The missing piece: Secondary education in crisis contexts

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Executive summary: Secondary education as the ‘missing piece’ in education in emergencies

The global movement to achieve universal primary education has placed increased demands on secondary education systems to accommodate more students, from a wider range of backgrounds, and to do so more inclusively and effectively (UNICEF, 2020b; UNHCR, 2022). In crisis contexts, at current funding levels these demands are difficult to meet. Adolescents of lower secondary age are already two-thirds more likely to be out of school and half as likely to complete lower secondary, with adolescent girls and adolescents with disabilities among the most adversely affected (UNICEF, 2020b; UNHCR, 2022; ECW, 2022). In low-income countries, only 8 percent of adolescents from the poorest 20 percent of households attend lower-secondary school, and only 4 percent attend upper secondary (UNICEF, 2023).

Across three levels of analysis and 12 areas of thematic focus, ‘The missing piece’ captures the current landscape for secondary education in crisis contexts. At the outset, our ability to adequately illustrate the extent to which various crises impact secondary education was limited by a lack of literature specific to secondary education, to adolescents, and to crisis contexts. As we reiterate throughout, this limitation means that evidence particular to secondary education had to be drawn from disparate studies in peer-reviewed publications and grey literature reports with a broader focus than secondary education itself. Although elements of these studies intersect with secondary education or adolescence, they do not constitute a coherent or accessible body of scholarship on secondary education in crisis contexts. Often, the literature did not adequately disaggregate the evidence between levels of education, age group of learners, or whether the contexts were low-resource, crisis-affected, or both. As such, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners use data from low-resource contexts or general education studies as a proxy for secondary education in crisis contexts.

This situation reflects a tension. On the one hand, it appears that issues impacting access to quality secondary education are common across all levels of the education system and do not require disaggregation or independent advocacy. On the other hand, where evidence specific to secondary education in crisis contexts can be extracted, in an already under-funded sector we see that secondary education receives just a morsel of funding compared to early childhood and primary education. Adolescents in crisis contexts are therefore made more vulnerable to a unique set of risk factors and corresponding protection and development needs. But we also see that adolescents with access to quality secondary education in crisis contexts are key contributors to preparedness, response, and recovery processes. As such, in this paper we call for increased attention and funding for secondary education and adolescent-specific research and programming.

The status quo will result in another generation of overlooked and underserved adolescents. But as the literature illustrates, increased attention for secondary education in crisis contexts can produce future generations of empowered adolescents able to contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and climate resilient communities. We must therefore work towards a coherent and sector-specific body of evidence that effectively informs policy, funding, and practice in the field.
This paper, ‘The missing piece’, provides an overview of secondary education in crisis contexts, highlighting the current issues, challenges, and thematic areas that help or hinder adolescents’ access to quality learning opportunities. It is an evidence-informed, analytical, and high-level summary of current debates and tensions in the field, and is intended to be read by government leaders, humanitarian sector policy makers, and practitioners to guide and support advocacy and decision-making processes. **In light of the significant evidence gaps in what is a dynamic and urgent field of inquiry, this briefing also helps shape a future research agenda that brings much needed attention to the sector.**

In this introduction, we provide a brief snapshot of secondary education in crisis contexts, we introduce the methods used to research and write this briefing, and we provide definitions for the key terms we have employed throughout the document.

The global movement to achieve universal primary education has placed increased demands on secondary education systems to accommodate more students, from a wider range of backgrounds, and to do so more inclusively and effectively (UNICEF, 2020b; UNHCR, 2022). In crisis contexts, adolescents of lower secondary age are two-thirds more likely to be out of school and half as likely to complete lower secondary, with adolescent girls and adolescents with disabilities affected disproportionately (UNICEF, 2020b; UNHCR, 2022; ECW, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Yet, secondary education is often perceived as a long-term development need rather than a life-saving measure in crisis contexts (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Cahill et. al, 2010). **Secondary education is a critical cognitive, physical, and social protective factor in adolescents’ lives.** As well as contributing towards resilience and a sense of self-reliance, it mitigates the risk of adolescent recruitment to armed forces, reduces the likelihood of forced marriage and early pregnancy, promotes health literacy, and supports climate adaptation (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Garbern et. al, 2020; King et. al, 2019). Longer term, secondary education serves as a vital bridge to opportunities for higher education and employment (ibid).

Protracted conflict and earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye, the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh, civil war in South Sudan, or events in Ukraine, among other emergencies, have rightfully attracted the attention of humanitarian agencies and researchers alike. As such, much of the literature on secondary education in crisis contexts relates more to conflict and settings of displacement, while there is a dearth of literature from contexts experiencing climate-related or sudden onset environmental disasters, for example. This has influenced the orientation of the examples used in this briefing.

Refugees and internally displaced adolescents are adversely impacted by a variety of crises and are over-represented in out-of-school statistics at the secondary level. Across 40 refugee-hosting countries surveyed for UNHCR’s 2022 report, just 37 percent of refugee adolescents were enrolled at the secondary education level compared with an average of 84 percent of adolescents globally (King et. al, 2019; UNHCR, 2022a). Commonly cited barriers to enrolment in and completion of secondary education include, among other risk factors, displacement caused by climate-related disasters, household responsibilities, financial limitations, gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, pregnancy, recruitment into armed groups, and low relevance between education and economic or civic opportunities (Cha, 2020; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Meyer et. al, 2019).

We also know that secondary education has a multiplier effect. It can develop adolescents who are capable and engaged citizens with the potential to contribute to peacebuilding, climate adaptation, and solutions to crisis situations more broadly. Quality secondary education thus allows crisis-affected adolescents of all profiles to “not only to inherit a future, but to create it” (Anselme & Hands, 2012, p. 90; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017, p. 13). Despite the clear benefits of secondary education, however, it remains one of the most neglected and underfunded sectors within the education in emergencies field.

This oversight is clearly reflected in the literature and inspires the title of this paper. **Secondary education in crisis contexts is poorly defined with very few research initiatives focused on this level of education in a meaningful and sustained way.** Data on the state of secondary education in crisis contexts – especially the different factors impacting adolescent access to quality secondary education – exists across disparate studies in peer-reviewed publications with a broader focus than secondary education itself. **Although elements of these studies intersect with adolescence, they do not constitute a coherent or accessible body of scholarship on secondary education in crisis contexts.** For example, literature on climate change addresses the role of adolescents and school curriculum in mitigation and adaptation efforts; literature on gender-based violence identifies schools as a factor promoting transformative gender norms in the community; or research on adolescent civic engagement highlights the role of teachers in the formation of adolescent civic literacy and identity.

As much as this reality illustrates the broad relevance of secondary education and adolescent development, it makes access to relevant and timely evidence difficult for actors in low-resource settings and outside of well-resourced NGOs and research institutions. As such, this publication marks an important step in canvassing the literature and bringing together the varied bodies of evidence that can inform future research, policy, and practice priorities.

‘The missing piece is the product of an extensive literature review, with sources identified through the Columbia Libraries Catalogue (CLIO), EBSCO, and Google Scholar. This process was guided by the search terms illustrated in figure 1 below."
INTRODUCTION

In addition to the above concepts and terms, if peer-reviewed research was empirical and produced evidence to support key theories in the field, there was no exclusion criteria for the date of publication. For grey literature, the review only included resources published from 2015 to the present to ensure relevance.

From our initial literature search, a total of 82 sources were selected for analysis. Of these resources, 74 percent were grey literature documents and 26 percent came from scholarly sources. The grey literature was authored by international non-governmental organisations (40 percent), United Nations agencies (28 percent) donors (6 percent), and development banks (2 percent).

To organise the themes influencing secondary education into categories for analysis, three different levels were chosen (as illustrated in figure 2 below). The first level is ‘global and national factors’, which consists of events or trends that influence the access, composition, and quality of secondary education across multiple country contexts. These factors interact in ways that affect adolescents’ abilities to participate in and complete a secondary education.

The second level is ‘community and school-level factors’, which represent the realities, decisions, and actions that determine what secondary education in crisis contexts consists of, how it is implemented, and the short- to medium-term outcomes it achieves. The third and final category is ‘adolescent development factors’, which represent the social variables in an adolescent’s life, related to their status, and identity that determine their ability to participate and engage in quality secondary education in crisis contexts.

The different organisational levels allow for a comprehensive illustration of the multiple, intersecting, and interacting factors that define the field and determine secondary education opportunities and experiences for millions of adolescents in crisis contexts.

There is an important distinction to make among secondary school students in crisis contexts. There are those who are enrolled in secondary education but may be of any age due to disrupted educational trajectories and there are adolescents who are of secondary school age as defined by national education systems (UNICEF, 2021).

For the purposes of this briefing, ‘adolescents’ is used to represent secondary school students. This report also acknowledges that many adolescents are out-of-school despite being of secondary age. In addition, secondary school students are adolescents who are in a complex developmental stage of their lives, which is a core consideration in the provision of quality secondary education in crisis contexts.

Throughout this briefing, the definitions below are used to frame the focus populations, contexts, and secondary education sector.
The missing piece: Secondary education in crisis contexts

INTRODUCTION

What is adolescence?
Adolescence refers to a phase within a person’s life and development, typically between the ages of 10 and 19 years old. Adolescence varies across cultures; however, it is determined as the period between entering puberty and the beginning of adulthood and understood as a phase of physical, mental, and social changes (Plan International. 2021b).

What is a crisis context?
The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (1994) provides a summary definition of a humanitarian crisis or emergency as a situation in which a society experiences severe disruptions, resulting in widespread human, material, or environmental losses. These events can be sudden or slow in onset, short-term or long-term, and can be caused by natural disasters, man-made hazards, armed conflict, or a combination of these factors. As such it is the place, or places, where these events occur.

How do we define secondary education?
For the purpose of this briefing, secondary education represents formal learning opportunities and the different pathways or programs that lead adolescents towards accredited certification. As defined by UNESCO (2011), formal education is “certified by the relevant national educational authorities or equivalent, e.g. any other institution in cooperation with the national or sub-national educational authorities.”

STATE OF THE DATA

We evaluated the literature in terms of its relevance to secondary education in crisis contexts. Highly relevant resources were focused specifically on secondary education or adolescent development in crisis contexts.

Resources of medium relevance had a broader focus, but directly addressed secondary education or adolescent development in crisis contexts in the content. Low relevance resources were focused more broadly on secondary education or adolescent development but did not reference or disaggregate for crisis contexts.

From the 82 resources that we included in this study, we determined 53 percent to be of high relevance, 39 percent to be of medium relevance, and 8 percent were of low relevance.

Although these numbers are influenced by the inclusion and exclusion criteria of our literature search, they still reflect our observation that there is a significant shortage of literature focused on secondary education in crisis contexts.
1 Global and national factors influencing secondary education in crisis contexts

Global and national factors are events or trends that influence the access, composition, and quality of secondary education across multiple country contexts. These factors are interrelated and interact in ways that affect adolescents’ ability to participate in and complete a secondary education.

1.1 The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the worst global learning crisis since World War II (UNHCR, 2021a). Costs of the closure of education institutions are immense, and while the magnitude of education disruption has not been fully captured or understood, emerging evidence is alarming (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Educational progress for adolescents in stagnated or fell behind. Specifically, health, safety, wellbeing, access to daily school meals, and gender equality were jeopardised when school closures occurred (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Educational progress for adolescents in stagnated or fell behind. Specifically, health, safety, wellbeing, access to daily school meals, and gender equality were jeopardised when school closures occurred (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Globally, 9 in 10 schools were shut due to quarantine measures in 2020 and 2021 (UNHCR, 2021a; UNICEF, UNESCO & World Bank, 2022). The education of 1.6 billion students in 188 countries was thus interrupted, with over 1 billion students living in low- and middle-income countries (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021; Plan International, 2021b; UNHCR, 2021a).

Conflict, violence, natural disasters, and other humanitarian crises have long hindered the ability of adolescents to access quality secondary education (Plan International, 2021; Geneva Global Hub for EiE, 2022). Approximately half of all out-of-school primary- and secondary school-age children and adolescents live in or are from crisis-affected countries. This number increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as the crisis compounded existing emergencies, leading to further displacement, learning loss, an increase in dropout rates, poor educational attainment, and the denial of schooling for those who hoped to access a formal education for the first time (UNHCR, 2021a).

Governments employed various remote teaching strategies to ensure learning continuity and to reach girls and boys, such as online learning, TV, radio, and print materials. However, the quality and access to remote learning varied greatly (Plan International, 2021a; Plan International, 2021b). Learning loss has been inequitable, with already marginalised students most adversely affected, specifically in crisis contexts (World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021; UNHCR, 2021a).
While students and teachers adapted to online learning, a more pronounced form of exclusion developed in virtual learning spaces. Millions of adolescents in stable contexts experienced some learning continuity, but at the same time girls, adolescents with disabilities, and displaced adolescents in crisis contexts are reported to have learned almost nothing at all (Plan International, 2021b). Inefficient coordination between governments and humanitarian agencies, insufficient digital infrastructure, and limited low- or no-tech alternatives stymied efforts to reach the marginalised. Adolescent learners living in emergency contexts, including refugee learners with limited access to the devices, connectivity, electricity, and data services required for uninterrupted remote learning (Plan International, 2021a; Plan International 2021b; UNHCR, 2021a).

Adolescents often face challenges in their home environments that make it difficult for them to learn, such as a lack of parental or caregiver support and limited time to study due to other demands, such as household chores, gender-based violence, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and income-generating activities to support their families (Plan International, 2021). As discussed in section 2.4 below, refugee and internally displaced adolescents face pressure to drop out of school to help support their families, putting them at increased risk of being forced into exploitative child labour (UNHCR, 2021a). In addition to barriers to access, the quality of remote learning for children and adolescents during COVID-19 was questionable. Little to no teacher support or training to deliver effective learning: inconsistent home-based materials for effective learning; and limited feedback on their progress meant that adolescents in crisis contexts did not learn at the same rate as in person learning (Plan International, 2021b).

COVID-19 had several other negative impacts on adolescents. School closures highlighted how schools are much more than just places for academic learning, especially for vulnerable students in crisis and emergency contexts (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies; 2022; UNHCR, 2021; Plan International, 2021b). They provide protection, access to basic services, and a sense of hope and opportunity. COVID-19 also prevented access to school meals, hygiene kits, health services, and mental health and psychosocial support. School closures had an impact on adolescent mental health and wellbeing as they struggled with isolation and worried about tests, falling behind on their academic performance, and future prospects (Plan International, 2021b).

Aside from disrupting learning during the pandemic, evidence shows that many adolescents have not returned to school due to perceived learning gaps, fear of catching the virus, early pregnancies, domestic or informal work, or schools remaining shut and limiting teaching to the online setting (World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, 2021; Plan International, 2021b). Shifting from crisis to recovery requires investment in and strengthening of schooling systems to address the learning crisis and encourage secondary school students to return to school. Education systems must collect disaggregated data to develop targeted learning recovery programs using evidence-based techniques, such as extending instructional time, small-group tutoring and remediation, and focused instruction (World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, 2021).

1.2 The impact of forced displacement

Adolescents often face challenges in their home environments that make it difficult for them to learn, such as a lack of parental or caregiver support and limited time to study due to other demands, such as household chores, gender-based violence, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and income-generating activities to support their families (Plan International, 2021). As discussed in section 2.4 below, refugee and internally displaced adolescents face pressure to drop out of school to help support their families, putting them at increased risk of being forced into exploitative child labour (UNHCR, 2021a). In addition to barriers to access, the quality of remote learning for children and adolescents during COVID-19 was questionable. Little to no teacher support or training to deliver effective learning: inconsistent home-based materials for effective learning; and limited feedback on their progress meant that adolescents in crisis contexts did not learn at the same rate as in person learning (Plan International, 2021b).

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A well-cited and sombre statistic is that the global population of displaced people has reached more than 100 million, which includes 32.5 million asylum seekers and refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). Displaced by climate change, poverty, conflict, persecution, or disaster, just over 42 percent of the global refugee population are children and adolescents (UNHCR, 2021a). Although the scale of the refugee crisis is profound, and a number of international legal frameworks or global agreements to secure refugees’ access to secondary education are in place, the inconsistent application of these instruments further contributes to poverty cycles, instability, and conflict in low-resource settings (Anselme & Hands, 2012). When we consider the numbers above, it is also vital that the lived experience of refugee adolescents is top of mind. Refugee adolescents experience isolation, discrimination, restriction of movement, prolonged economic uncertainty, and the denial of basic social services, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNHCR, 2021a).

Forced displacement has an especially detrimental impact on the continuity of learning (Anselme & Hands, 2012). Because refugees often settle in neighbouring countries where social and economic institutions are also fragile, there is limited capacity to absorb additional students within national systems, which contributes to the large numbers of out-of-school refugee adolescents (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, & Adelman, 2017; Education Cannot Wait, 2022). Moreover, where inclusion within national systems is possible, the disruption to schooling that many adolescent refugees experience means that accelerated education services, catch up or bridging programs are first required to refresh and strengthen knowledge and skills in order to help them enter school at an appropriate age or grade level (Anselme & Hands, 2012; INEE, 2017).

Data on refugee access to education is already limited, but data on secondary education for refugees are even harder to find. Especially cross-national and comparative data for secondary-aged refugee adolescents (King et al. 2019). This means that single country case studies are used as a proxy for multiple and diverse contexts. It also means that our understanding of the benefits of refugee and displaced adolescents’ access to secondary education and its broader contribution to the employment pipeline, economic development, peacebuilding processes, or civic engagement is underdeveloped (ibid).

Across all education levels, we know that forcibly displaced adolescents’ school enrolment rates are much lower than those of their host-country or host-community counterparts (ECW, 2022). The latest estimate, which includes but does not disaggregate for primary or secondary-aged or refugee and
internally displaced status, is that globally 12.5 million forcibly displaced adolescents are out of school (ECW, 2022). Of most concern is the fact that for each grade level the gap between enrolled and unenrolled adolescents widens (UNHCR, 2021a). Data for this gap at the primary level are abundant, but our understanding of the extent to which this gap is consistent at the secondary level and across multiple contexts is limited. A poignant example from Jordan shows that the secondary enrolment rate for national adolescents is 65 percent compared to just 25 percent of refugee adolescents (UNHCR, 2021a). Another concerning gap exists between the primary and secondary enrolment rates of all refugee children and adolescents. Across 40 countries studied, we know that the enrolment rate for primary-aged refugee children is 68 percent compared to only 34 percent of secondary-aged adolescents (UNHCR, 2021a).

Secondary education is critical for the rebuilding and stability of conflict- and displacement-affected countries, communities, and populations. It plays a central role in the mitigation of violence and extremism, it reduces dependency and adolescent disaffection, and it promotes self-reliance and hope for the future (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2017). The inaccessibility of secondary education for a majority of refugee and displaced adolescents therefore creates a roadblock, beyond which lie possibilities for security, certainty, and belonging. Even when refugee and displaced adolescents secure access to secondary education, however, the purpose of schooling is complex and contested. Especially when their pathways towards residency and employment are stymied by a lack of documentation and when the host-country or community’s policies and opportunities for refugee inclusion, resettlement, or repatriation are limited (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, & Adelman, 2017). Additionally, secondary education for refugee and displaced adolescents suffers from poor schooling infrastructure which impacts quality teaching and learning and includes inadequate classroom resources, untrained or under-skilled teachers, and a poor selection of subjects due to an insufficient supply of expertise (ibid; King et al., 2019).

Humanitarian efforts in contexts of displacement have typically focused on early childhood and primary education, exacerbating out-of-school refugee and displaced adolescents’ vulnerability to trafficking, child-labour, and exploitation due to inadequate investments in formal secondary education (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In relation to this, humanitarian funding is most often short-term and dispersed to each level of schooling as if they are independent of each other rather than inter-dependent (Anselme & Hands, 2012; King et al., 2019).

Scholarly literature and evidence on how to resolve this predicament is scarce, but among donors, UN agencies, and INGOs there is consensus that refugee and displaced adolescents’ inclusion within host-nation and host-community education systems is vital, as is the recognition of prior learning and qualifications from their contexts of origin (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017; UNHCR, 2021a). Despite this consensus, however, more needs to be understood in terms of how host-countries can accommodate and support refugee and displaced adolescents learning, especially in contexts where governments struggle to provide secondary education for national learners. As such, the collection, documentation and sharing of data on refugee and displaced adolescents’ prior learning needs to be prioritised and coordinated by United Nations agencies and national governments (ibid). In addition, due to persistent tensions between secondary education and scarce income-earning opportunities – which are amplified in contexts of displacement – secondary education needs to address these dual priorities in the provision of quality, relevant, and formal schooling (Anselme & Hands, 2012).

1.3 The impact of climate change

The climate crisis is causing devastating and irreversible damage to people and the environment. Extreme weather events such as floods, storms, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires are becoming more frequent and severe, resulting in a vast loss of life, land, crops, livestock, ecosystems, and infrastructure (Plan International, 2022). As the climate crisis intensifies, adolescents’ access to education, a safe home, healthy environment, sufficient food, and healthcare becomes all the more precarious. This is especially true for adolescents already in the midst of humanitarian crises (UNICEF, 2021a; Plan International, 2022).

Climate-related disasters perpetuate intergenerational poverty, vulnerability, and marginalisation. The extent of this impact varies within countries and is influenced by pre-existing vulnerabilities and people’s capacity to adapt. Climate change disproportionately impacts low-income and conflict-affected countries, especially where inequities are already rife. Recent data shows that nearly all the highest-risk countries are also considered to be fragile contexts. Of the 33 countries that are at extreme risk, one quarter (8 countries) already have high levels of displacement and crisis-related mobility, with over 5% of their populations experiencing internal displacement (UNICEF, 2021a).

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather, toxic hazards, and diseases caused by climate change. Almost all adolescents globally are exposed to at least one major climate hazard, with already marginalised and conflict-affected adolescents, particularly girls, disproportionately impacted (UNICEF, 2021a; Save the Children, 2021; Plan International, 2022).

Adolescents in such settings are often less able to cope with hazards, in part due to a lack of civic order, political transparency, and economic management at a government level, which in turn leads to poor preparedness for disaster recovery processes and reduced collective resilience at the community level (UNICEF, 2021a). The climate crisis is also having a detrimental impact on adolescents’ basic rights.
exacerbating displacement and a series of education-adjacent crises such as adolescents’ poor access to water and nutrition, healthcare, protection and mental health support, and platforms for effective participation (Plan International, 2022).

Climate change also contributes to conflict-related displacement in situations where violence erupts over the competition for scarce natural resources (UNICEF, 2021a). Importantly, increased exposure to climate change and associated shocks are impacting adolescents’ ability to access and receive a quality and continuous education. Extreme weather damages infrastructure, forcing adolescents to leave their homes and classrooms, which disrupts their ability to learn (Save the Children, 2021; Plan International, 2021b). As climate-induced displacement is expected to increase, the risk of adolescents dropping out of school and not returning will also rise (Save the Children, 2021; Education Cannot Wait, 2022). The economic costs of the climate crisis cause many adolescents to discontinue their education as their families struggle with the associated financial burdens of a disaster (Geneva Global Hub for EiE, 2022).

Despite growing evidence and the compulsion to act, in reality countries are failing to prioritise secondary education that focuses on sustainability and climate change. Moreover, the transformative power of education is not sufficiently recognized in global climate policies or integrated at a national level. Approximately 20% of adolescents rate their climate change education as inadequate and the majority have little or no knowledge about policies, processes, and strategies related to climate change mitigation and adaptation in their countries (Plan International, 2021b).

Secondary education plays a crucial role in helping adolescents adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. Investing in sustainability education can help reduce the threat of climate emergencies (Plan International, 2022). Providing education builds relevant knowledge, skills, and leadership capabilities can improve sustainability practices and reduce emissions at individual, institutional, and community levels (UNICEF, 2021a; Plan International, 2022). Quality education that involves teaching about environmental issues also fosters ecological awareness and promotes sustainable living practices (Save the Children, 2021). Research shows that individuals who have completed secondary education are 10% more likely to be concerned and engaged in political action than those with only primary education (UNICEF, 2021). As such, secondary education is a climate action in and of itself.

Adolescents are often excluded from climate change policy planning that directly affects their lives (Plan International, 2021b). Providing adolescents with opportunities to meaningfully and productively engage in climate actions is essential for long-term solutions that have intersectional, intergenerational, and human rights-based outcomes (Plan International, 2021b; UNICEF, 2021a). Improving the quality of secondary education in crisis contexts should also involve investments in school infrastructure. This would enhance the physical resilience of education facilities and would result from the institutionalisation of risk management and anticipatory action, to reduce disruptions to adolescents’ learning when climate disasters strike (UNISDR, 2015; UNICEF, 2021a; Save the Children 2021).

Regarding the concerns above, the Comprehensive Safe Schools Framework (2022-2030) provides an all-hazards approach to support resilience and risk reduction in education (UNISDR, 2015). Despite challenges to implementation in conflict-affected contexts, the framework includes practical tools and actionable guidance for ministries of education, disaster risk reduction entities, schools, and other stakeholders. It has four components, including a cross cutting foundation and three pillars. The foundation focuses on system-level strengthening and resilience to protect the school community and ensure learning continuity. The first pillar addresses new and existing school buildings to build safer buildings and/or repair, replace, or relocate existing ones. School safety management, the framework’s second pillar, adopts an equity-focused planning approach to protect students’ health, safety, and wellbeing. The third pillar aims to build individual and community level resilience through learning opportunities that focus on disaster risk management and climate change, among others (UNISDR, 2015).

### 1.4 The impact of food insecurity

#### KEY RESOURCES


Food insecurity is increasingly prevalent in crisis contexts and is a crisis in its own right. As the most at-risk group, adolescents are susceptible to risks that create unique needs and challenges in all areas of their lives (Asfahani, Kadiyala, and Ghattas, 2019; Chaves et al., 2018; Elgar et al., 2021; CARE, 2022).

**Undernutrition from food insecurity has a negative effect on adolescents’ physical and mental health and education, resulting in low secondary school attendance and poor learning outcomes** (CARE, 2022). Recent projections indicate that the world is not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2, which aims to end hunger by 2030. In 2021, for example, there were around 2.3 billion people globally who experienced moderate to severe food insecurity (CARE, 2022) and 11.7 percent of the world’s population struggled with severe food insecurity, with hunger impacting 46 million more people in 2021 compared to 2020 (ibid).

Famines are complex and do not occur in isolation. They are often linked to intense social upheavals, the breakdown of the social contract, political and economic instability, war, and environmental degradation, as well as climate-related disasters such as drought and flooding, and rapid population growth (Chavez et al., 2018; Elgar et al., 2021). Multiple countries are facing a grave food security situation and an increasing number of people are dependent on food assistance in order to survive (Chavez et al., 2018). Current data shows that **more than 2 billion people are officially ‘food insecure’**, which includes chronic hunger, skipping meals, limited access to food, and reliance on donated or discarded food (Elgar et al., 2021).

When we consider the high proportion of this population who are adolescent, and compelling evidence showing that optimal school performance, cognitive, and physical development and socioemotional wellbeing require access to sufficient quality nutrition, we can understand the severity of food insecurity’s impact on secondary education in crisis contexts (Belachew et al., 2011; Chavez et al., 2018).
High rates of absenteeism and academic delays caused by food insecurity affect academic performance, which is a contributing factor to corresponding school dropout rates in contexts experiencing food insecurity (Belachew et al., 2011). Undernutrition caused by food insecurity also leads to shorter lifespans, stunted childhood growth rates, and a higher likelihood of developing chronic health conditions in adulthood (Chavez et al., 2018; Asfahani et al., 2019; Elgar et al., 2021). In addition to physical effects, adolescents are more likely to develop mental health problems and psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety if they are undernourished during this formative developmental period (Chavez et al., 2018; Asfahani et al., 2019; CARE, 2022).

When households that experience food insecurity must make decisions about how to use their limited financial resources, young people’s schooling is often compromised, especially for girls, in favour of providing sufficient sustenance to the wider family. For example, 70 percent of girls under the age of 18 in Somalia reported going to bed hungry at least once, with higher proportions of acute hunger being reported among internally displaced people (77%) and minority ethnic groups (80%) (CARE, 2022). Successful initiatives that mitigate food insecurity include school feeding programs or meal voucher programs to improve health and learning outcomes among the most marginalised (ibid, 2022). The World Food Program (WFP) and UNHCR developed a technical review to guide the design, implementation, and monitoring of school feeding programs for refugees (World Food Program, 2021). Despite funding limitations, it provides a new approach that aims to improve the health and well-being of the most marginalised which integrates health and nutrition planning at the level of schools.

1.5 The impact of conflict

- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA). (2022). Education Under Attack 2022

Conflict negatively affects secondary education from a supply and a demand side. Military spending takes away funding from education and weakened state institutions rely on short-term humanitarian aid which prevents universal and long-term access to secondary education in conflict-affected contexts (King, Dunlop, Kelcey, and Ndirangu, 2019). On the demand side, the comparatively high cost of secondary education reduces demand for schooling as adolescents and their parents perceive education to have less value, relevance, and diminishing returns during protracted periods of conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2017; King et al., 2019).

Attacks on education, often perpetrated by armed forces, non-state armed groups, and state security entities, also impact secondary education. These include any threat or use of force against teachers, staff, academics, students, buildings, and school facilities (GCPEA, 2022). Attacks and military use of school facilities for conflict operations have more than doubled in 2020 and 2021, compared to pre-pandemic rates (GCPEA, 2022). In recent times, these activities have killed, injured, abducted and detained, or arrested more than 9,000 primary and secondary teachers and adolescents (ibid).
During attacks, adolescents are commonly kidnapped or forced into military or rebel group service, further disincentivizing parents from sending adolescent children to school and contributing to high dropout rates at the secondary level (Silwal, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2017; Burde et al., 2017).

The effects of conflict reduce adolescent attendance and access to quality education due to the destruction of vital school facilities, the displacement of teachers at risk of harassment or attack (Burde et al., 2017; GCPEA, 2022). Moreover, the impact of conflict on secondary education may be greater than on primary because secondary schools require subject-specific and specialised resources which are difficult to obtain during conflict. Thus, on top of considerable personal risks, conflict limits the availability of vital school supplies and negatively affects motivation to enrol in and attend school on a regular basis (Burde et al., 2017).

As a result of incidents like those described above, there is a considerable shortfall in secondary school enrolment in conflict-affected contexts when compared with secondary school enrolment in stable settings, as conflict-affected adolescents are 50% less likely to enrol in and complete secondary education (Silwal, 2016; Burde et al., 2017; King et al., 2019).

The impact of conflict is not only short term. Studies indicate that inequalities, disruptions to the continuity of learning, and poor-quality teaching and learning lead to long term loss in human capital, economic stagnation and decline, and the worsening of conflict, which reinforces cycles of intergenerational inequality in education and life chances (Silwal, 2016; Burde et al., 2017).

Protecting education from attack in conflict-affected countries is one of the priorities to mitigate the impact of conflict on education. Protecting education from attack is actively promoted by the Safe Schools Declaration which outlines key commitments to ensure learning continuity during conflict (GCPEA, 2014). Over 116 states worldwide have so far endorsed this inter-state political agreement and are committed to implementing its guidelines to protect schools, students, and teachers during conflict.

Education also plays a key role in preventing conflict and promoting peace at the individual and community levels. It contributes to stability as it provides children and young people with knowledge, skills, and concepts for resolving conflicts peacefully (King et al., 2019). Quality secondary education encourages tolerance, support for democratic processes and civic participation, and resistance to violent extremism (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In fragile contexts, if just 30% of adolescents accessed quality secondary education, conflicts and wars could be reduced by half (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Investing in and improving access to secondary education in conflict-affected countries reduce youth frustration and disaffection and promote inclusion and shared values.
Despite an overall decline in the overseas development assistance (ODA) to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio for education, overall funding from ODA and humanitarian funding mechanism sources for education in crisis contexts has grown year on year, reaching $807 million in 2021 (Geneva Global Hub for EiE, 2022). Spending on secondary education in crisis contexts has reportedly increased, too (Malala Fund, 2015; ODI, 2016; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). However, these increases have not kept pace with the severity of global crises and the corresponding needs of crisis-affected adolescents (Geneva Global Hub for EiE, 2022). Moreover, within these figures, disaggregated data that defines and compares funding allocations towards crisis contexts is unavailable, meaning analysts and policy makers depend on data from low-income settings as a proxy for secondary education financing in contexts affected by conflict, climate change, or disaster vulnerability, for example. For the reasons above, key actors call for greater coherence and coordination between humanitarian and development sectors and their respective funding mechanisms (ibid).

Numerous actors also call for fee-free universal secondary education in low-resource and crisis contexts, while simultaneously noting/acknowledging concerns about the feasibility and sustainability of this approach (Malala Fund, 2015). Tensions revolve around the extent to which secondary education should be universal like primary education or whether secondary education should even be included in the state’s duty of care. Additionally, the potential of private sector funding for secondary education as an investment in workforce development and employment pipelines is approached with some caution (INEE, 2021; Menashy & Zakaria, 2022).

Also, the allocation of scarce resources towards universal secondary education is a cause for concern in contexts where primary education still suffers from chronic access and quality issues (Malala Fund, 2015).

Either way, evidence shows that a return on investments in quality secondary education depends on a stable political environment, low population growth, and sustainable financing for educational infrastructure such as classrooms, learning resources like textbooks, the recurring cost of teachers and teacher education, and up to date curricula. Without these elements in place, scholars, policy makers, and practitioners worry about overcrowded classrooms, irrelevant schools, high student and teacher attrition, and persistent unemployment rates among graduates (ibid).

To support sufficient and sustainable financing for secondary education, actors also call for the suspension of debt payments, a reduction of tax incentives for foreign investors, and the cessation of austerity measures in fragile and crisis-affected settings (Action Aid, 2017; Action Aid & Education International, 2022; Global Campaign for Education, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). In low-income country contexts, there is a direct association between debt burdens and reduced education spending (Global Campaign for Education, 2022).

In many cases, these reductions are a conditionality of multilateral development loans or debt reduction measures (Action Aid & Education International, 2022). Compounding this effect is the impact of ‘tax-dodging’ on government revenue. Each year, hundreds of billions of dollars are lost to tax incentives for multinational corporations and as a result public education misses out on vital domestic funds (Action Aid, 2017). To address the debates above and mitigate trade-offs associated with financing universal secondary education, innovative and sustainable financing solutions are required. Literature focused on finance solutions for secondary education in crisis contexts is scarce, but materials focused more broadly on low-resource settings offer some insight. For example, ongoing official development assistance (ODA) financing to secondary education contributes opportunities for systems-level capacity building and innovation towards more sustainable and domestic oriented options (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; UNICEF, 2020c). This may consist of medium-scale pilot projects that invest in education to industry pathways or bonded fellowships for school leaders to pursue knowledge and skills development abroad. This approach has higher risks in terms of investment leakages and bureaucratic inefficiencies, but it can promote the disbursement of costs across multiple actors and prioritise the inclusion of out-of-school and marginalised adolescents (ibid).

Beyond ODA, corporate social responsibility and corporate shared value initiatives also offer potential. As stated above, this approach to financing anticipates a collective return on investments, whereby knowledgeable and skilled graduates are prepared for workforce entry and the broader public gains engaged and enfranchised citizens (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Additionally, approaches like results-based financing to incentivize private investment in social impact bonds are suggested, as are public-private partnerships and collective impact models, where multiple funders including public, private, and philanthropic investors contribute to specific and complementary components of the secondary education system (Malala Fund, 2015; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Finally, social enterprise models are proposed, whereby business ventures that include adolescents and contribute to knowledge and skills development through apprenticeship models and the allocation of profits towards further schooling (ODI, 2016).

Although these approaches to secondary education financing are ambitious in fragile and crisis-affected contexts, they do offer a blueprint of possibilities. As such, the sector requires investment in a framework and the piloting of innovative and sustainable financing in crisis contexts as well as a stronger evidence base for the sector to work from. As this section shows, the data on financing for secondary education relates to broader development contexts and does not yet account for the complexities or fragility of crisis settings.
Community and school-level factors influencing secondary education in crisis contexts

Community and school-level factors are the realities, decisions, and actions that determine what secondary education in crisis contexts consists of, how it is implemented, and the short- to medium-term outcomes it achieves.

2.1 Teaching and learning approaches

Teachers are at the core of achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, teachers are central to meeting Goal 4: ‘Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning’ (UNESCO-IICBA, 2017). In crisis contexts, where learning materials and school infrastructure are limited, a teacher is often the only resource available to students, making their role especially important to quality education (Richardson et al., 2018). Numerous studies show that teachers are the strongest school-level predictor of student learning (Mendenhall et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers in crisis-affected settings provide life-saving information and skills. They can bring a sense of stability and hope, as well as disrupt the cycle of violence by equipping learners with the skills to heal and participate in the peaceful reconstruction of their communities (Mendenhall et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2018).

Who are teachers in crisis contexts?

“...the term teacher refers to instructors, facilitators or animators in formal and non-formal education programs. Teachers may have different levels/amounts of experience and training; they may be older learners or educated members of the community. A qualified teacher is an individual with a nationally recognized teaching certificate, diploma or degree; national recognition is obtained either in their host country or in their country of asylum. A trained teacher is someone with an alternative teaching certificate, whereas an untrained teacher is someone in a teacher position who has not undergone comprehensive teacher training”
(Richardson et al., 2018)

Significant teacher shortages exist globally, particularly at the secondary level and in crisis-affected contexts. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, will need 10.8 million additional teachers to meet the region’s demand for quality and relevant secondary education by 2030 (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Female teachers in particular are underrepresented at the secondary level in most countries, particularly in crisis contexts. In Liberia, for instance, women made up only 7% of secondary teachers in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). Teacher shortages limit enrolment and create large class sizes which compromise quality in the classroom, limit feasible teaching approaches, and give rise to protection issues (UNHCR, 2015). Investment in teachers who are qualified to teach the new types of skills that youth need to succeed in the workforce and in uncertain environments, including refugee teachers, is an investment in durable solutions for crisis-affected communities (Mastercard Foundation, 2020 UNHCR, 2015). Reducing the gender disparity among secondary teachers is also vital to reducing barriers to female adolescent attendance and learning in these settings (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Moreover, very few studies disaggregate challenges between primary and secondary level teaching.

Teacher quality is among the most important factors influencing learning outcomes at the primary and secondary school level. High-quality teachers enhance students’ well-being and future economic outcomes (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). They may also improve equity by helping disadvantaged students make up previous ‘learning deficits’ (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Beyond being present to teach, teachers play other critical roles in providing education to youth in crisis contexts (Richardson et al., 2018). They serve as essential public health allies - from the initial triaging of COVID-related health risks, classroom reconfiguration and social distancing, to gender-responsive WASH provisions, and beyond (UNICEF, 2020a). In humanitarian settings, teachers also provide psychosocial support and skills development for learners who have experienced distress, providing guidance in coping with stress and managing emotions (UNICEF, 2019).

As facilitators, teachers are key agents of change and must be qualified to promote skills development through various approaches (UNICEF, 2019). The presence of untrained and distressed teachers leads to poor learner scholastic outcomes and may present protection risks in schools. However, teachers with clear roles, outlined in a code of conduct, and with training and supervision can ensure that schools are safe, protective spaces where adolescents can regain a sense of normalcy following the trauma of displacement (UNHCR, 2015). As role models, teachers can be examples that embody the values, attitudes and behaviours that learners seek to acquire (ibid). Additionally, their direct work with adolescents’ families is critical in helping communities transition after emergencies to restore a sense of stability, security, and confidence both in their home countries upon return and in host countries, where they may stay indefinitely (Richardson et al., 2018).

KEY RESOURCES

- Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies. (2022) Promising Practices: Teacher Professional Development in Crisis Contexts
- Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies. (2022). Guidance Note: Teacher Wellbeing in Emergency Settings


For teachers to acquire and apply the skills they aim to facilitate in learners, their own well-being plays a key role, especially amid the trauma and stress of a crisis. Teacher well-being is correlated with helping students develop core social-emotional skills. Teachers who struggle with their own social-emotional management in the classroom have a negative impact on student learning outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable students (UNICEF, 2019; INEE, 2021; 2022).

In crisis-affected contexts, teachers who are seen not only as educators, but as community leaders and nurturers for adolescents in times of crisis, have the stressful role of providing education to students during community reconciliation or recovery processes. They may be expected to address sensitive issues in the classroom related to trauma and emotional problems for which they have received minimal, if any, training and support (UNESCO-IICBA, 2017). Meanwhile, teachers have their own psychosocial needs which are further impacted by crises and the work of teaching (Richardson et. al, 2018; INEE, 2022). As a result, teacher professional development that promotes skills development in this area should be considered when programming in crisis-affected contexts (ibid). Yet, there is a lack of research on what services are available to teachers in emergencies and whether or not teachers access them (Richardson et. al, 2018).

Although teachers are critically important, they face many challenges across student, school, and community levels that affect their teaching. These challenges are categorised in the literature as teacher wellbeing, teacher management, and teacher professional development issues (INEE, 2022).

Teaching in crisis contexts brings difficulties in gaining access to appropriate professional development opportunities as new or continuing teachers, in finding pathways toward formal certification of their training and expertise, and in sustaining themselves in the profession (Mendenhall, 2019).

Reports also suggest that the remuneration of teachers in post-crisis situations is often (but not always) lower than for other teachers and that they are the last in line for resources and professional development (UNESCO-IICBA, 2017). The most experienced teachers, or those with transferable capital to work in more lucrative secondary schools or with humanitarian organisations in other capacities, often leave the profession as a result (ibid). Low pay also forces teachers to find additional sources of income, but doing so through secondary or tertiary income activities divides teachers’ attention, which in turn negatively affects the quality of schooling (ibid).
Secondary school teachers in crisis contexts also report feeling demotivated by an inability to adequately address the trauma, discipline, motivation, and psychosocial issues that their students contend with (Richardson et al., 2018). Teachers in these contexts teach in complex environments, where class sizes are typically large and classrooms are comprised of learners of different cultures, ages, academic backgrounds and learning abilities. Rarely are these teachers adequately trained to manage classrooms or create differentiated curricula amid such complexities, which then limits the approaches they use with learners (ibid).

As participation in secondary education has broadened to a wider group of adolescents, there is increased demand for the secondary education sector to equip students to find employment and live healthy and empowered lives. Traditional curricula, teaching methods and strict school timetables have become less relevant to the current needs of adolescents and potential employers, requiring teachers to also shift their curricular and pedagogical approaches to teaching for these new needs, often without training (UNICEF, 2020). As noted in section 3.3, pedagogy is fundamental to transferable soft skills development. While balance between direct or traditional teaching and active learning approaches is important, evidence shows that active learning approaches best support transferable soft skills development and can also facilitate healing, foster a sense of belonging and community, and promote social cohesion (UNICEF, 2019). In crisis-affected contexts, active learning approaches can foster skills that support the psychosocial wellbeing and individual resilience processes of adolescents. As examples, cooperative games can foster cooperation, social awareness simulations can promote empathy, and visualisation exercises that ask learners to consider their future goals can help them develop self-awareness of their abilities, and breathing or relaxation exercises can help learners to recognize and manage their own emotions (ibid).

Teacher professional development to foster pedagogical skills is particularly important in challenging contexts (Mendenhall et al., 2017). High quality teacher professional development, including preservice and in-service support, can have a significant and positive impact on teachers’ classroom instruction, helping them to develop both subject matter knowledge and the appropriate skills to support skills development in all learners and in different learning environments (UNICEF, 2019). As previously stated, **teachers in these settings need the knowledge and skills to meet the psychosocial and behavioural needs of complex learners** (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; Richardson et al., 2018). Psychosocial training in refugee contexts is especially important because the insecurity inherent to refugee situations can ‘harm children’s physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural and social development’ (Richardson et al., 2018). However, evidence suggests that teachers in crisis contexts are not equipped to address and manage the context-specific needs of their students (INEE, 2015; Richardson et al., 2018). **Teacher professional development initiatives are largely neglected during emergencies, and in many cases consist of one-off workshops with unrealistic expectations**, which neither provide sufficient time to learn content and pedagogy, nor the time for teachers to apply what they learned in their own classrooms (Mendenhall et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2018).

Coordination across the humanitarian-development nexus remains a pressing issue that shapes teaching approaches...
The missing piece: Secondary education in crisis contexts

COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS

2.2 Flexible pathways

At the Transforming Education Summit (TES) in September 2022, UN Member States committed to the prevention, preparation for, response to and recovery from crises. In particular, they called for increased attention to access, quality, equity and inclusion for the 222 million children and youth who have had their learning disrupted due to armed conflict, forced displacement, and health or climate-induced disasters (TES, 2022). Fulfilling this population’s right to quality secondary education thus requires the strengthening of multiple flexible education pathways, as discussed further below (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; UNICEF, 2020b).

Given the complexity of factors impeding adolescents’ progression through secondary education, flexible secondary pathways are critical to meet the needs of adolescents (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Late entry, repetition, dropout, and re-entry following extended absence are prevalent challenges for adolescents and education systems alike (ibid). Adolescents affected by conflict or climate change often interrupt their schooling to seek safety or new livelihoods (ibid). The need to shift continually between school, work, and domestic responsibilities is also a reality for many adolescents.

Flexible secondary education systems also need to meet the demands of the changing nature of work and global complexities like rapid urbanisation, technological changes, and climate change (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Yet despite these realities, secondary education systems generally employ a one-size-fits-all approach. Traditionally, secondary schooling is designed to support a small minority of students who are most likely to progress to tertiary education. Secondary education, especially in low-resource and crisis-affected contexts, rarely offers relevant, practical, or high-quality education, especially in low-resource and crisis-affected contexts. Flexible education pathways are critical to meet the needs of adolescents and education systems alike (ibid).

Flexible secondary education pathways need to be designed and implemented in a way that is responsive to the needs of learners and educators in crisis contexts. Different project timelines, funding cycles, and sources of funding, as well as compartmentalised humanitarian and development divisions within institutions influence teacher professional development, recruitment, and retention (Mendenhall, 2019; Richardson et. al, 2018). Education specialists, ministry authorities, donors, and policymakers need to find ways to establish purposeful and coordinated practices and policies that work within and across their humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities (Mendenhall, 2019). For secondary education, this means finding ways to improve coordination as key actors consider short- and long-term education responses (Mendenhall, 2019).

From the outset of a crisis, education specialists need to consider the longer-term implications of their programming and policy-influencing decisions as they relate to learners, teachers, and education system actors. They need to consider how best to liaise with national authorities as early in the process as possible to support broader institutional and system strengthening (Mendenhall, 2019). Furthermore, all inter-governmental and INGO partners that recruit, manage, and train teachers need to coordinate to establish common and standardised teacher policies and practices. When teacher policies are mixed and determined by a disparate arrangement of agencies, there is a corresponding lack of coherence and accountability among teachers and partners. This contributes to the migration of teachers from one agency to another and dissatisfaction and confusion amongst teachers, which results in disruptions to learners and inconsistent teaching approaches (UNHCR, 2015).

The need to maintain up to date and disaggregated teacher data is another priority that affects teacher approaches more broadly. Without data that tracks teachers, their qualification levels, subject specialisations, and sociocultural backgrounds ‘we know little about how to effectively recruit, select, and deploy teachers’ (Richardson et. al, 2018). The lack of data results in limited information to discern what training teachers might need based on their qualification levels (UNHCR, 2015). At a regional and global level, little is known about who teachers of refugees and other crisis-affected adolescents are or how they are recruited, trained, retained, compensated and managed in their contexts (Richardson et. al, 2018). As emergencies become increasingly protracted and refugee populations continue to grow, we need an evidence base to guide policies and support governments and implementing partners to provide a quality teaching force in crisis settings (ibid).

Finally, teacher educators and those working in teacher training colleges are often not consulted or prepared until later in the crisis preparedness, response, and recovery process. Yet they play a critical role in equipping teachers with effective teaching approaches to use in crisis settings (Mendenhall, 2019). Teacher educators understand the context, the national curriculum, appropriate pedagogical approaches, and disciplinary practices which can benefit teachers in local settings. Teacher educators would also benefit from additional investment in capacity building that addresses the broader academic and social-emotional needs of displaced learners, as well as the needs of IDP/refugee teachers, as they may be less familiar with them (ibid).

The key to effective teacher education is to ensure that teacher educators are well prepared to meet the needs of displaced learners, as they may be less familiar with them (ibid). Teacher educators would also benefit from additional investment in capacity building that addresses the broader academic and social-emotional needs of displaced learners, as well as the needs of IDP/refugee teachers, as they may be less familiar with them (ibid).

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accessible ways, though inequities in access to technology and constraints in teacher professional development limit its potential (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Flexible pathways most relevant to crisis contexts are Accelerated Learning/Education Programs, Bridging Programs, and Catch-up Programs (INEE, 2017; UNICEF, 2020b).

Increasingly, Accelerated Learning/Education programs are acknowledged within National Education Strategic Plans (AEWG, 2020). They run in an accelerated time frame, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school adolescents who have had their education interrupted by poverty, marginalisation, conflict and/or crisis (ibid). They have also been used when schools have been shut down or where the school system is unable to reach all learners (ibid). The goal of Accelerated Learning/Education Programmes is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity (AEWG, 2020; USAID, 2020). To note, Accelerated Learning/Education programs have focused mostly on primary education until recently, though utilising them for secondary education has been discussed in recent years.

Bridging programs facilitate the integration of adolescents into the formal education system by preparing them for new educational contexts. These are short-term courses focused on language proficiency and preparation for enrolment in the education system of a new context or country (AEWG, 2020; UNICEF, 2020b). Catch-up programs address learning gaps for adolescents who have recently dropped out to facilitate their re-entry into lower or upper secondary formal education. These are short-term transitional programs for adolescents previously enrolled in upper primary or lower secondary who have had their education disrupted (AEWG, 2020; UNICEF, 2020b).

While flexible pathway programs provide access to large numbers of adolescents, and while strong evidence demonstrates how these programs support learners in basic numeracy and literacy skills, they continue to serve only a small percentage of the total affected population (AEWG, 2020). Significant gaps remain when it comes to sustained and meaningful policy-level commitments to flexible programming, particularly in relation to government ownership and oversight of flexible programs, financial allocations from national budgets, and alignment of flexible pathway learners within national EMIS systems (ibid). This also impacts the consistency of transition pathways from alternative learning programs into formal education (ibid).

Many flexible pathway programs also suffer inefficiencies in terms of poor attendance rates and high learner drop out, with female learners struggling more than males in respect to retention, completion, and transition to further learning or employment (AEWG, 2017; AEWG, 2020). Many adolescents also find the transition into formal education systems challenging following pathways programs due to a range of barriers (AEWG, 2020). Where transitions do occur, an ongoing challenge is the capacity to track learner progress upon their entry into formal education, as doing so is often not an explicit focus of most programs (ibid). The contextual constraints of many emergency contexts, such as the lack of resources and limited time to train and supervise teachers, also make program implementation difficult (AEWG, 2017; USAID, 2020). Many teachers are rarely trained to teach in accelerated or alternative learning environments with groups of mixed age learners (Mendenhall, 2019).

The scale and sustainability of flexible approaches to secondary education are also important considerations. Successful flexible learning programs are generally tailored to the local context, have diversified sources of funding, and multi-stakeholder partnerships (AEWG, 2017). They also engage directly with formal schools and systems into which learners may eventually (re)enter, are integrated within national education systems where feasible, and have strong ownership and oversight by national educational authorities (AEWG, 2020; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). The role of private and non-state providers in education is also important for additional innovative and flexible pathways, but with such approaches the public sector needs to retain a strong regulatory role (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

A number of ‘blind’ spots remain, however, when it comes to the ways in which flexible pathway outcomes are measured and reported on, with a need for more substantial and diversified data to inform decision-making (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; USAID, 2020). The focus on the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills has come at the expense of measuring a wider range of important outcomes in fragile contexts, including psychosocial well-being, life skill acquisition, social emotional competencies, and general self-confidence/self-efficacy (AEWG, 2020), see section 2.3 below. Additionally, disaggregated outcome reporting by household poverty indices, disability status, displacement status, or other demographic markers are under-documented and under-analysed within many programs at present (USAID, 2020).

2.3 Transferable soft skills

**KEY RESOURCES**


Adolescents live in a world of challenge and opportunity, which includes new technologies, changing labour markets, migration, conflict, and environmental and political changes (UNICEF, 2019). To succeed within current and future environments, adolescents need access to learning that develops the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values which enable them to become successful life-long learners who can learn, un-learn, and relearn; find and retain productive work; make wise decisions; and positively engage in their communities (ibid). The changing nature of work also places a premium on skills beyond traditional literacy and numeracy (Brown, 2015; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Employers in formal and informal sectors
therefore demand workers with digital literacy and 21st century skills like critical thinking, communication, creative problem-solving, entrepreneurship, resilience, and teamwork (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Though literature on these concepts in crisis-contexts specifically is limited, adolescents in crisis contexts also need to develop the skills needed to navigate the complex realities of their lives, including refugees and IDP adolescents who have especially uncertain futures (UNICEF, 2020d; Dryden-Peterson, 2022).

Despite this expressed need, by 2030 an estimated 825 million children are expected to leave school without basic secondary level skills (UNICEF, 2019). Globally, about 500 million youth are unemployed, underemployed, or working insecure jobs, often in the informal sector. Two hundred and fifty-five million (21%) youth in the developing world – threequarters of whom are women – are not in employment, education, or training (ibid). **Curricula and pedagogical approaches in secondary schools have traditionally been academic and theoretical in nature, without relevance to contextual needs, and delivered to prepare youth for further studies alone** (Mastercard Foundation, 2020).

Secondary education systems, especially in low-resource and crisis-affected contexts, rarely offer practical or high-quality opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complex realities that often accompany life for adolescents in these settings (UNICEF, 2020d; Dryden-Peterson, 2022). Furthermore, low levels of enrolment in crisis settings and compressed or accelerated curricula leave adolescents with fewer opportunities to gain essential skills (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Shifting secondary education from an elite system for a select few to a system open to all adolescents is therefore a vital and unprecedented necessity (ibid).

As the world becomes more complex, the skills needed for work and those required for learning, personal empowerment, and active citizenship are converging (Brown, 2015; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). The UNICEF (2019) Framework for Transferable Skills identifies four different categories of skills needed by adolescents for success in school, life, and work: a) Foundational skills, namely literacy and numeracy; b) Transferable soft skills, also known as life skills, 21st century skills, soft skills, or socio-emotional skills; c) Digital skills; and d) Job-specific skills, also known as technical and vocational skills (ibid).

Within those categories, transferable soft skills, which are defined by the Mastercard Foundation (2020) as ‘higher-order cognitive and non-cognitive skills that individuals can use to succeed in different situations in work and life’ play four key roles. It is important to note that many terms are used to describe the set of tools learners need to develop in education today, particularly for crisis contexts. For this briefing, these are considered synonyms. **Transferable soft skills promote lifelong learning; support a changing workforce; support personal empowerment and community engagement; and build skills to cope with trauma and build resilience** (ibid).

They include problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy, and communication, and are highlighted by UNICEF (2019) as the ‘magic glue’ that works alongside knowledge and values to connect, reinforce, and develop other skills and build further knowledge (ibid). Transferable soft skills also encompass socio-emotional skills, defined as “a set of social, emotional and related “non-academic” skills, attitudes, behaviours and values that help an individual direct their thoughts, feelings and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school, work and life” (Harvard University & INEE, 2022).

Transferable soft skills predict a wide range of life outcomes, such as increased wages and GDP growth, poverty reduction, and reduced fertility and population growth (Brown, 2015; UNICEF, 2020b). Quality education and learning focused on transferable soft skills fosters empowered and more resilient adolescents, especially for those who are already marginalised (UNICEF, 2019). **Transferable soft skills support crisis-affected adolescents to build resilience and cope with trauma in the face of adversity** (ibid). With transferable soft skills, adolescents can become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social, and economic challenges and to identify solutions to problems (UNICEF, 2020b). They also enable adolescents to make constructive life choices and avoid unhealthy behaviours that threaten their health and well-being, such as the risk of violence, early marriage, unintended pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, or substance abuse (UNICEF, 2019).

For the potential of transferable soft skills in crisis contexts to be realised, teachers need to be prepared to foster skill development in classrooms and communities. **While there should be a balance between direct instruction and active learning approaches, transferable soft skills are better taught through ‘doing’ rather than through theory or memorization** (UNICEF, 2019). Evidence shows that active learning approaches best support transferable soft skills development (ibid). When adapted to crisis settings, active learning can foster skills that support the psychosocial well-being and resilience processes of adolescents (ibid).

In humanitarian settings, skills development relies on specialised curricula for social emotional learning and psychosocial support. The resulting guidance and resources to facilitate the implementation and teaching of that curricula should be adapted to respond to the culture, age, and gender needs in a particular setting (Mastercard Foundation, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). However, adolescents’ capacity development should be supported beyond the immediate humanitarian context in both formal and informal settings (UNICEF, 2020b). Skills development should also be incorporated into the existing school curricula. When doing so, one priority is to create formal education interventions in an ongoing and consistent manner rather than through singular skills courses inserted outside of the curricula. **Integrating skills through whole-school approaches helps institutionalise opportunities for students to access information and actively engage in school and wider civic life** (UNICEF, 2020b). There is also great demand for interventions and evidence about...
interventions designed to reform curricula holistically and to train teachers to build transferable soft skills within their classrooms (Brown et. al 2015).

Multiple learning pathways are also critical in crisis settings to promote equal access to opportunities for transferable soft skills development for marginalised groups. There is a growing body of evidence on the effectiveness of alternative learning pathway interventions to build transferable soft skills, such as peer-to-peer learning, community centres, or civil society groups (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Safe spaces programming that offers adolescent girls opportunities to strengthen foundational skills and develop life and livelihood skills are an alternative for adolescent girls without access to secondary education (ibid).

Challenges remain in implementing programs that build transferable soft skills. As an example, in a UNICEF (2019) study, out of 152 surveyed countries 117 include transferable soft skills within national policy documents, and 71 include transferable soft skills within curriculum, but only 18 define the learning standards to ensure the development of these skills across different age/grade levels. There is also a lack of specific information about which transferable soft skills are targeted in many of the interventions, which means that it may be hard for users to disentangle the evidence that studies provide related to transferable soft skills (Brown et. al, 2015). Navigating the various terminologies used in the field is also a challenge, with many terms used interchangeably (UNICEF, 2019).

In terms of measurement, there is a noticeable gap in evidence of programming connected to the formal education system, and little to no evidence on institutional level changes and teacher-focused interventions (Brown et. al, 2015). The majority of measured outcomes are at the individual level, especially for individual beliefs and attitudes, and health and safety behaviours. There is also a gap in evidence related to the effectiveness of interventions on schooling and academic outcomes (ibid). Similarly, there is very limited evidence on the cost-effectiveness of interventions to increase transferable soft skills among youth in low-and-middle-income countries, and only 10 studies measure outcomes specifically for early school leavers (ibid). There is also a need for future impact evaluations of transferable soft skills programmes to measure outcomes that occur further out, for instance, those that are the result of changes in learning and behaviours (ibid).
3 Adolescent development factors influencing secondary education in crisis contexts

Adolescent development factors represent the social variables in an adolescent’s immediate life, status, and identity that determine their ability to participate and engage in quality secondary education.

3.1 Protection and inclusion

KEY RESOURCES

- Bakhshi, P., Babulal, G. M., & Trani, J. F. (2018). Education and disability in a conflict affected context: Are children with disabilities less likely to learn and be protected in Darfur?
- UNGEI. (2021). Leave No Girls with Disabilities Behind
- UNICEF. (2016). Towards Inclusive Education: The Impact of Disability on School Attendance in Developing Countries

As discussed in previous sections, adolescent vulnerability and corresponding protection needs are exacerbated in crisis and emergency contexts. Exposure to conflict, displacement, climate disasters, education exclusion, and food insecurity increases protection risks and interferences with learning. During the pandemic, the most marginalised adolescents were forced to drop out of school to support their families and lost access to essential services due to school closures, such as mental health and psychosocial support and school meals (Plan International, 2021a). Similarly, adolescents in displacement contexts often lose access to social services. They are often discriminated against in host-communities and face several challenges, including bullying, discrimination, and exploitation.

Due to inadequate funding and coordination, secondary schools in host country communities do not always have the capacity to provide the services needed for adolescent protection and wellbeing (UNHCR, 2021a). Moreover, research, guidance, and data on adolescent protection at the secondary level is very limited. Instead, the role of education is recognized in most adolescent protection interventions, and it is shared with the wider humanitarian action in situations of emergency.

All levels of education are supposed to provide physical and psychosocial support, hope and stability, and access to essential protection services which includes health care and food (INEE, 2018). However, adolescents require additional support and protection not only at home and school, but also in their communities. As such, the rights of adolescents should be protected, and their development should be supported through cross-sector social welfare and protection programs (UNICEF, 2022). Protection measures include providing targeted gender-based violence, feeding, and mental health supports and creating safe spaces for adolescents within and outside schools (ibid).

The above-mentioned protection risks have an acute effect on people with disabilities. They often face discrimination and exclusion in situations of conflict and crisis, not to mention heightened comparative risk to their safety and well-being (Pearce, Paik, & Robles, 2016; Secondary Education Working Group, 2022). Disability is defined as the combination of an individual’s functional limitations and the barriers to participation within community or institutional environments (Bakhsi, Babulal, and Trani, 2018). The extent to which inclusive policies and practices are in place determines the degree to which adolescents with disabilities are enabled or prevented from engaging in aspects of social life, which includes making decisions that impact present and future possibilities (Bakhsi, Babulal, and Trani, 2018; Plan International, 2021a).

The percentage of children and adolescents with one or more functional difficulties is highest in fragile and crisis-affected contexts (Secondary Education Working Group, 2022). Disability significantly affects school attendance in primary and secondary education, with an average marginal effect of -30%, indicating that disabled children consistently face more challenges than non-disabled children in participating in education (UNICEF, 2016).

A lack of systematic data collection on disability is a major barrier to the development and implementation of quality and inclusive education in crisis contexts (Plan International, 2021). Adolescents with disabilities are more likely to face exclusion from education due to the multiple learning barriers that they face, including but not limited to a lack of inclusive resources mobility restrictions, higher risk of bullying and abuse, gender-based violence, neglect, and long-term psychosocial trauma (Cavalleria, Nasir, and Munir, 2020; Secondary Education Working Group, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). School environments often reinforce negative attitudes and discrimination towards adolescents with disabilities and teachers in under-resourced and under-supported contexts rarely have the knowledge and skills needed to create inclusive and empowering learning environments (UNGEI, 2021).

Like other factors in crisis contexts, inadequate approaches to inclusion for disabled adolescents contributes to low enrolment and completion rates. Regardless of their education level, adolescents with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than adolescents without disabilities (UNGEI, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Disability has a greater impact on education participation than other individual and household characteristics. Disabled children also experience the same barriers in accessing education, regardless of their individual and socio-economic characteristics, such as gender, age, household income, and place of residence (UNICEF, 2016). In addition, it is important to note that the rate of out-of-school children increases during secondary school and is higher among children with multiple disabilities, and highest among those with
severe disabilities (UNICEF, 2022). Secondary-level education programs in crisis contexts are not always able to prioritise inclusive education strategies, which exacerbates existing inequities in school participation. For example, distance and remote learning during COVID-19 struggled to account for the needs of adolescents with disabilities (Plan International, 2021a; Secondary Education Working Group, 2022). This affects their ability to progress through all levels of education, including higher education, and negatively affects their psychosocial wellbeing. (UNGEI, 2021).

Given current trends, the humanitarian sector is on track to fail its commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,’ particularly adolescents with disabilities. Consequently, hand in hand with low-cost and no-cost interventions at a local level, significant investment in system-level data collection and improvements to inclusive secondary education in crisis contexts are needed. The provision of education for adolescents with disabilities has been shaped by international agreements and frameworks, such as UNESCO’s (1994) Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, which recognizes inclusive education as a fundamental human right.

3.2 Gender equality

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The central intergovernmental agreement to reverse disparities in adolescent girls’ access to quality education is the Charlevoix Declaration, which promotes increased funding, research and the production of gender-disaggregated evidence, and gender-transformative programming (G7, 2018; Allaf, Dicum, & Naylor, 2022). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 69 million girls were out of school in crisis-affected countries (Plan International, 2019; Education Cannot Wait, 2022; Allaf, Dicum, & Naylor, 2022). For those who could attend school, there were only 7 girls in the classroom for every 10 boys (Plan International, 2019). In conflict-affected communities, evidence shows that girls are less-likely to engage in or stay enrolled in schooling (Burde et al., 2017). Compared to their counterparts in stable settings, girls in crisis contexts are also 90 percent more likely to be out-of-school during adolescence (INEE & UNGEI, 2019). Moreover, it is estimated that more than 20 million girls who were previously attending school have not returned since COVID-19 restrictions eased (Plan International, 2019). This figure represents all ages and low-resource contexts more broadly, but with additional barriers to schooling during adolescence and the compounding impact of conflict and climate change on girls’ access to education, it is likely that secondary-aged girls and crisis contexts are over-represented in this projection. A further projection for contexts affected by climate change is that related disruptions will prevent over 4 million girls in low- and middle-income countries from completing their education, with this number increasing to 12.5 million per year by 2025 as the frequency of climate-related disasters increases (Plan International, 2021).

Gender has a strong bearing on the metrics of quality secondary education in crisis settings. In large part, this is due to the developmental stage of secondary-aged learners and gender biases in many contexts; the effects of which have a disproportionate impact on adolescent girls (UNGEI, 2017). A quality secondary education that is gender-transformative and empowering can increase girls’ skills and opportunities for leadership and decision making in terms of their own health literacy, civic engagement, and employability (UNGEI, 2017, INEE & UNGEI, 2019; UNICEF, 2020a; Plan International, 2021). Access to quality secondary education also enhances the trajectory from adolescence to adulthood, improving social and cultural capital, income earning potential, and providing a downstream effect for peacebuilding, resilience to climate change, and public health outcomes within their communities (UNICEF, 2020a; Plan International, 2021; Cha, 2020).

Analysis shows that gender parity in mean years of schooling equates with more peaceful and inclusive societies that are better prepared to mitigate conflict and adapt to the threat of climate change (INEE & UNGEI, 2019). Access to quality secondary education for adolescent boys is also a significant protective factor. It promotes knowledge and skills building for improved employment pathways, the capacity to contribute to peacebuilding and disaster risk reduction, and access to gender-transformative classrooms that promote gender-equity. In crisis contexts, secondary schooling also reduces the likelihood of recruitment into armed groups, trafficking, and exploitation through informal labor markets (UNICEF, 2020a).

As highlighted in the literature, however, harmful gender norms deny access to secondary education for adolescent girls in particular (Education Cannot Wait, 2022). In multiple crisis-affected contexts, these norms limit girls and young women to domestic and reproductive roles and exclude them from participation in the public sphere (UNICEF, 2020a; Corwith & Ali, 2022). Cultural attitudes also deny them access to resources, information, and social networks, negating their ability to participate in the decisions affecting their own lives (Plan International, 2021). In crisis contexts, amid protracted uncertainty and risk it is common for harmful norms to become more embedded in daily cultural beliefs and practices (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This reality is represented by the fact that secondary-aged girls are more vulnerable to school-related and gender-based violence and being forcibly married to alleviate financial burdens or mitigate safety concerns, which further entraps them in cycles of intergenerational poverty, dependency, and exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2017; UNICEF, 2020a; Plan International 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, secondary-aged girls devoted more time than boys to unpaid care work in the home environment (Plan International, 2021). During the pandemic, girls and young women were disproportionately impacted by...
gender biases and less likely to return to secondary school compared to boys (UNICEF, 2020a). For many crisis-affected contexts, this represents a concerning regression, especially in contexts where impressive progress towards gender parity had been made (e.g. Pakistan and Uganda). **Based on data from past crises, we know that conflict reduces the chances by 50 percent of adolescent girls transitioning from primary to secondary education and on to tertiary education or employment** (UNICEF, 2020a). In part, this is due to the increased time, effort, and risk that girls take to travel to and from school in complex settings (Burde et al. 2017).

In conflict-affected contexts, where travel to and from school increases the likelihood of kidnapping or attack, parents are inclined to keep girls at home (Burde et al. 2017). This is prevalent in settings like northern Nigeria and Afghanistan where girls’ education is contentious and armed groups commonly target students, their teachers, and educational facilities to enforce their ideological aims (GCPEA, 2022). **A further complexity undermining girls’ access to secondary education in crisis contexts is insufficient Water, Sanitation and Health (WASH) facilities at school, including sex-segregated bathrooms and menstrual health management resources**. In conjunction with the stigma around menstrual periods that still exists in many societies, this presents a deterrent to adolescent girls’ schooling as many are compelled to stay home due to perceptions of shame and the risk of harassment (UNGEI, 2017; INEE & UNGEI, 2019; Plan International, 2021).

Where disruptions to education are most pronounced and protracted, digital technologies are a way to promote the continuity of secondary schooling and mitigate learning loss (UNICEF, 2020a). Even in low- and middle-income countries and contexts affected by crises, rates of access to mobile technologies are high. For example, 78 percent of households in Pakistan, 84 percent in Afghanistan, and 86 percent of households in Bangladesh have access to mobile devices (UNICEF, 2020a). However, a pervasive digital gender divide means that adolescent girls in South Asia are 70 percent less likely than boys to access devices at home (ibid). This divide emerges as girls hit puberty, broadens during adolescence, and persists after marriage (ibid). As such, **even where digital technologies offer promise, gender discrimination denies adolescent girls access to learning, further compounding the impact of a disrupted secondary education**.

Available literature offers a number of system-level solutions to reduce the impact of gender-biases on secondary education in crisis contexts. To minimise the digital gender divide, for example, the prioritisation of devices and subsidised data plans for gender-discriminated and marginalised learners is a starting point (UNICEF, 2020a). But for investments like this to make a meaningful difference to secondary education, schools, informal learning centres, and teachers need to work towards gender-responsive and gender transformative practices that create safe and empowering spaces for adolescents’ learning and development (INEE & UNGEI, 2019; UNICEF, 2020a). Beyond the assessment-driven learning that characterises a lot of secondary education in low-resource countries, schools also need to be a safe haven and lifeline for adolescent girls in crisis contexts. Essential health and nutrition information, protection services and referral mechanisms, and opportunities to engage in civic activities need to be made
available. As promoted by UNICEF’s (2020a) conceptual framework for gender-responsive education, this means that secondary education requires a cross-sector and multi-site approach with adolescent girls and boys at the centre and health, protection, and education actors who coordinate equitable access to quality schooling in its broadest sense (ibid). Moreover, global- and national-level policies to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change need to be gender-transformative, acknowledging the disproportionate impact of climate-related events on adolescent girls and young women and recognizing the key role that they play in disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities (UNGEI, 2017).

3.3 Participation and engagement

Adolescents are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in humanitarian preparedness, response, and recovery activities (Apollo & Mbah, 2022; Action Aid, 2019). Many are digitally literate, socially networked, and less bound by prior knowledge or traditional processes than their parents’ or teachers’ generation (ibid). Adolescents with appropriate skills can advocate for their peers and those less fortunate than them and they can contribute to awareness campaigns and recovery activities with creativity and a high-level of relevance (Plan International, 2018; Action Aid, 2019).

Countries with large adolescent populations, which are typically low-income and often fragile with lower life-expectancy and higher birth rates, stand to benefit from the demographic dividend (Apollo & Mbah, 2022). This means that the largest cohort of the nation’s population are adolescents and youth. In theory, the demographic dividend pays off when appropriate investments in quality education and platforms for meaningful participation in decision making are made, which allows this cohort to contribute towards long-term peacebuilding, economic development, and environmental sustainability (ibid).

As enshrined in Article 12 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), participation in decisions about matters that affect one’s life is a fundamental right (UNICEF, 2001).
2021). This is about more than adolescents having a voice in everyday decision-making processes. It connects to the availability of spaces and forums whereby adolescents can safely challenge exclusion and discrimination, exploitation and injustice, and participate in local, national, and global processes for change (UNICEF, 2021).

Typically, the State is the duty bearer, bound by the UNCRC to create environments such as secondary schools where adolescents’ views can be heard and acted upon. In the absence of functioning state actors, it is the role of non-governmental and inter-governmental entities to realise the vision of Article 12 for all adolescents (UNICEF, 2021). As such, it is vital that all secondary education actors reframe adolescents as active partners in policy and program decision making processes (UNICEF, 2021).

In many crisis-affected contexts, however, the proposition of adolescents as partners in decision making is complex and contested. Many adolescents in fact experience the ‘broken trajectory effect’ (Cha, 2020). This is where the promise of secondary education fails to materialise in adolescents’ lives. In some settings, adolescents become frustrated by perceptions of a corrupt and unjust society as their envisioned transition to adulthood is undermined by violence or environmental disaster (Cordaid, 2015). In other crisis settings it is too dangerous for adolescents to exercise their voice and as such they are rendered passive and vulnerable (ibid). In both cases, non-participation becomes a safe and convenient option for many adolescents.

Adolescents are positioned in local dialogue and global discourse as changemakers and leaders, with the energy and agency to affect present and future realities (Bellino, 2018; Apollo & Mbah, 2022). Yet they often live within incompatible cultural and political systems that do not allow for the expression of leadership at such a young age (Bellino, 2018). In post-war Guatemala, a fragile democracy and the social expectation that adolescents are “apolitical citizens” has undermined possibilities for participation and civic engagement (ibid). Despite deep distrust for state institutions and critical awareness of injustices within society, adolescents have become “wait citizens” as disaffection and disinterest in civic processes also contributes to non-participation (ibid).

This cautionary tale is included to illustrate the hidden barriers to participation that many adolescents (and humanitarian agencies) in crisis contexts contend with. Although there is emerging recognition of adolescents as a cornerstone of crisis preparedness and response processes, the humanitarian sector’s top-down role in crisis contexts has denied adolescents access to an enabling environment in which they can contribute to recovery and change (Plan International, 2018; Action Aid, 2019; Apollo & Mbah, 2022). At present, there is a general disconnect between humanitarian sector rhetoric and action. In crisis contexts adolescents tend to be treated as students who are either passive and vulnerable or they are positioned as a risk as perpetrators of violence (Bellino, 2018; Apollo & Mbah, 2022). It is therefore vital that the conditions for partnership and meaningful partnerships between adolescents and secondary education actors in crisis contexts are nurtured. This also ensures that adolescents are not set up with the expectation that they need to resolve crises that have deep structural and political causes alone (Plan International, 2018).

To alleviate the above scenarios and promote positive adolescent participation the literature suggests various approaches for secondary education settings, which we have synthesised into seven recommendations.

**The first recommendation** is fostering a sense of belonging by engaging adolescents in curriculum design and teaching activities, especially for displaced and refugee youth who experience ‘radical uncertainty’ (Cha, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). When they are made to feel like they belong and experience a sense of agency, the literature shows that even the most disaffected adolescents become motivated to learn and participate in secondary education (Cha, 2020).

**The second recommendation** relates to the positive influence of skilled teachers as a strong predictor of adolescent participation and engagement in learning. As such, increased investment in teacher professional development is in effect an investment in adolescent participation, belonging, and motivation to learn (Cha, 2020).

**The third recommendation** requires a shift in mindsets about the role of adolescents in crisis preparedness, response, and recovery processes. In turn, humanitarian actors need to approach adolescents as equals, able to contribute ideas and strategies, and able to progress their own initiatives with and alongside policymakers, practitioners, teachers, caregivers, and their peers (Plan International, 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

For the fourth recommendation, humanitarian actors should support secondary education providers to institutionalise platforms for adolescent participation in school and civic decision making, including the identification of service gaps and needs (UNICEF, 2021).

**The fifth recommendation** is to encourage and support adolescent-led school-based organisations to promote and address key development, equity, peacebuilding, or climate change concerns (Plan International, 2018; UNICEF, 2021). Where possible, the sixth recommendation is to partner secondary schools with tertiary education providers or NGOs and support approaches to adolescent participatory action research on issues of collective concern (UNICEF, 2021).

**The seventh and final recommendation** is for humanitarian agencies to work with local researchers, practitioners, teachers, and adolescents to devise a crisis-context specific matrix for effective adolescent participation and engagement in school and community decision making.
At the global and national level, we have identified numerous factors that impede adolescents’ access to quality secondary education in crisis contexts. Due to COVID-19, for example, over half of all out-of-school children and adolescents were from crisis-affected contexts (UNHCR, 2021a). We also saw that adolescent dropout rates were compounded in crisis contexts, especially where adolescents were unable to return to school due to domestic demands at home or the need to supplement family incomes. Girls are disproportionately affected, showing higher rates of school dropout (Plan International, 2021).

Due to vast differences in the quality and reach of secondary education, COVID-19 also accelerated learning loss among vulnerable and already marginalised adolescents (Plan, 2021b; World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021; UNHCR, 2021a). In crisis contexts, poor coordination between government actors and humanitarian agencies, limited digital infrastructure, and a lack of low-cost or no-cost alternatives for learning stymied access to quality education at this time.

A gender divide in access to digital infrastructure exacerbated the impact on girls (Plan International, 2021a; Plan International 2021b; UNHCR, 2021a). COVID-19 also highlighted how secondary schools in crisis contexts represent more than academic learning alone. Dropout rates and learning loss can be mitigated when wrap-around social services are also present. For example, where adolescents are able to access protection and psychosocial support services, where education sector actors facilitate connections and activities with public health actors, and where WASH resources are made available, the quality of education and continuity of learning can be maintained (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, 2022; UNHCR, 2021; Plan International, 2021b).

For adolescents experiencing forced displacement, their daily realities must be kept top of mind when considering the provision of quality secondary education. Forcibly displaced adolescents experience isolation, discrimination, restriction of movement, prolonged economic uncertainty and the denial of basic social services (UNHCR, 2021a). At present, 12.5 million forcibly displaced adolescents are out of school and the evidence shows that the gap between enrolled and unenrolled adolescents widens as the grade levels increase (UNHCR, 2021; ECW, 2022). This fact is exacerbated by the overwhelming focus of humanitarian donors on early childhood and primary education, leaving the secondary sector woefully underfunded and many displaced and out-of-school adolescents more vulnerable to trafficking, child labour, and gender-based violence including child early and forced marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The literature stresses, however, that where quality secondary education is made available, it plays a critical role in the prevention of violence and extremism, it reduces dependency and adolescent disaffection, and it promotes values of self-reliance and hope for the future (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The literature also outlines how climate change heightens the vulnerability that adolescents in contexts already prone to conflict or disaster experience (UNICEF, 2021a). Especially where the frequency and severity of climate-related disasters intensifies, adolescents’ access to secondary education is further disrupted and the likelihood of poverty throughout their lives is increased (UNICEF, 2021a; Plan International, 2022). Moreover, key protective factors such as access to safe housing, clean water, a healthy environment, and sufficient nutrition become more precarious (ibid). Improving adolescents’ access to climate change education at the secondary level therefore holds transformative promise (Save the Children, 2021). At present, however, the power of climate education is not well recognized in global climate policies, and it is poorly integrated at national and local levels (Save the Children, 2021).

An associated threat to quality secondary education in crisis contexts is food insecurity. The literature shows how its immediate impact is poor attendance and higher dropout rates, particularly amongst girls, especially as families experiencing food insecurity make decisions with limited financial resources and often choose sustenance over schooling (CARE, 2022). Longer term, undernutrition causes stunted childhood development, chronic health conditions in adolescence and adulthood, and prolonged effects on mental health and academic progress, too (Chavez et al., 2018; Elgar et al., 2021; CARE, 2022).

In contexts impacted by conflict, the comparatively high costs of secondary education reduce demand for schooling for adolescents (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Moreover, where conflict is protracted, families perceive that secondary education represents a diminishing rate of return, especially where opportunities for tertiary education or employment are rare or non-existent (Human Rights Watch, 2017; King et al., 2019). Such attitudes often have a disproportionately high impact on girls, particularly where child early and forced marriage is used as a coping mechanism in times of insecurity and economic pressure (Plan International, 2021b). Another factor impeding the quality of secondary education is the frequency of attacks on education facilities and personnel in conflict-affected contexts (GCPEA, 2022). In many instances, adolescents are forced into service with state military or rebel groups and schools are converted into military facilities (Human Rights Watch, 2017; GCPEA, 2022; King et al., 2019). These factors, as well as the risks associated with travel to and from school, especially for girls, further disincentivize parents from enrolling adolescents in secondary school. At the same time, however, Human Rights Watch (2017) projected that if just 30 percent of adolescents were able to attend secondary school, the incidence of conflict could be reduced by half.
The final global and national level factor that we analysed is **finance**. Arguably, the greatest barrier to the delivery of quality secondary education (as is the case for the education in emergencies more broadly) is a lack of targeted and sustainable funding. Early childhood and primary receive a lion’s share of the limited Official Development Assistance (ODA) and humanitarian mechanism financing allocated to the education sector, which leaves secondary education more dependent on tenuous domestic sources, private philanthropy, and remittances (ODI, 2016; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). Although spending on secondary education has increased in recent years, it has not kept pace with the expanding scale of global crises and the corresponding needs of crisis-affected adolescents (Geneva Global Hub for EiE, 2022). As the universal right to basic education is well-understood, the fact that basic education includes lower-secondary education is often overlooked. As such, unresolved tensions about the extent to which secondary education should be a universal right like primary education also affects the consistency of funding towards secondary education in crisis contexts (INEE, 2021; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022). Moreover, we highlight how debt burdens, externally imposed austerity measures, and tax-dodging are directly associated with reduced government spending on education in low-income and crisis contexts, which stands to impact secondary education the worst due to a higher cost per student.

At the **community and school level**, the first factor we analysed is **teaching and learning**. In crisis contexts, where school infrastructure and learning materials are limited or altogether unavailable, a teacher is often the only resource available to adolescents, making their role all the more critical (Mendenhall, 2017; Richardson, et al., 2018). The literature promotes teachers in crisis contexts as providing a sense of belonging and safety, supporting psychosocial wellbeing, and improving the coping strategies and resilience of trauma-affected adolescents (UNHCR, 2015; Richardson, et al., 2018; Mendenhall et al., 2019). Yet in many crisis-affected contexts profound teacher shortages result in overcrowded classrooms. This ultimately compromises the quality of teaching delivered, as the pedagogies known to accelerate learning and promote social and emotional development are unfeasible (UNHCR, 2015). These issues also impact enrolment rates more broadly as parents and adolescents do not see the advantage of learning in such unfavourable conditions. A further factor inhibiting the quality of teaching at the secondary level is the limited availability of continuous teacher professional development (Mendenhall, 2019). This reality is made worse by the disparate and often disconnected arrangement of agencies that deliver professional development in humanitarian settings (UNHCR, 2015). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our analysis of the literature shows that poor financial compensation contributes to many skilled secondary teachers needing to find additional work or leaving the profession altogether in search of more lucrative opportunities (UNESCO-IICBA, 2017).

Quality secondary education in crisis contexts includes the scaling and strengthening of multiple and **flexible education pathways** (UNICEF, 2020b). Late entry, repetition, dropout, and re-entry following extended absences are prevalent challenges for adolescents and education systems alike in crisis contexts (Mastercard Foundation, 2020). However, secondary education commonly takes a one-size-fits-all approach and the delivery of flexible programs is complicated by the fact that many adolescents continually shift from domestic responsibilities, economic activities, and schooling (UNICEF, 2020b; Mastercard Foundation, 2020). To resolve these issues, flexible pathways programs need strong steerage and ownership at the government level with effective coordination with humanitarian agencies to offer diverse and responsive opportunities for adolescent re-engagement in secondary education (AEWG, 2020). Known as accelerated education programs, bridging programs, and catch-up programs, the literature shows that successful initiatives are tailored to the local context, have diversified sources of funding, and employ a multi-stakeholder approach (UNICEF, 2017; 2020b; AEWG, 2020).
Also impacting the quality of flexible pathways is the fact that teachers are rarely trained in accelerated or alternative learning environments (Mendenhall, 2019).

The literature reflects a predominance of literacy and numeracy focused approaches to teaching and learning, with insufficient attention to a wider range of relevant and needed secondary-level learning outcomes in crisis contexts. This includes psychosocial wellbeing, underpinned by social and emotional competencies, and ‘life skills’ acquisition (AEWG, 2020).

Learner-centred teaching approaches that build social and emotional learning, sometimes described as ‘transferable soft skills’, promote lifelong learning and personal and community empowerment as well as skills to cope with trauma and build resilience (UNICEF, 2019). Yet there is a significant gap in the literature related to the effectiveness of transferable soft-skills development on academic outcomes in crisis contexts (Brown et al., 2015). Although emerging evidence from high-income country contexts shows positive associations between social and emotional learning and academic achievement among children, the data is less clear for adolescents (OECD, 2021) In addition, a majority of the metrics measuring the success of transferable soft-skills programs are at the individual level and do not yet evaluate the school- or community-level benefits (Brown et al., 2015). A lack of data about specific transferable soft skills that different programs target also makes it hard for policy makers and practitioners to disentangle the evidence and determine which approaches are most appropriate for their respective contexts (Brown et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2019).

In terms of adolescent development level factors that influence secondary education in crisis contexts, we first looked at issues of protection and inclusion. A key finding is that the extent to which policies and practices in crisis contexts prioritise inclusion determines the degree to which adolescents with disabilities are enabled or prevented from engaging in social life. This also includes their ability to make decisions about present and future education and employment possibilities (Bakhshi, Babulal, & Trani, 2018; Plan International, 2021a). Globally, disability has a significant effect on school attendance, with a marginal effect of -30 percent (UNICEF, 2016). Although we could not access disaggregated data for crisis contexts, we know that crises further disrupt the opportunities of adolescents who are already marginalised (Pearce, Paik, & Robles, 2016; Secondary Education Working Group, 2022). Policies and practices that promote inclusion are a critical priority at the secondary level, especially as secondary schools in many contexts represent an environment of hostility and discrimination towards adolescents with disabilities (UNGEI, 2021). For this reason, one of the main recommendations in the literature is for government and humanitarian actors to prioritise interventions at the school and community level that support protection referral services and remove other barriers to inclusion for marginalised adolescents (UNGEI, 2021; Plan International, 2021a).

Intersecting with the issues above is the need for gender equality at the secondary education level. Gender has a strong bearing on adolescents’ access to quality secondary education: compared to adolescents in stable settings, girls in crisis contexts are 90 percent less likely to be enrolled in school (UNGEI, 2017; INEE & UNGEI, 2019). In conflict-affected settings, the data shows that harmful gender norms such as girls’ early child and forced marriage, domestic labour, and exclusion from education become more embedded in daily cultural beliefs and practices (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Among other factors, this accounts for the fact that adolescent girls are on average 50 percent less likely than adolescent boys to progress from primary to secondary education (UNICEF, 2020a). A further reality that inhibits adolescent girls’ access to school is a lack of gender-segregated WASH facilities and the poor availability of menstrual hygiene resources, which contributes to non-enrolment or non-attendance in many contexts (UNGEI, 2017; UNICEF, 2020a).

Also present in the literature is the digital gender divide, which became more apparent during COVID-19 school closures. Even in contexts that have high rates of access to mobile and internet technologies, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, evidence suggests that girls are on average 70 percent less likely than boys to access digital devices at home, thereby disrupting their continuity of learning (UNICEF, 2020a). A gender-transformative secondary education that directly addresses the root causes of gender inequality, however, can increase girls’ skills and opportunities for leadership, aiding their decision-making competencies and improving their health literacy, civic engagement, and employability (UNGEI, 2017; INEE & UNGEI, 2019; UNICEF, 2020a; Plan International, 2021). For adolescent boys, secondary education can also be a significant protection factor. It promotes knowledge and skills development, opening up formal employment pathways, and allows them to contribute towards disaster risk reduction and peacebuilding processes (UNICEF, 2020a). Moreover, in gender-transformative settings adolescent boys are exposed to and can become allies for gender equity at school and in their communities (UNICEF, 2020a).

The final adolescent development level factor we analysed is participation and engagement. The literature shows that with appropriate knowledge and skills, adolescents can advocate for their peers and those less fortunate than them (Plan, 2019; Action Aid, 2019). They can also contribute towards thematic awareness raising campaigns and crisis preparedness, response, and recovery activities with a high level of creativity and awareness (ibid). Increasingly, adolescents are seen as a cornerstone of disaster risk reduction and peacebuilding processes (Plan International, 2018; Action Aid, 2019; Apollo & Mbah, 2022).

We found that in crisis contexts adolescents often lack meaningful platforms or forums in which their voices can be heard and acted upon. As such they are excluded from decision making processes (UNICEF, 2021). Evidence shows that there is still a top-down and hierarchical approach to secondary education programming (Apollo & Mbah, 2022; Plan, 2018; Action Aid, 2019). For this reason, we make a series of evidence-informed recommendations for improved participation and engagement policies and practices, with the aim of fostering a better sense of belonging in adolescent learning spaces. This can be achieved through investments in teacher professional development on issues and practices in adolescent participation and engagement. We also call for the institutionalisation of platforms for adolescent civic engagement and their participation in school- and community-level decision making processes. Our final recommendation is that intergovernmental agencies, NGOs, community-based organisations, and tertiary institutions include adolescents in research and knowledge production activities (UNICEF, 2021).
5 Opportunities for further research and advocacy

At the global and national level
- Governments, donors, multilateral and intergovernmental organisations, INGOs & NGOs need to reach a consensus on the extent to which secondary education is prioritised in crisis contexts.
- In line with the SDG4 and the Global Compact for Refugees, we need to advocate for forcibly displaced adolescents’ inclusion in national secondary education systems, with flexible and diverse pathways for entry made available.
- We need empirical studies that disaggregate the challenges between primary- and secondary-level education and adolescent development outcomes in crisis contexts.
- Advocacy for meaningful policy-level commitments to flexible programming is required, with particular attention to the inclusion of out-of-school and at-risk adolescents within national EMIS systems.
- We need to produce better evidence on the association between transferable soft skills and adolescent learning and development outcomes within the formal education system.
- In line with government commitment statements from the Transforming Education Summit, we need to develop effective processes, platforms, and professional development support for secondary-level teachers to meaningfully engage in social dialogue and advocate for improved work conditions in crisis contexts.

At the community and school level
- We need empirical studies that disaggregate the challenges between primary- and secondary-level education and adolescent development outcomes in crisis contexts.
- Advocacy for meaningful policy-level commitments to flexible programming is required, with particular attention to the inclusion of out-of-school and at-risk adolescents within national EMIS systems.
- We need to produce better evidence on the association between transferable soft skills and adolescent learning and development outcomes within the formal education system.
- In line with government commitment statements from the Transforming Education Summit, we need to develop effective processes, platforms, and professional development support for secondary-level teachers to meaningfully engage in social dialogue and advocate for improved work conditions in crisis contexts.

At the adolescent development level
- Research that examines the specific impact of humanitarian crises on different adolescent age groups is required, which should include the developmental differences between younger and older adolescents, as well as their specific psychosocial and protection risks.
- We need gender- and age-disaggregated data that helps us understand the ways in which diverse types of crisis alter or compound traditional gender roles and affect educational outcomes.
- To shift mindsets, we need to promote adolescents in crisis contexts as capable and creative agents of change, and support their engagement at all levels of secondary education. We also need to better document case studies that highlight secondary education-specific examples of adolescent participation and leadership.
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