavior regulation, empathy and perspective-taking)</li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal skills</b> (e.g., attachment relationships, pro-social/cooperative behavior)</li> <li>• <b>Perspectives</b> (curiosity about the environment, openness)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Internalizing and externalizing behavior</b> (e.g., depression, PTSD, anxiety, conduct problems, hyperactivity)</li> <li>• <b>Emotion processes</b> (e.g., emotion knowledge and expression, emotion and behavior regulation)</li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal skills</b> (e.g., pro-social/cooperative behavior, understanding social cues, conflict resolution)</li> <li>• <b>Perspectives</b> (e.g., optimism, gratitude, openness, hope)</li> <li>• <b>Values</b> (e.g., civic engagement, academic engagement, moral/ethical values, respect for diversity)</li> <li>• <b>Identity</b> (e.g., self-esteem, self-awareness, ethnic/racial/religious identity)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Internalizing and externalizing behavior</b> (e.g., depression, PTSD, anxiety, conduct problems, hyperactivity)</li> <li>• <b>Emotion processes</b> (e.g., emotion knowledge and expression, empathy and perspective taking)</li> <li>• <b>Interpersonal skills</b> (e.g., pro-social/cooperative behavior, conflict resolution, social problem-solving skills)</li> <li>• <b>Perspectives</b> (e.g., optimism, gratitude, openness, hope)</li> <li>• <b>Values</b> (e.g., civic engagement, community/civil participation, moral/ethical values, respect for diversity)</li> <li>• <b>Identity</b> (e.g., self-knowledge, sense of purpose, ethnic/racial/religious identity)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Livelihood skills</b> (e.g., vocational/job skills, income generation, money management)</li> </ul>



**For more information, or to request the full scoping study, please contact Roxane Caires: [Roxane.Caires@nyu.edu](mailto:Roxane.Caires@nyu.edu).**

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2016). *Leaving No One Behind: How Far on the Way to Universal Primary and Secondary Education?* Policy Paper 27/Fact Sheet 37. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2017). *More than one half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> These include those managed by including those managed by the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies, the USAID Education in Crisis and Conflict Network, and the International Education Funders Group

<sup>4</sup> In all, 347 people opened the survey, 264 people answered at least one question in the survey, and 179 responded to a sufficient number of questions to be included in the following analyses.

<sup>5</sup> While the response rate was fairly high for this type of survey, the results of the survey are not representative of the field at large for the following reasons:

- Outreach was targeted to stakeholders working with children in crisis and vulnerable contexts in the Middle East and North Africa and Turkey (MENAT) region.

• Given the affiliations of the organizations conducting this survey, researchers at universities and practitioners at international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are overrepresented in the final sample.

• The content of the survey likely encouraged responses from stakeholders that were already interested or engaged in research, monitoring, and evaluation activities. Given these sample biases, we ask readers to interpret findings with caution.

<sup>6</sup> This finding is further broken down as 20% of researchers and 64% of practitioners are using experimental design (government employees were not asked this question)

<sup>7</sup> Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61-83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>

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