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TECHNICAL BRIEF

A Conceptual Framework for Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC): Systematic, holistic approaches to Education Research, Policy and Practice

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

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

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

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

A. Background

Children living in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis are among the most educationally and developmentally disadvantaged in the world (UNESCO, 2015). As of 2023, an estimated 224 million school-aged children across 73 countries are affected by conflict and crisis, with more than 30% of them being (Education Cannot Wait, 2023). These staggering figures, along with the unique challenges and constraints posed by conflict and crisis to education systems, underscore the urgent need for a systematic approach to address the educational needs of such children.

To address these challenges, the field needs a systematic evidence base that can inform policy, practice and evidence. However, the field continues to face an overwhelming lack of evidence on how children learn and develop in contexts of conflict and protracted crises and how to effectively support them (Masten & Narayan, 2012; UNESCO, 2015; Burde et al., 2023). This limited knowledge base is further strained by a fragmented research landscape divided into disciplinary and sectoral silos. This fragmentation hinders holistic understanding of the issues and complicates the development of practical and actionable recommendations. For example, public health and education research on school-based interventions often do not cross-reference each other despite having overlapping goals (Jordans et al., 2016; Kamali et al., 2023; Burde et al., 2017; 2023).

A bibliographic analysis from 2008 to 2023 reveals that the two largest subdisciplines within education in conflict and crisis contexts – 'Education in Emergencies' and 'Refugee Education' – share only 3% of their publication records, despite their similar research topics and target populations. As a result, these conditions create an incoherent evidence base, leading to inefficiencies in research, policymaking, programme development and investment, particularly in conflict and crisis contexts.

Transforming education systems affected by conflict and crisis will require a coherent language, structure and method for integrating and leveraging this disparate evidence – an overarching conceptual framework that reflects the conditions and realities of conflict and crisis-affected education systems and helps identify opportunities and promising solutions for improving education in these contexts.

B. The ERICC Conceptual Framework

To address these challenges, the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium has developed a systematic conceptual framework to translate individual studies into an interconnected body of knowledge on effective educational practices in conflict contexts (Kim et al., forthcoming). Through this framework, we aim to synthesise the existing body of knowledge and build a systematic knowledge base that is comprehensive, context-sensitive and actionable for educational interventions and policy changes. This brief summarises the key components of the conceptual framework, which we hope will provide educational researchers, policymakers and practitioners with a holistic understanding of the field and how to advance effective policy development and educational practice in conflict and crisis contexts.
The ERICC framework is designed to organise existing evidence, challenges and needs, and innovative solutions for education systems in conflict and protracted crisis contexts across disciplines, sectors and regions. Through a comprehensive, transdisciplinary and sectoral approach, it aims to situate and incorporate educational research from conflict and crisis contexts within a global education research landscape. To do so, the ERICC framework situates pathways of education within a nested

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system of actors and stakeholders where key processes involved in education in conflict and crisis contexts take place:

- **Educational experience pathways:** At the child and local levels, children interact with and directly experience educational processes in households, schools and communities, characterised by their access to, quality of and continuity in education;

- **Education policy pathways:** At the local, regional, national and global levels, education systems are operated and managed through policy, financing and accountability decisions and are influenced by (in)coherence in the political economy of education.

Figure 1. ERICC Conceptual Framework (revised in 2024 from 2022)
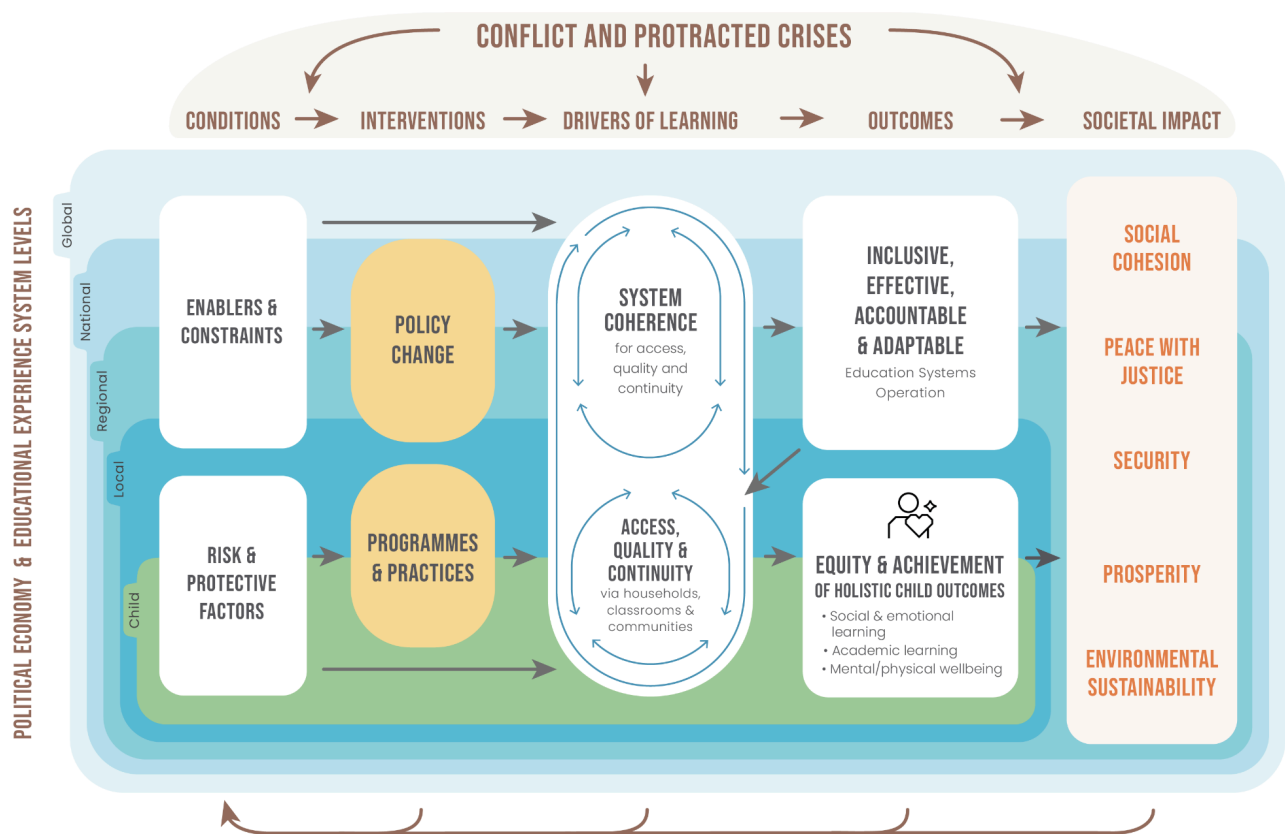
C. Who's Involved in Education System Operations in Conflict and Crisis?

Education systems in conflict and crisis contexts consist of various actors, sometimes with conflicting motivations and aims for education. These actors operate at multiple levels, and include global, national and regional governing authorities (e.g., multilateral banks, federal and state ministries of education, local authorities) and different types of formal and informal education providers at the local level. Education is delivered at the local level by programme implementors and stakeholders (e.g., schools, local NGOs and civil society organisations, communities, parents, teachers, service providers and religious organisations). In conflict and crisis settings where the national governments might have limited authority and capacities, the influence, decisions and actions of global actors (e.g., humanitarian and development donors, multilateral organisations, international NGOs), and the

quality of their coordination with the governing authorities, play important roles in shaping policy systems operations (Tubbs Dolan, 2017, Homonchuk et al, forthcoming).

D. What are the Conditions of Education Systems in Conflict-Affected Settings?

Box 1: Dimensions of conflict and crises

Falk et al (2024) identify four dimensions of conflict and crises in which education policy processes and children's educational experiences take place:

- **Types of conflict and protracted crisis:** compounded crisis or poly crisis, armed conflicts, violence, climate-induced and environmental disasters, forced displacement, economic crisis and shocks, health epidemics and pandemics, and governance or political crisis;
- **Phases of conflict and protracted crisis:** onset-development, protracted-chronic and post-recovery-reconstruction;
- **Scales of conflict and protracted crisis:** intensity (low, medium, high) and centralisation (localised, regional, national, international);
- **Stakeholders of conflict and protracted crisis:** agents (those leading or managing the crisis and/or response) and affected (those affected by the crisis).

Conflict and protracted crises present policy systems operation and local provision of education with significant challenges and constraints. To minimise the impact of conflict and crisis and to support access, quality, continuity and coherence in children's educational experiences, it is important to identify, understand and strategically leverage or counteract the contextual conditions that enable or constrain education systems' operation and children's learning experiences.

- **The conditions that enable or constrain effective policy decision-making processes and implementation** include the available resources – notably financial (e.g., education budget), sociopolitical (e.g., historical legacies, contested political ideologies, social norms on how and where educational resources are invested, perception of refugee and internally displaced populations) and human (e.g., workforce capacity) resources – and the landscape of the political economy and accountability systems (e.g., data and monitoring infrastructure and capacity, policy and procedures on accountability mechanism).

- **The conditions that pose risks and serve as protective factors of children's educational experiences** at the local level - households, schools and communities – may include human capacities (e.g., parents' education and attitudes toward education, teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills and their wellbeing), resources (e.g., curriculum, teaching and learning materials, household income, school budget, community resources) and arrangements (e.g., allocation of school budget; grade level placement; classroom grouping). Children's own characteristics (gender, disability, marginalised group membership), history (e.g., exposure to violence, experience of interrupted schooling), capacities and skills (e.g., learning level, social skills), and relationships (e.g., with teachers, parents, community members) can also present barriers to engaging in their own learning and development, or could serve as assets to improve their access to and quality and continuity of education.

E. Education for What?

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The ERICC framework specifies the immediate outcomes of education policy pathways and educational experience pathways, both of which contribute to broad societal outcomes through education.

- **Education policy outcomes: inclusive, effective, accountable and adaptable education systems' operation, to improve access, quality and continuity**
  To successfully provide access, quality and continuity of education for all children, the education systems in conflict and crisis contexts should strive towards inclusive, effective, accountable and adaptable **policy** design and implementation. This entails ensuring sufficient, equitable and consistent **budget and financing** as well as well-capacitated and usable **data and monitoring systems** that allow monitoring and evaluation to hold the education systems' operation accountable.

- **Educational experience outcomes: equity and achievement of holistic child outcomes**
  The goal of education systems' operation – across local, national/regional and global levels – is to ensure access, quality and continuity of education at the local level, in their schools, homes and communities, and in turn, to support equitable achievement of holistic outcomes for all children. These child-level outcomes are not limited to foundational literacy and numeracy but also include social and emotional skills, citizenship competencies, vocational skills, as well as physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Through achieving these education policy and educational experience outcomes, the ERICC framework posits that inclusive, effective, accountable and adaptable education systems, along with equitable and holistic child outcomes, can enhance societal impact with improved **social cohesion, peace with justice, security, prosperity and environmental sustainability** in conflict and crisis contexts.

F. What Drives Children's Learning, Development and Wellbeing?

The ERICC framework organises the education research landscape around four drivers of learning that can be identified across disciplinary and sectoral divides: **access to**, **quality of**, **continuity in** and **coherence of** educational experiences and policies. Instead of focusing on conventional indicators, such as enrolment rate (as a proxy of access) and learning outcomes (as a proxy of quality), it focuses on identifying central **mechanisms of education** that can be leveraged to improve equity and achievement in holistic learning, development and wellbeing of children in conflict and crisis contexts. The ERICC framework also posits that educational policy and interventions are most effective when they directly address the four drivers of learning:

- **Access: the opportunity and capacity to participate in educational opportunities**
  Access to education involves more than school enrolment; it includes addressing barriers to attendance and engagement in learning opportunities, such as gender inequality; disability; religious, linguistic and ethnic marginalisation; geographic isolation; and climate disasters that prevent children from attending school regularly and participating fully in educational activities (World Bank, 2018). Community and parental awareness of educational access are also crucial in low-resource, crisis-affected contexts (Kabay, 2021; Kabay et al., under advanced review). In the context of distance learning, access also means the availability of functional technology and internet connectivity (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

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- **Quality: quality of the resources, relationships, norms, practices and interactions within classrooms/schools, households and communities**
  While quality of education is often measured by and equated with 'learning outcomes,' this framing makes it difficult to determine what aspects of quality should be targeted to improve learning outcomes. We instead focus on quality, and characteristics of resources and social processes involved in educational experiences (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Resources include physical infrastructure and relevant educational materials, learning content and human capacity. Social processes involve relationships, norms, school/classroom climate, practices and social interactions (e.g., instructional quality, social and emotional support, parenting, community support) that are necessary to safeguard and improve children's holistic learning, development and wellbeing.

- **Continuity: sustained exposure to education that allows progression in both learning and grade/school transition**
  Duration and consistency in educational exposure are frequently overlooked dimensions in the educational literature; yet, inconsistency and disruptions are defining characteristics of educational experiences in conflict and crisis contexts. Brief, sporadic access to learning, even if high quality, is insufficient for children to learn and develop. A glaring gap in research is how to ensure continuous learning over the school-age years among displaced and/or marginalised populations. We specify continuity of learning as one of the drivers – and not just a dimension of – access, and define it as sustained exposure to education that allows progression in both learning and grade/school transition. Continuity is critical to overcoming the challenges of disjointed programming, frequent disruption and school closures, attendance challenges, programme and grade repetition, and dropouts prevalent in crisis contexts.

- **Coherence for access, quality and continuity: alignment and coherence in procedures, capacities and resources, and incentives and goals within and across learning contexts and stakeholders, at and across the local and the policy systems levels**
  A child's access to education and the quality and continuity of their educational experience are determined by education systems' conditions across local, state, national and global levels. Coherence, or lack of, within organisations/systems and across stakeholders at local, state, national and global levels can facilitate or hinder the degree of access, quality and continuity of education (Pritchett, 2015). Ensuring education systems' coherence, horizontally across educational settings and stakeholder groups, and vertically across local, state/regional and national tiers of education systems' operation (Sarwar et al., 2024), is crucial to ensure inclusive, effective, accountable and adaptable education systems in conflict and protracted crisis contexts.

G. How Do We Improve Drivers of Learning and Development?

The ERICC framework posits that educational interventions are most effective when they directly address the four drivers of learning: access, quality, continuity and coherence.

Box 2. **Educational interventions addressing the four drivers of learning: access, quality, continuity and coherence:**

- **Interventions targeting access**
  - programmes that provide incentives for enrolment and attendance, e.g., conditional cash transfers (García & Saavedra, 2017);
  - removing barriers to access, e.g., providing school fees or transportation (Akar et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2014);
  - alternative education opportunities for out-of-school populations through informal/non-formal education programming provision (e.g., F. Brown et al., 2023; Diazgranados et al, 2022; Sirin et al., 2018; Taftaf & Williams, 2020).
- **Interventions targeting quality**
  - enhancing physical structures and resources, e.g., improving water, sanitation and hygiene in schools (UNICEF, 2012);
  - providing quality pre- and in-service teacher training or hiring additional teachers (Wolf et al., 2019);
  - structured pedagogy interventions, skill-based teacher training and ongoing teacher mentoring (e.g., Aber et al., 2021; Banerjee et al., 2023; Bashir et al., 2018; Tubbs Dolan et al., 2022; Torrente et al., 2019; Smart, 2021);
  - mental health psychosocial support, and social and emotional learning to address children's holistic learning and wellbeing in conflict and crisis contexts (Burde et al., 2023; Deitz et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024).
- **Interventions targeting continuity**
  - retention and remedial tutoring programming to increase transition rates and prevent school dropouts (e.g., L. Brown et al., 2022; Brudevold-Newman et al., 2023);
  - distance education programmes to provide ongoing access to education opportunities at times of school closure (Adil et al., 2021; Afoakwah et al., 2021; Angrist et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2022), or education technology support to provide ongoing learning opportunities for children during the school break (Levesque et al, forthcoming).
- **Interventions targeting coherence**
  - global initiatives such as the Grand Bargain, the New Way of Working, and OECD Education in Emergencies financing guidelines, which advocate for predictable, flexible and localised financing of education in conflict and protracted crises, or funding mechanisms such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education, which also aim to improve coherence between the humanitarian and development sectors (Homonchuk et al, forthcoming);
  - improving coordination and alignment among stakeholders, e.g., between two government organisations responsible for pre-service and in-service teacher training (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020) or between the development and humanitarian sectors at state and national levels (Nicolai et al., 2019; Sarwar et al., 2024; Homochuk et al., 2024).
  - broader policy reforms, like integrating refugee teachers into national systems for recruitment, certification and compensation policies (Mendenhall & Falk, 2023);
  - building community trust and engagement for the education programme participation (e.g., Coombes & Ponta, 2023).

Despite growing investments in, and the body of evidence around, the implementation of these interventions, evidence on their effectiveness remains scant; existing research demonstrates, at best,

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mixed results. There is limited information on how, why, for whom and in what conditions these programmes do and do not work (Aber et al., 2021; Burde et al., 2023; De Hoop et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024). To generate actionable evidence for effective programme and policy design and implementation, it is critical to identify and test pathways and conditions under which these interventions succeed within specific contexts and systems.

H. The ERICC Framework's Approach to Education in Conflict and Crisis

The ERICC framework is designed to provide systematic and holistic approaches to best support education research as well as evidence-based policy and practice in conflict and crisis contexts. These include:

- **A focus on drivers of learning and development, beyond outcome.** The ERICC framework moves beyond the policy objectives and benchmarks, e.g., improving enrolment and minimum proficiency in learning outcomes, and focuses on specifying and addressing the concrete mechanisms of change around access, quality, continuity and coherence that can drive impacts of education. By doing so, it provides tangible intervention targets for policy and practice.
- **A multifaceted approach for synergetic education policy and programming.** The ERICC framework emphasises the interconnected nature of the four drivers of learning. Providing access alone cannot make a significant impact in child outcomes without quality, continuity and coherence across educational systems and experiences. This multifaceted approach to education encourages comprehensive approaches that address all four dimensions of learning and development, catalysing synergistic and innovative solutions to improve education policy and programming.
- **Attention to education systems across multiple levels.** By specifying education systems at different levels across child, local, regional, national and global systems, the ERICC framework helps researchers, practitioners and policymakers to consider actors, conditions, pathways and desired outcomes at and across different levels, providing a holistic picture of education systems' operation and policy/programme implementation.
- **Attention to conditions of contexts.** The ERICC framework approaches the conditions of context as a whole, exploring both enablers of and constraints to the drivers of learning. This approach provides a full picture of the context of education systems' operation and children's learning experiences. This is a step forward from traditional deficit-oriented approaches that focus on challenges and problems of the conflict and crisis context, enabling a context-sensitive systems' approach to policy, programming and research.

The ERICC Research Consortium's ongoing research leverages these approaches to generate actionable evidence to transform education in conflict and crisis settings. See the ERICC website for research agendas for the ERICC countries.

Building a robust, actionable evidence base to support children's achievement and equity in learning and wellbeing outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis contexts requires a holistic understanding of the contexts, conditions and mechanisms – addressing the why, how, in what conditions and for whom. The ERICC framework aims to support systematic evidence-building and holistic, synergetic and innovative policy and programming that can transform education systems affected by conflict and crisis, thereby contributing to providing quality education for all.

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