

# An integrated approach to Education in Emergency in Emergency Response:

A mixed-methods study of PlayMatters  
Emergency Response Mechanism in  
Conflict-Affected Regions of Ethiopia

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**PlayMatters**

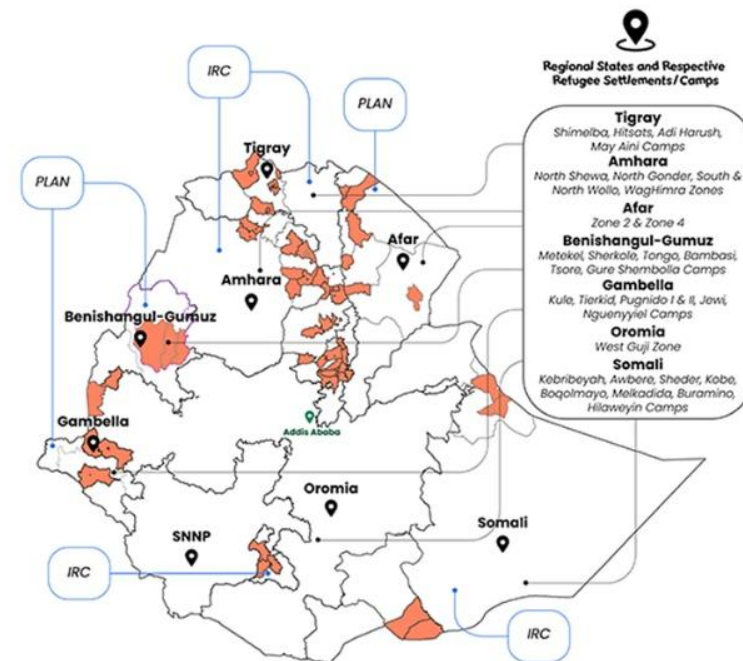
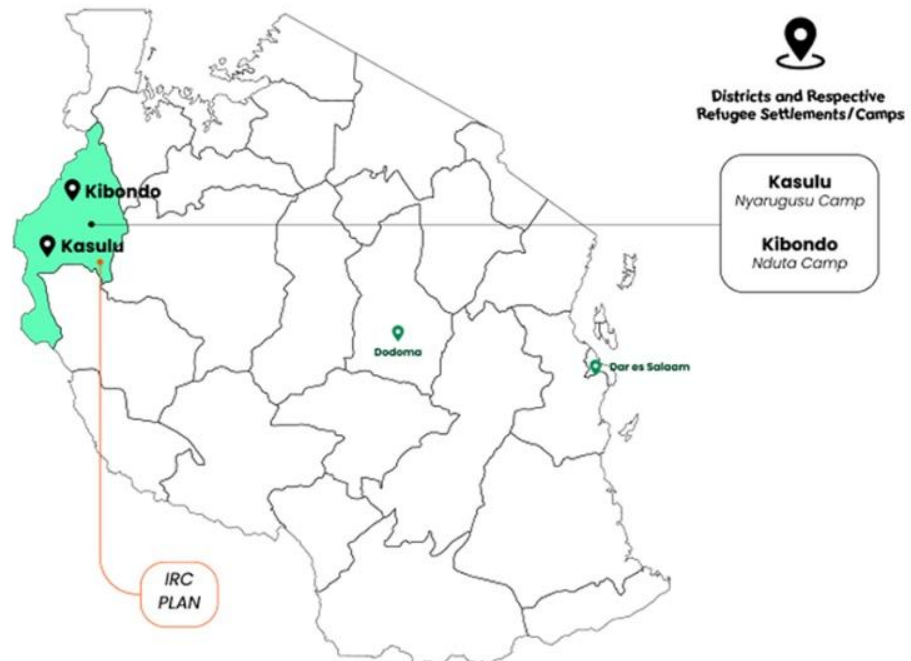
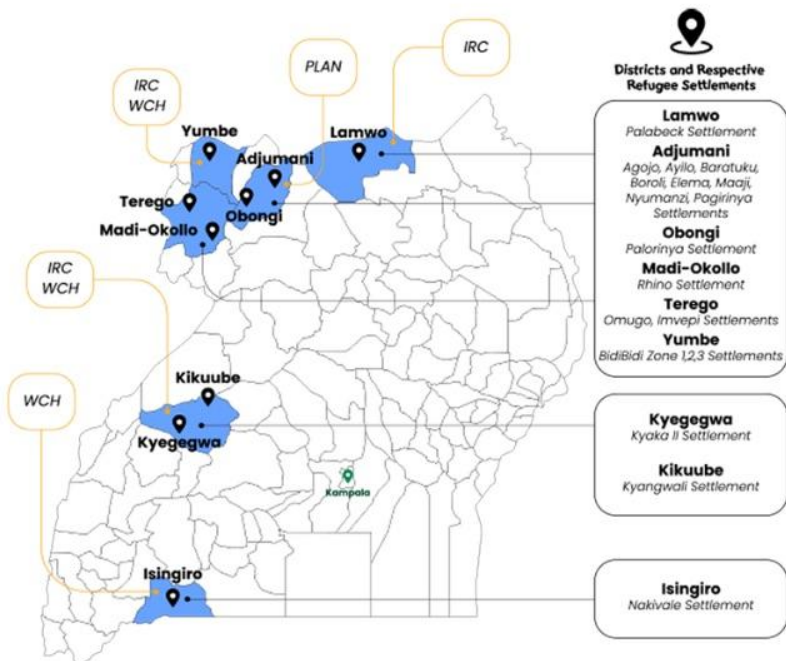
# Background

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# PlayMatters: Background and Basics

- **6 year project:** 2020–2026
- **Three countries:** Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda
- **Five partners:** IRC (Lead); PLAN International; War Child Holland; Innovations for Poverty Action; Behavioural Insights Team
- **Funder:** LEGO Foundation
- **Goal:** Improved holistic learning and well-being for 800,000 children ages 3–12+ in refugee and host communities by strengthening education systems' capacity to train and support pre-primary and primary school teachers and facilitators to use "Learning through Play" as an active teaching and learning methodology



## PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM)

- The Northern Conflict in Ethiopia began in November 2020, **affecting millions of children** in the Amhara, Tigray, and Afar regions.
- The PlayMatters ERM was a **1-year multi-sectoral response** (Sept. 2022 - Sept. 2023) funded under the larger PlayMatters project implemented by the IRC, Plan International Ethiopia, and 10 other implementing partners in partnership with the LEGO Foundation.
- The PM ERM integrated **Education, Child Protection, WASH, and Health and Nutrition programming in Education in Emergencies response** in the Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia regions in **201** pre-primary and primary schools.
- The primary goal of the PM ERM was to **ensure crisis-affected children in Ethiopia have their basic health, safety, and educational wellbeing needs met** to survive and be meaningfully engaged by the larger PlayMatters programming outcomes. In total, the PM ERM reached **177,409 children**.

# Methods

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## Study Design

- Mixed-Methods design answering the research question: ***“To what extent did the PlayMatters ERM’s integrated and holistic approach improve basic health, safety, educational, and well-being needs of crisis-affected children?”***
- The study primarily used a qualitative case study design triangulated with quantitative inferential statistical analysis.



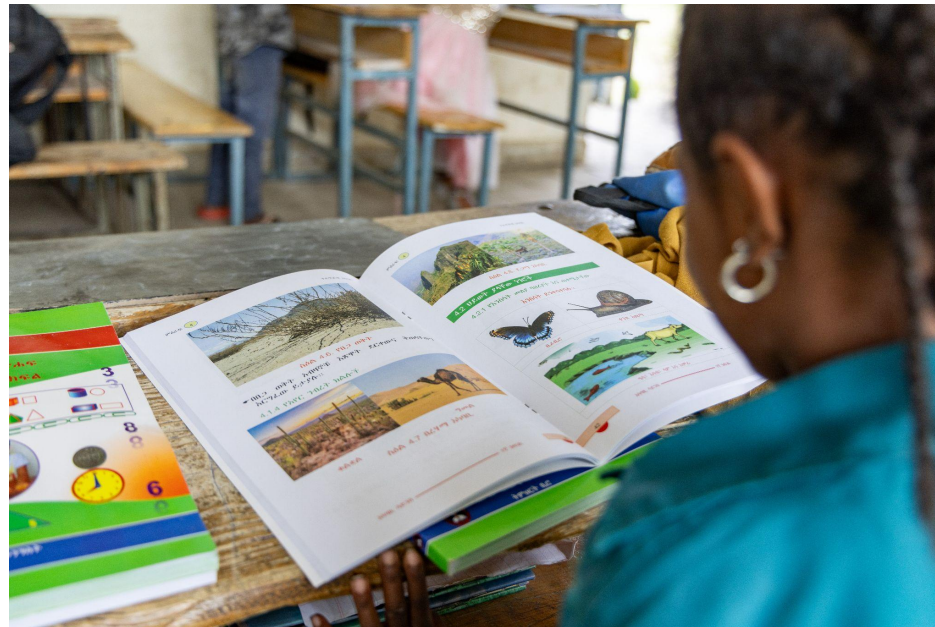
Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

## Sample and data collection procedures

- Qualitative data: **6 case study schools across the Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia regions** using purposive sampling.
- In each school, we conducted **Key Informant Interviews** with 1 Head Teacher, 3 Teachers, 1 Implementing Partner and **Focus Group Discussions**: 1 children, 1 parent, 1 government actors for a total sample of:
  - **86** Adults (M= 56; F= 30) & **42** Children (M= 21; F= 21)
- IRC staff collected data at **2 or 3 time points** between December 2022 - June 2023, dependent on access due to ongoing security concerns.
- Data were captured in either Amharic or with a translator from another local language.
- Data were translated and transcribed to English.

# Sample and data collection procedures

- Quantitative data: secondary data from district education offices
  - Data were cleaned for missing or incomplete data
  - **128** ERM schools and **131** non-ERM schools with similar characteristics (size, urbanity, and location)
  - Two time points: **2019/2020 (Pre-Conflict)** and **2022/2023 (End of Year)**





## Data analysis

- Qualitative data: Data was analyzed using Dedoose and an iterative coding framework, **through open coding** based on the research questions (such as “benefits”, “opportunities”, “challenges”) and **emic codes emerging from each round of data collection**.
- Quantitative data: Comparative analysis (two-way ANOVA) using Stata ver. 17 using Woreda (district) Education Office reports
  - Variables: (1) **student enrolment**; (2) **student absenteeism**; (3) **teacher retention** considered for comparison.
- Qualitative and quantitative data were then compared together to triangulate findings

## Ethical considerations



- School Directors of every school and Woreda (District) Education Officers provided permission for data collection to take place.
- All adults provided informed written consent before their participation.
- All children provided informal oral assent before their participation.
- Ethical approval from the IRC's Institutional Review Board.

# Findings

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# Key Finding 1: The PM ERM supported children's physical and psycho-social needs

## Addressing Children's Physical Needs

- Providing high energy biscuits through **school feeding**, provision of **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)** support, **water point rehabilitation**, and **vaccination and deworming campaigns** were most frequently reported by participants.
- Participants discussed the **relationship between children's physical needs and increased enrollment and attendance** at school and reduced absenteeism, and the value of such physical needs being met to support quality learning.

# Key Finding 1: The PM ERM supported children's physical and psycho-social needs

## Addressing Children's Psycho-social Needs

- Participants primarily described how the ERM support provided a **boost in morale for teachers and students**, primarily by **restoring hope, normalcy, and re-building after the conflict**.
- Some participants also described more clinical support provided through professional Mental Health and Psycho-social Support (MHPSS) services.
- While rehabilitation activities supported students' access to safe learning environments, they more importantly **minimized reminders and triggers of trauma or stress** from the conflict.

## Key Finding 2: The PM ERM Supported Children's Increased Access to Education

Participants from all population groups described **increased enrollment and attendance and reduced student absenteeism and dropout**

*“Previously,...**there was a trend of absence**...the solution for [their] problems has made them **follow their learning appropriately**; this in turn has a great benefit to the students” - School4\_Teacher1\_R2*

Increased enrolment and attendance can be attributed to four factors:

- Children's **physical and psycho-social needs were met**
- Provision of **scholastic materials** and teaching and learning materials
- Rehabilitated **physical environments** and provided play materials
- Increased **teacher capacity** to implement Learning through Play methods in the classroom

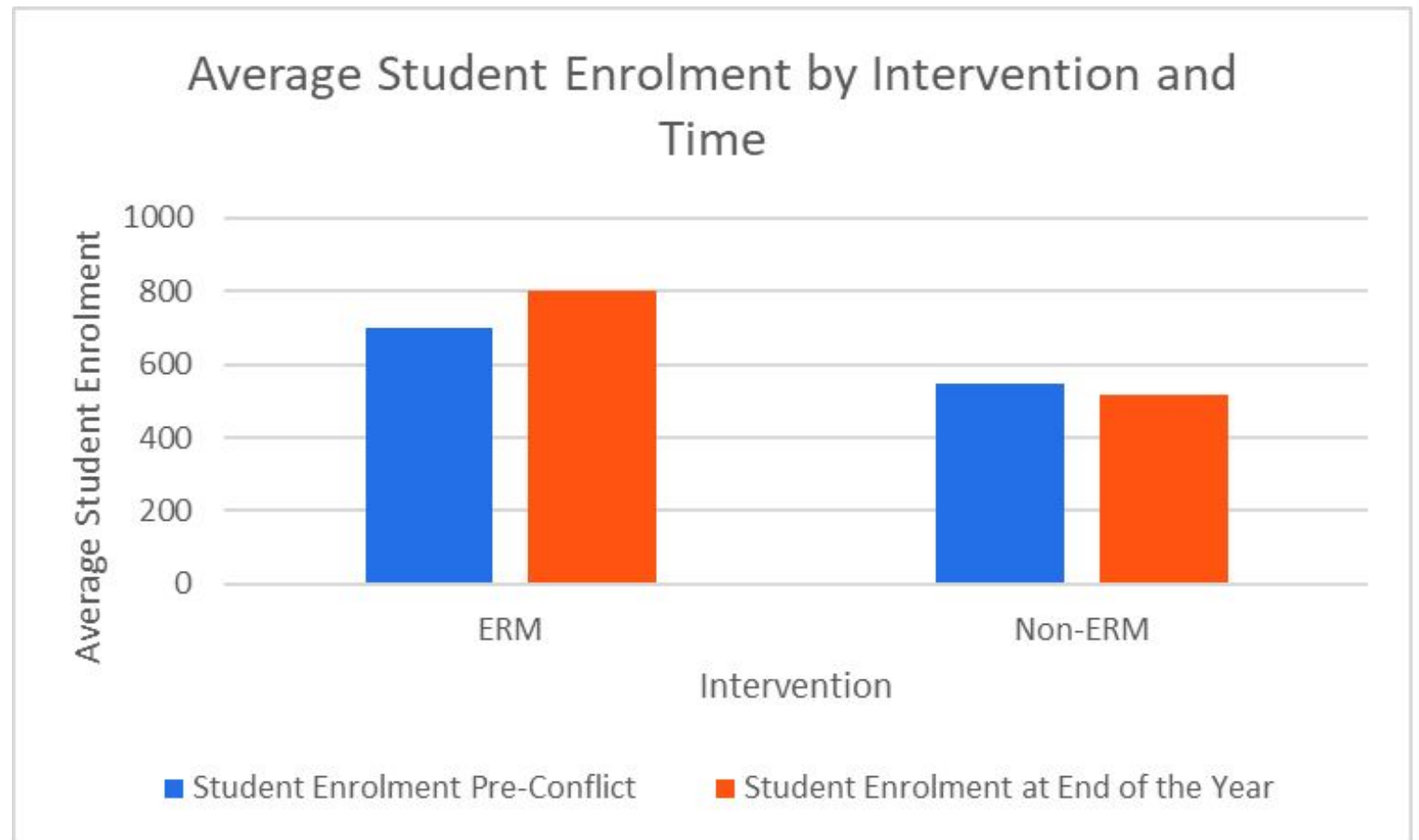
## Key Finding 2: The PM ERM Supported Children's Increased Access to Education

Participants, particularly parents and teachers, frequently described **increased enjoyment at school, desires to attend school, and engagement** while at school.

*“**Kids are racing to go to school** or they are not being tardy...if they are late without washing because they have slept in and they are late to school, because there is enough supply of water in the school, it is available there...in the name of this organization the kids are racing to school. Rather, it has made them generate love for school.” - School5\_Parent\_R2*

## Key Finding 2: The PM ERM Supported Children's Increased Access to Education

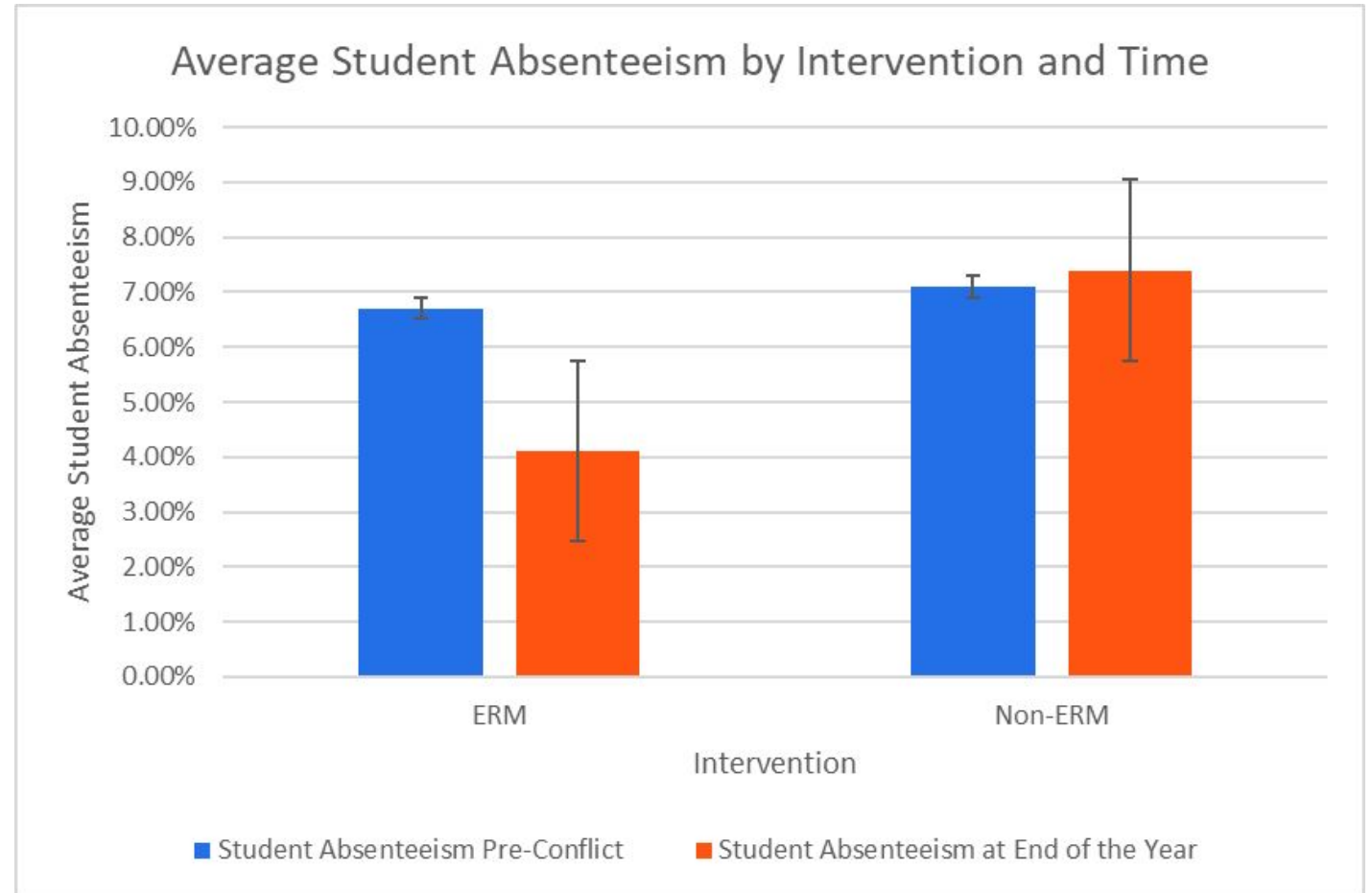
PM ERM schools demonstrated a **statistically significant (p<.05) increase in average student enrolment** by 102 children compared to a decrease in average student enrolment of 29 children in non-ERM schools.





## Key Finding 2: The PM ERM Supported Children’s Increased Access to Education

The **average absenteeism rate in PM ERM schools dropped from 6.71% to 4.11%** while absenteeism increased from 7.1% to 7.4% in non-ERM schools. This was not statistically significant due to overlapping confidence intervals.



## Key Finding 3: The PM ERM Supported Children's Holistic Learning and Well-being

**Trainings provided to teachers on LTP and MHPSS** contributed to improved holistic learning and well-being of students.

**Cognitive Development:** Some participants described **improved academic achievement** of students in ERM schools.

*“At the time this school was screened **our students were labelled as unproductive students**, and less than half were able to pass. However, today, **we believe that they can be more than just passers**; they can be a hope for this village and possibly the entire nation.”*

*– School6\_HT\_R2*



Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

## Key Finding 3: The PM ERM Supported Children's Holistic Learning and Well-being

**Social Development:** Participants described the **social community** among students and between students and teachers.

*“Students now engage in discussions outside of school and encourage each other to attend classes. They **form a supportive network that motivates** and helps any students who may be falling behind.” – School6\_Teacher1\_R1*



Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

## Key Finding 3: The PM ERM Supported Children's Holistic Learning and Well-being

**Emotional Development:** Participants described the **improved teacher-student interactions** and the safe emotional environment in schools.

*“What [the project] has contributed to the kids is that they have gotten what they want because **they are learning with love**...they haven't come across mental stress, they are learning with a relaxed mind.” – School3\_Parent\_R2*



Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

## Key Finding 4: The PM ERM Supported Teachers' Retention, Instructional Practices, and Well-being



Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

Professional development opportunities supported teachers' classroom practices and their overall **motivation and encouragement**, given minimal other professional development opportunities.

*“When a person takes training, it makes them happy and causes them to have love for the job. There is a situation where we got this from the teachers during our field activities, and we saw them happy to teach and carry out the work happily” - School2\_SA\_R2*

## Key Finding 4: The PM ERM Supported Teachers' Retention, Instructional Practices, and Well-being

Additionally, participants elucidated how the PM ERM supported **improved teacher-student relationships**, particularly due to trainings on LTP and MHPSS.

*“Students like the school. **Students love their teachers.**” -  
School3\_SA\_R2*

Some teachers reported that professional development opportunities, especially MHPSS training, **supported their well-being**.

*“The teachers were suffering from mental issues due to the war. They were sad, disappointed, and depressed. But, **once they took the psychosocial training, they realised there is a project...trying to bring them out of the problems they were in. The teachers are happy now.**” - School3\_HT\_R2*

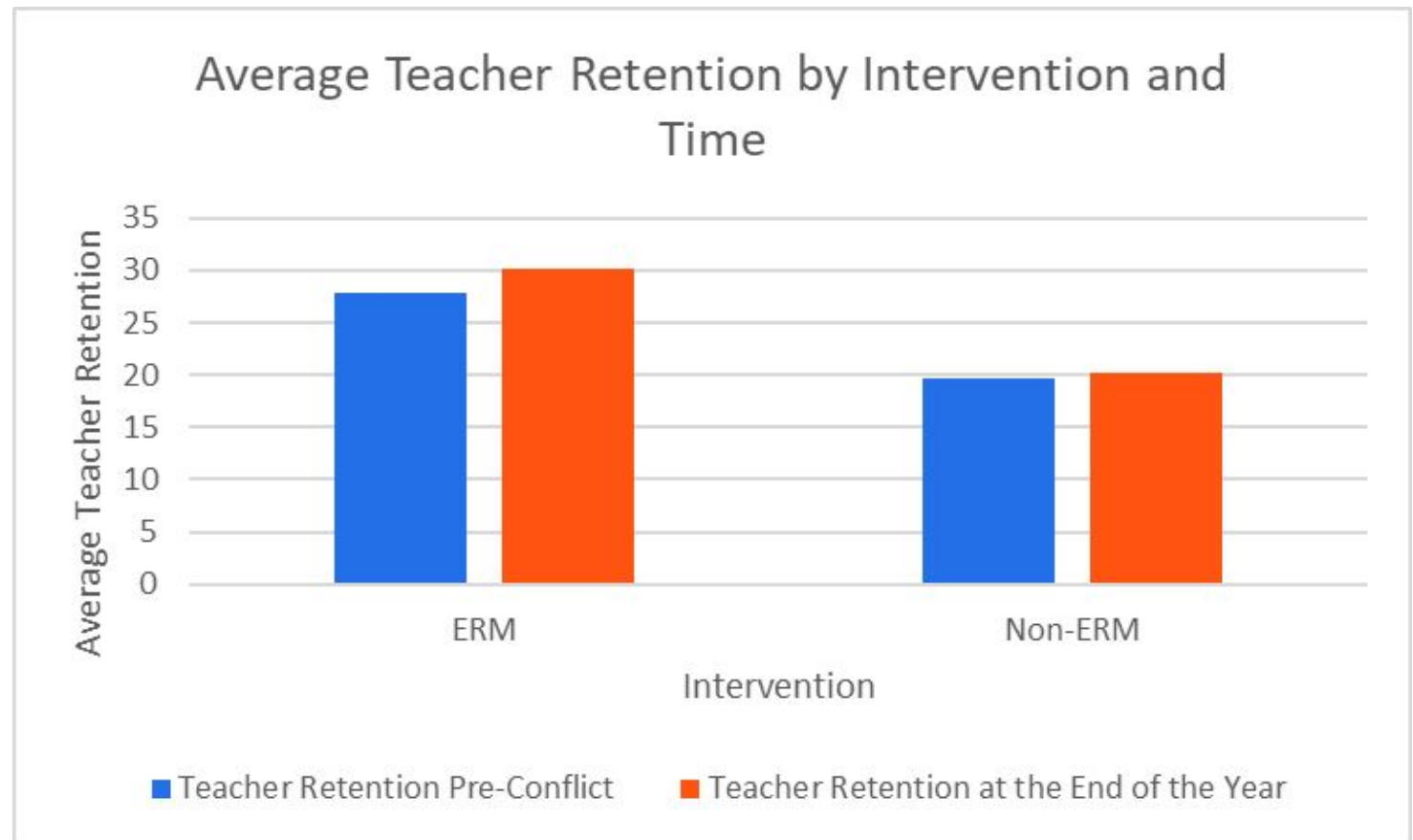


Photo courtesy of Derrick Tarremwa, IRC

## Key Finding 4: The PM ERM Supported Teachers' Retention, Instructional Practices, and Well-being

Teacher retention increased in PM ERM schools over non-ERM schools with statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ), with an increased average of 3 teachers retained per year compared to an average of less than 1 additional teacher retained per year.

Two core yet inter-related components of teacher retention include teacher motivation and teacher well-being.



## Key Finding 5: The PM ERM strengthened local capacities

- Implementing partners and local government officials from offices related to ERM intervention sectors **participated in and co-led PM ERM trainings, conducted joint monitoring, and were knowledgeable about project goals.**
- **Community members were also active collaborators** in implementation by donating time, money, or materials.

*“We have various stakeholders, each playing their respective roles. For instance, they facilitate, support, monitor, and evaluate the education bureau's work in the education sector...Whenever we face challenges, we hold discussions with them to find solutions. They also support us in monitoring. The community is actively involved as well.” - School6\_IP\_R2*



## Key Finding 5: The PM ERM strengthened local capacities

- To Implementing Partners, the ERM as a **multi-sectoral intervention was viewed as innovative** with funding and project structures frequently siloed by sector.
- The **ERM also strengthened the synergies within local government offices.**
  - Examples include joint planning, implementation of school-based trainings (such as trainings for school clubs), and joint monitoring of activities in schools

*“Even before the project, there is a system in place at the district level called a multisectoral structure that integrates different sectors...There is a gap, particularly in relation to resources and awareness. There is a lesson we have learned from the integrated approach or system that [Implementing Partner] follows as well as working with NGOs and different sectors. We have gained good experience, especially in relation to communicating well and working together.” - School5\_SA\_R3*

## Key Finding 6: Additional Support is Needed to meet the needs of crisis-affected communities

A primary issue raised by all stakeholder groups was the **desired continuation and expansion** of the ERM.

- **Prioritization at the school-level:** Due to limited resources, IPs did not provide programming for all students, particularly related to scholastic material distributions and school feeding.
- **Expansion to other schools:** Respondents discussed persistent needs in communities beyond intervention schools.
- **Long-term funding:** Nearly every respondent described their hopes for the ERM to continue as communities continue to recover to address recurring needs such as scholastic materials and hygiene materials.

*“For the future, what I want to share is that because of the achievements of the school shown this year, I'm afraid that we may have more students next year according to the information I get from the community. The school food program may not be reliable despite this, and we risk losing even the students we currently have at a time when we are expecting more.” - School6\_HT\_R2*

## Key Finding 6: Additional Support is Needed to meet the needs of crisis-affected communities

- **School feeding:** While respondents were happy with the high energy biscuits provided, many respondents recommended moving towards hot meals that would benefit the whole school.
- **MHPSS and well-being:** While MHPSS was integrated into the project, further psycho-social support was requested for both children and teachers, including a stronger focus on teacher well-being.
- **Additional trainings:** Teachers frequently reported a desire for additional trainings, often on a regular basis, echoing evidence that comprehensive, consistent continuous professional development is more responsive to teachers' needs than one-off trainings.
- **Insufficient response:** One participant from an area vulnerable to conflict suggested **integrating peacebuilding** into programming to mitigate the risks schools face for future conflict. Some participants also described the importance of **economic recovery and development** activities to sustainably support both the schools and parents to better meet children's needs.

## Key Finding 7: Barriers to the Implementation

- **Insecurity, delays, and road access:** Due to remaining insecurity, project activities were frequently disrupted or delayed. In some cases, initial needs assessments had to be repeated due to resurgence of insecurity.

*“The first big challenge was when we finished doing the need assessment, a conflict happened and we had to do another need assessment. There was a gap between the need assessment we did and what we actually encountered, and this was one of the major problems.” - School2\_IP\_R2*

- **Inflation, budget inflexibility, and procurement processes:** Following the conflict, lengthy procurement processes led to delayed procurement compounded with inflation, creating tensions between compliant procurement processes and the need for timely response.
- **Coordination mechanisms:** Some participants, primarily system actors and Head Teachers, described the importance of strengthening coordination with system actors and other NGOs to ensure there are no duplication of efforts and timely implementation.

*“If [Implementing Partner] shares with us the plan of what activities it is planning to carry out this year in relation to education, we can include that plan with our plan, and perhaps even if they forget, we can remind them about it.” - School1\_SA\_R3*

## Limitations

- **Quantitative** data sets were obtained through government reports, not collected independently or through rigorous measurement.
  - While we requested data gathered from schools that have received no intervention to serve as control schools, we cannot verify the authority of controlling for this independent variable.
- **Qualitative** data was collected by IRC staff, which may have led to positivity bias of the effectiveness of the intervention.

# Recommendations and Conclusions

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# Recommendations and Conclusions

1. Ensure that EiE responses **address children's holistic needs through multi-sectoral interventions** considering their health, safety, and educational wellbeing. Balance fulfilling basic needs and the **provision of structural inputs** (such as classroom rehabilitation) with an eye towards **ensuring quality learning** and holistic development at school.
2. **Integrate LTP as an entry-point for supporting teachers** in crisis-affected contexts through teacher continuous professional development by recognizing the positive influence of LTP on supporting school attendance and retention for both students and teachers.
3. **Provide continuous support to teachers**, prioritizing their professional development and material provision responses to support how they have been affected by conflict. Consider **teachers' well-being as an outcome** in future EiE responses.
4. **Strengthen existing capacities and coordination mechanisms** to improve communication and multi-sectoral synergies to support the **transition from emergency response to recovery and long-term development stages**.

# Q&A

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