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Prioritising the 'right to education' in emergencies: reducing the distance between human rights mechanisms and rights holders

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Efforts to decolonize education in emergencies—by including marginalized groups and knowledge in research and policymaking and shifting decision-making from Global North metropolises—are more than an academic endeavor. They are fundamental to reducing the distance between those who manage and fund human rights mechanisms and the children, youth, and teachers affected by crises, whose right to a safe and quality education they aim to protect. We argue that the geographic and economic, political and relational distance of humanitarian decision-makers and donors from people affected by crises, including perpetrators and survivors of violence or disasters, contributes to the distancing of children and teachers from their right to education. Human rights institutions remain remote in the minds of leaders—such as education authorities—in emergencies and protracted crises, who are rendered more peripheral and vulnerable by their exclusion from the very mechanisms that should support them. Reducing this gap is essential to reducing inequalities and upholding the right to education in contexts affected by conflict, climate-related disaster, and/or forced displacement.

KEYWORDS

right to education, duty bearers, rights holders, rights violations, United Nations, teachers

Introduction

As Geneva-based education in emergencies researchers and practitioners, we represent elite institutions that hold immense privilege, influence, and historically unrivalled mobility, while working with and for children and teachers who often rely on us to represent their realities. Our work centres on knowledge production and advocacy in global decision-making spaces that we can access with ease but are far out of reach for those we work with. In this regard, we experience the whiplash of moving between spaces of power in the Global North and the crisis-affected contexts on which our work is focused: In Geneva or New York, we often speak of the rights of conflict-affected children and teachers, without children or teachers alongside us or in the audience. In crisis-affected settings, we speak with children and teachers who are the focus of our work—rights holders who rarely enjoy the rights that duty-bearing institutions profess to protect.

The late, great Dr. Paul Farmer, a visionary public health advocate, championed *accompagnement*—walking alongside crisis-affected populations in close proximity and solidarity rather than making decisions, delivering aid, or offering support from a distance (Farmer, 2003). In this paper, we call for institutional *accompagnement* in the pursuit of the universal right to education: a model of closeness, commitment, and lived engagement between duty-bearing institutions and the rights holders they serve.

Children's rights and their realities in emergency settings

Recognizing children's right to a quality and safe education in crisis settings, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 64/290 (2010) affirmed the right to education in emergency situations, including during armed conflict. Further reinforcing this commitment, UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021) calls on all parties to safeguard, uphold and promote the right to education in conflict-affected contexts.

Yet children living in conflict-affected settings continue to experience profound disruption to their education. Attacks on schools and the consequences of forced displacement caused by violence and climate-related emergencies result in broken education trajectories (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). The latest data indicates that 234 million school-aged children are affected by conflict and crises (Education Cannot Wait, 2025). Among them, 85 million are out-of-school, with girls comprising 52 percent of this group (ibid). Furthermore, 84 percent of conflict- and crisis-impacted children who are out of school live in regions experiencing protracted instability, often due to conflict and resource scarcity, and usually with overlapping climate-related risks (Education Cannot Wait, 2025). At this moment, the world is bearing witness to the gravest violations of children's right to a safe and quality education in modern history.

Since October 7, 2023, UNICEF has documented 226 attacks on school buildings in the Gaza Strip, with at least 64 incidents—averaging two per day—occurring in October 2024 alone (UNICEF, 2024). UNRWA reported in the same period that 85 percent of all school buildings, including 70% of UNRWA schools, have been destroyed due to the ongoing conflict (UNRWA, 2024). With over one million children displaced, and 95 percent of remaining school facilities repurposed as shelters for their families, children's right to education has been severely violated. According to UNICEF (2025), 658,760 children in Gaza are currently out of school, while more than one million are suffering from severe trauma, necessitating urgent mental health and psychosocial support services.

Less visible in the media, but no less acute, Sudan's civil war has forcibly displaced over 12 million people (UNHCR, 2025) and unraveled years of progress in educational provision (World Bank, 2020). During the first year of the conflict (2023), attacks on schools and the education sector increased fourfold (Save the Children, 2024). Moreover, 88 incidents of extreme violence, including airstrikes on schools that led to student and teacher casualties, as well as cases of educators being abducted, tortured, and killed have been documented (Save the Children, 2024). Reports also highlight instances of sexual violence against students within school premises (GCPEA, 2024). As violence towards children in Gaza and Sudan continues, rights mechanisms appear to have little effect on the perpetrators.

Teachers' rights and their realities in emergency settings

Where children are subject to rights violations, so are teachers. Teachers are the most compelling school-level predictor of children's learning and protection (Schwille et al., 2007), yet the conditions in

which they live and work negatively impact their wellbeing and ability to offer protection and quality learning experiences to those they teach (Henderson, 2025; Mendenhall et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2024).

The 1966 UNESCO-ILO Recommendations on the Status of Teachers recognize that upholding Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the right to education—relies on the protection of teachers' right to a safe and dignified workplace (ILO and UNESCO, 2016). Among its core principles, Principle 7 states that: “teachers should be free from any form of discrimination on grounds of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, or economic condition.” Moreover, in Principle 8, teachers' “working conditions... should best promote effective learning and enable teachers to concentrate on their professional tasks” (Principle 8). While the UNESCO-ILO recommendations provide due recognition for teachers' rights, teachers tend to be overlooked in other core instruments and mechanisms promoting the right to education (Henderson, 2023). This needs to change.

As it stands, teachers face violence fulfilling their responsibilities in conflict-affected settings. Between 2020 and 2021, for example, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) documented 630 incidents targeting teachers and education personnel across 28 contexts (GCPEA, 2022). In multiple crises, teachers are abducted, threatened, or killed as perceived representatives of the state or due to their affiliation with teacher unions (GCPEA, 2022; Marchais et al., 2024; Wolf et al., 2015). In other instances, teachers are caught in the crossfire of war, exposed to explosive weapons on their way to school or during clashes between armed groups and military forces (GCPEA, 2022; Marchais et al., 2024; Wolf et al., 2015). Sexual violence against teachers has also been reported, particularly in the aftermath of attacks on schools (GCPEA, 2024; Maber et al., 2019; Save the Children, 2024). Furthermore, the use of schools and universities for military purposes make these institutions targets for opposing factions, further destroying vital school infrastructure and endangering teachers' lives (GCPEA, 2022, 2024).

The consequences of this violence on teachers' work are significant. In Colombia, for example, teachers report that violence directly affects their ability to teach. Some note how threats against them erode their trust in the community and hinder their engagement with students and families (FECODE, 2019; INEE, 2023). In Afghanistan, the return of the de facto Taliban authority resulted in widespread arrests and killings of teachers and education leaders advocating for girls' education (Al Jazeera, 2023; GCPEA, 2022). In Burkina Faso, Boko Haram committed violent attacks on more than 230 teachers in 2020 alone. They have also targeted teachers in Nigeria and Cameroon through intimidation, abductions, and killings to prevent the teaching of national curricula (GCPEA, 2022). In Syria, resistance Syrian Democratic Forces forcibly conscripted teachers to join their ranks, thereby making them direct targets of the Assad regime's state forces (GCPEA, 2022). In Myanmar, teachers affiliated with the shadow National Unity Government have faced persecution from the military junta, with more than 40 teachers reportedly killed after the 2021 coup (Save the Children, 2024).

The need to reduce the distance between rights holders and rights mechanisms

Where children and teachers feel bereft of their right to a quality education and a safe place to learn, the decision-making functions of

duty-bearing institutions that promote the right to a quality education seem remote to the point where *de jure* rights cannot—*de facto*—be enjoyed or enforced. While the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed by just 48 of 58 member states from the Global South and North, subsequent decolonization and internal divisions have increased the number of member states to 193, all of whom have ratified many of the core international human rights treaties that build upon the Universal Declaration's foundational principles. However, rights mechanisms are devised, championed, and funded far from affected populations in the Global South, and often without meaningful engagement with the children and teachers who experience crises firsthand.

As children's classrooms in Sudan are occupied by rebel forces (GCPEA, 2024) and teachers in Myanmar are targeted and killed by the military junta (Maber et al., 2019; Save the Children, 2024), crisis-affected children and teachers' ability to exercise their rights diminish the further they are from the centers of duty-bearing institutions and rights mechanisms. Within current aid frameworks, the response to distant conflicts or climate-related crises frequently treats them as sudden-onset and isolated challenges rather than the product of ongoing, interconnected, and systemic inequalities rooted in colonial histories and contemporary global governance structures (Faul, 2025; Zakharia, 2024). By extension, the concentration of duty-bearing power in Global North metropolises—for example UNICEF in New York City or UNESCO in Paris—can render humanitarian needs and the right to education as a peripheral and unenforceable concern in the experiences of rights holders (and in the minds of rights violators).

This 'distance' also contributes to the inequitable distribution of financial resources and weak labour protections (Shah et al., 2024). For example, teachers in conflict- and displacement-affected settings like Lebanon (Adelman, 2019) or South Sudan (Falk et al., 2022) often work as un- or under-compensated volunteers without contracts, recognition of qualifications, or other employment certainties. Yet it is upon teachers' efforts and working conditions—which Adelman (2019) and Falk et al. (2022) both characterize as 'impossible'—that children's right to a quality education invariably rests. Such disparities illustrate racialized hierarchies that are designed into the global humanitarian architecture (Shah et al., 2024), where those most affected by crises also have the least say and receive the least economic support to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the events that most affect them.

So long as Global North-defined and exercised humanitarian norms prioritize top-down and short-term access and efficiency over locally grounded, contextually relevant, and long-term solutions, the distance between rights mechanisms and rights holders will endure (Shah et al., 2024). Norms-setting mechanisms like UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 Steering Committee or funding mechanisms like the Global Partnership for Education's Board of Directors, while inclusive of some members representing crisis-affected contexts, take place in Paris and Washington DC. But as the literature highlights, rights holders like war-displaced youth in Guatemala (Bellino, 2018) or Congolese teachers in Uganda (Dryden-Peterson, 2022) are most knowledgeable about how crises shape their right to a quality education and the furthest removed from the people, places, and processes that can secure and sustain their access to it (Shah et al.,

2024). Therefore, to enable the enjoyment of human rights by crisis-affected learners and teachers alike, and as we outline in our four recommended actions below, institutions and rights mechanisms need to be brought closer to the land, lives, and lores of those they seek to serve through consultation and meaningful involvement in decision-making at the very least.

Where to from here?

In a shifting and unstable international order there is also opportunity. This is a call for *accompagnement* in the struggle for children's and teachers' right to a quality and safe education and place of work (Farmer, 2003). As funding shortfalls and the UN80 review challenge us to reconsider the relevance and effectiveness of the global humanitarian system, we call for rights-focused institutions to reduce the distance between them and conflict- and crisis affected settings. In working towards this outcome, we propose four short- to medium-term actions for duty bearing institutions to consider:

1. Funding must be earmarked to ensure that at least 50 percent of delegates at global fora focused on humanitarian emergencies and the right to education represent contexts affected by conflict and crisis and those who experience rights violations.
2. Processes need to ensure that delegates are appropriately resourced and supported before, during, and after their engagement in global fora so that:
 - a The agendas of global fora prioritize the engagement of conflict- and crisis-affected delegates who can fully shape and contribute to proceedings in ways that are inclusive of different communication styles and abilities.
 - b Children and teachers, as rights holders, can be properly engaged, can fully participate, and have their lived experiences and aspirations included.
 - c The outcomes of global fora are reported back to children and teachers, who are then meaningfully included in actions to implement recommendations and/or hold duty bearers accountable.
3. Strengthen the presence of duty bearing institutions and associated fora in contexts most vulnerable to rights violations. Look to move institutional headquarters and global fora from distant Global North metropolises such as Geneva and New York (where cost and visa barriers prohibit the participation of many rights holders) to regional hubs in the Global South such as Addis Ababa, Beirut, Bogotá, or Dhaka.
4. Prioritize the employment and leadership of experts and advocates with lived experiences in crisis-affected settings. In doing so, work towards the establishment of local duty bearing institutions who have; parity of influence in global fora relating to the right to education.

It is essential to use this moment of reflection to reduce the distance between human rights mechanisms and rights holders, making them more responsive, visible, and effective for those who

need them most. Ensuring meaningful engagement with rights holders and acting on their insights will be key to achieving this goal.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

CH: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. MF: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AJ: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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