The Politicisation of Evidence:

A Critical Realist Approach to Data-Driven

Education Planning, Practice and Exclusion in Syria

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Declaration

I, Tomoya Sonoda, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Grounding aid planning in empirical evidence on 'what works' has gained currency in the field of education and conflict. However, mainstream debates on the evidence base rarely investigate the politicisation of data, even though it may be more at play than in non-conflict settings. This research aims to examine what forms of discourse play out behind data-driven education planning and practice, and whether and in what ways the politicisation of evidence may enact educational exclusion. I take a critical realist approach to analysing aid professionals' presuppositions of evidence and the reality it claims. I draw on semi-structured interviews with 31 stakeholders in and outside Syria.

The findings reveal that the Government of Syria, Western pro-opposition donors and aid agencies deploy political, emotional and managerial discourses for their advantage. These discourses generate methodological bias in evidence production and use. Stakeholders fabricate, politically reinterpret or selectively deny particular data, justifying their allocation of education resources and services in ways that favour their partisan groups over others. Consequently, vulnerable children in siege, hard-to-reach opposition-held areas and government-retaken areas were kept out of the equation of education assistance. Another emerging finding is that stakeholders position themselves strategically to both use the rhetoric of objectivity implicit in numerical data *and* recognise its politicisation. Analysing the complexities around how evidence is constructed and used in policies and programming, the research offers critical realist insights into aid

professionalism. Measurable data are susceptible to methodological and political contestations in conflict-affected contexts, and therefore cannot objectively represent the whole reality. Aid professionals should reflect on what data tell and do not tell, and what presuppositions are inscribed in evidence. This helps professionals to attend to conflict-affected children's realities and educational needs that they cannot simply observe and quantify, thereby making education planning and practice fairer and more just.

Impact Statement

This research examines data-driven education planning and the resulting phenomenon of educational exclusion in the conflict-affected context of Syria. It is an attempt to challenge predominant empiricism in humanitarian aid. I encourage policy professionals and education practitioners to shift decision making away from an overreliance on quantifiable evidence on 'what works' towards reflexivity on what forms of discourse play out underneath the statistics used for aid financing and programming.

The thesis offers insights into the scholarship on education and conflict by rethinking from a critical realist perspective about what we believe is real and how evidence claims it in the case of education aid to Syria. It critiques positivistic faith in which objective reality is presumed to be only known through particular forms of empirical knowledge and observation. It also challenges an interpretive model that sees reality as socially constructed and thus reduces it into perceptions, interpretations and beliefs in people's mind. For critical realists, both approaches do not necessarily allow researchers and practitioners to understand what real mechanisms or causal forces exist and how they engender the politicisation of evidence and the associated educational exclusion in conflict contexts. From a critical realist perspective, I unpack the politicisation of education data in Syria for the period between 2013 and 2019, and demonstrate how ostensibly scientific data analytics are shaped by stakeholders' political, emotional and managerial discourses. In so doing, I alert aid professionals to the fact that uncritically promoting an

evidence base is dangerous, as it may exclude vulnerable children in conflict from learning opportunities, and even justify their marginalisation as natural.

In addition, the thesis presents how critical realism performs as an alternative approach to analysing the politicisation of evidence in education and conflict. I have documented the process of abductive and retroductive inference as part of data analysis. The analysis explores what conditions must be in place in order for the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion to occur in Syria. The process allows me to detect different discourses and preconceived *idées fixes* in place under the guise of an evidence base. If aid professionals are to serve the most vulnerable children in Syria who may not be reflected in official statistics or those who are deliberately excluded from educational assistance for political reasons, it is crucial to attend to such causal mechanisms that are inconspicuous but structure our thinking, knowing and behaviour. This is vital but largely absent in mainstream debates about the evidence agenda in education and conflict.

Furthermore, the thesis presents how unseen discourses shape what we know and what we do not know, and they have influence over educational resource allocation and beneficiary selection in Syria. It encourages policy professionals and aid practitioners to not only critically reflect on the underlying discourses of an evidence base but also challenge the prevailing political economy value systems within international aid, be honest about part of their complicit and expedient decision making, and redress their self-serving human mentality. Problematising these unseen causal mechanisms is necessitated to address the structural educational exclusion in Syria and make real transformative change in professionalism in education and conflict.

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List of Acronyms

BERA	British Educational Research Association
CPD	Country Programme Document
DFID	Department for International Development
ECW	Education Cannot Wait
EdD	Doctor in Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EU	European Union
FCV	Fragility, Conflict and Violence
FY	Fiscal Year
GCPEA	Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
ICMMS	Iraq Child and Maternal Mortality Survey
IFS	Institution Focused Study
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
IS	Islamic State
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NORRAG	Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SCR	Security Council Resolution
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goal 4
Government	Government of Syria
UCL	University College London

U.S.	United States
UIS	UNESCO Institute of Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UN-DPPA	United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WOS	Whole of Syria
3Ds	Development, Diplomacy and Defence
3Rs	Redistribution, Recognition and Representation
4Rs	Redistribution, Recognition, Representation and Reconciliation

Reflective Statement

Introduction

The Doctor in Education (EdD) programme at University College London (UCL) Institute of Education has provided me with the opportunity to reflect on how I see the world, whilst critically examining both what I do and do not know in the field of education and a philosophy of critical realism. My current circumstances as both doctoral researcher and aid professional have altered my ontological and epistemological awareness about what exists and is real in the social world and how it appears to us in empirical data. Before proceeding, let me briefly introduce my professional background. I will then articulate what I have reflected on throughout the EdD programme.

Over the last fifteen years, I have worked for international NGOs and the UN in development and humanitarian contexts in Afghanistan, Japan, Myanmar, Kenya, Somalia, Lebanon and Syria. Currently, I reside and work in Amman, Jordan in the capacity of Education Manager for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF is a UN agency promoting and protecting the rights of every child worldwide. I have worked for the agency since 2011. The scope of my technical responsibilities at UNICEF has encompassed national education sector analysis and planning, policy advice to the local government, programme design, budget management and donor relations for resource mobilisation.

Before my current assignment in Jordan, I was based in Damascus, Syria between May 2013 and December 2017. My day-to-day work entailed

technical discussions about the education status of conflict-affected children, out-of-school children, required educational interventions, and the financial allocation for said interventions. When discussing these issues with a wide range of counterparts including members of the Ministry of Education, donor group, UN agencies and NGOs, I often came across contradictions and dissonance, whereby different stakeholders made sense of singular events very differently. I kept record of such experiences in my reflective research diary (see Chapter 5 and Appendix 5). For example, I took a memo on my reflection, when the European Union (EU) delegation from Brussels responsible for education aid in the Syrian crisis, invited some of the Damascus-based education aid practitioners to Beirut, Lebanon in June 2017. The EU was one of the largest donors in the education sector of Syria, whilst enforcing foreign policy and economic sanctions against the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. The EU is politically sympathetic to opposition groups in Syria. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the education sector strategy in Syria. Both the EU and the Damascus-based aid agency group talked about the importance of prioritising vulnerable children and delivering education assistance to them. However, the discussion did not engender a shared sense of reality as to who were the most vulnerable. Damascus-based practitioners, including myself, underscored the significance of strengthening the government education system to reach out to vulnerable children in greater coverage and reach, regardless of whether these children reside in government-controlled or opposition-held areas. However, the EU diplomats called the Government of Syria 'the regime' and exclusively focused humanitarian assistance on those living in opposition-

held areas. From the pro-opposition donor perspective, supporting the government education system was never an option. This experience reminded me of the Rashomon effect named after Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film. This term denotes that people, even if witnessing the same event, make sense of it differently based on their own standpoints. As a result, people often have multiple conflicting accounts of reality in the social world.

Reflexivity

Whilst wondering what runs deep in the construction of multiple competing realities in Syria, I have also reflected upon my ontological and epistemological position throughout my doctoral research. I have noted that formerly, I viewed the world of my work through the lens of the positivistic model, given the fact that linear-rational thinking is dominant in UNICEF. Verifiable and measurable evidence is integral to education planning with government authorities and donor communities. I uncritically developed my habit to consider that what appears in official statistics and numerical data mirrors reality on the ground. Therefore, I believed that local authorities and aid organisations, whether they operate in conflict or not, should base any decisions on empirical data for greater rationality, accountability and value for money. Rather than questioning the positivistic empiricist mentality, I believed that the systematic evidence base would dispassionately tell us about 'what works' and the most appropriate courses of action in education for vulnerable children. I believed that this would also benefit my organisation that always appreciates effectiveness and efficiency in the larger UN system.

However, nearly six years of my engagement in doctoral research have served to foster greater individual reflexivity in my professional life. By reflexivity, I refer to methodological introspection; namely, 'an inward-looking, sometimes confessional and self-critical examination of one's own beliefs and assumptions' (Lynch, 2000, p.29). The dual practitioner and researcher identity has allowed me to pause and reflect on how I make sense of the world based on what I think I know. As my literature review and interactions with supervisors and colleagues progressed, it also made me realise how I blinded myself by obscuring what I do not know and what does not appear in empirical data and evidence. From a critical realist perspective, Norrie (2010, p.35) problematises such a single-value ontology or ontological monovalence, writing that 'one cannot grasp the nature of any entity without seeing what it is not, as well as what it is'. A developed understanding and embraced philosophy of critical realism has helped shift my analytical focus from surface to depth, reconfiguring the way I see the world. I will further explore some concepts of critical realism in Chapter 4.

This thesis is concerned with the politicisation of evidence in education aid planning and professional practice. The concept of an evidence base is a powerful and convenient term to demonstrate a sense of objectivity and thus make arguments sound compelling. However, my direct experience in the aid frontline in Syria suggests that an evidence-informed approach can also be highly politicised and even abused as a political tool to justify ideologically motivated decision making, make it appear natural to exclude particular powerless groups from the benefit of aid, and maintain the status quo. Upon a greater understanding of this concept, and understanding that evidence-

based humanitarian and development programming is not always compatible with fairness and justice, my inner discomfort increased. I began frequently questioning in Syria: Do I really act to reduce rather than reproduce exclusion and inequality for the most marginalised children? Whose evidence counts in education aid planning? Whose interest is being served by humanitarian aid practice? These questions in my professional life spurred my drive for this doctoral research, and I became interested in examining the interplay between politics (i.e. discourse) and science (i.e. evidence).

Despite the widespread acceptance of an evidence base, little research has been conducted to examine the politicisation of evidence in education aid in politically divided conflict-affected environments like Syria. The research gap has profound implications for fairness and impartiality in aid budget allocation and beneficiary selection. If the political dimension of evidence remains unexamined, policy professionals and aid practitioners may treat empirical evidence as if it objectively represents the whole reality. They may pay scant attention to the fact that empirical data and research evidence can be politicised and distorted behind the scenes to cater to the political needs of particular authorities and institutes in power. In other words, those in power can control knowledge making in ways that favour their own interests over those of the powerless. As a result, the values, beliefs and emotions accepted by those powerful groups can only prevail in shaping aid policies and decisions. The politicisation of science and evidence can even undermine science and democracy as a whole. Pielke (2007, p.11) warns that 'science ceases to be science and morphs completely into politics, threatening the sustainability of the scientific enterprise itself'. If science does

not matter to us in the social world, 'distinguishing science and politics would be of little concern: we could all then simply invent "facts" as convenient' (Pielke, 2007, p.63). If the politicisation of evidence is persistently unchallenged, fair and impartial education aid also comes under assault. As a result, children in need of education aid may remain excluded from necessary assistance in Syria and other contexts. Therefore, the investigation of the politicisation of evidence is necessary and crucial.

This doctoral research is a reflective opportunity for me to better understand the potential power and risks that underlie the 'what works' agenda in professional aid practice. I have become more wary that the practice of deploying numbers as evidence is not simply a rational enterprise of ensuring objectivity and fairness, but it is also a political act of advancing the legitimacy of particular political desires and exclusionary practice that those in power want to promote. Whilst gaining greater insight into the idea of an evidence base, I also recognise that the more I learn about the depth of knowledge around reality and evidence, the more I know of what I do not know about the subject. I come to be more aware of what I do and do not know. Reflecting on my own experience, knowledge, ignorance and even ignorance of my ignorance as a practitioner, the EdD programme has served as my individual reflexivity in professional life. As elaborated in this thesis, looking at the world from a critical realist perspective also helps me to be more attentive to unobservable and unmeasurable forces or discourses underneath apparent political phenomena. A reflection on my professional work within philosophical and theoretical accounts has enabled me to gain an alternative viewpoint and see what I was not able to see previously.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1.   The Rise of Evidence in Education and Conflict

In recent years, there has been strong global momentum for a strengthened evidence base in education planning and practice within conflict contexts. DFID (2019) has planned for a major research programme on Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis for the period between 2020 and 2026, seeking to tackle the current lack of rigorous evidence on 'what works' for education and to deliver better data-driven policies and value for money in conflict. UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) has also advocated 'better data = better policies' in education systems (Montoya, 2019a). UIS (2018) calls on governments and development partners to make an annual global investment of USD 280 million in education data in order to advance the progress of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and leave no one child behind in crises. The rise of an evidence agenda reflects the increased demand by taxpayers and donor governments keen on how their money is spent for humanitarian action (Obrecht, 2017). The call for evidence also mirrors the fact that aid professionals and practitioners are willing to make rational decisions based on knowledge on what interventions do and do not work (Stewart, 2019).

Education policymakers, aid practitioners and donor diplomats often assume that the use of empirical research on how change occurs, grounded in observable and measurable data, enables them to capture the educational needs of children and identify the most effective course of action for problem

solving (see Burde et al., 2015, 2017; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). In other words, they believe that educational problems can be resolved in linear cause-effect thinking. However, my professional engagement in Syria as a UNICEF Education Specialist based in Damascus between May 2013 and December 2017 suggests that such a positivistic and empiricist faith is mythical. Artefacts that we usually produce and use as empirical evidence could not always be taken to portray a whole reality. My professional experiences suggest that knowledge and evidence often come to be fabricated, reinterpreted and selectively ignored by groups in power for their advantage, particularly in a politically divided conflict-affected environment.

Let me share an example from personal experience in Syria. Since 2014, Syria's Ministry of Education (MOE) and UNICEF have conducted an annual education sector analysis using the statistical estimates of displaced persons and Education Management Information System (EMIS) that collates enrolment data in each school. Representing UNICEF, I coordinated with the MOE and stakeholders in organising the sector analysis between 2014 and 2017. In 2014-2015, the findings of the analysis revealed that the crisis left 2.1 million children out of school in the country (UNICEF, 2016a). These figures were readily accepted as a 'true' reflection of the reality by the international community. In the 2016 Supporting Syria Conference in London, donor governments and aid agencies quoted the estimate of 2.1 million out-of-school children in high-level dialogues, pledging USD 11 billion for multi-year goals including their response to the education crisis in Syria (HRW, 2016; UNICEF, 2016b). However, the Government of Syria viewed the estimate as inconvenient, because it could undermine the image of its

state control and authority. UNICEF tried to cite the estimate of '2.1 million out-of-school children' in its national strategic documents, such as the UNICEF Syria Country Programme Document 2016-2017 (CPD) and the UN Strategic Frameworks 2016-2017. However, Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) never allowed for the inclusion of these figures. MOFA even suggested to replace it with 'one million out-of-school children' with little regard to what data and evidence their estimate might rest on. UNICEF was in negotiation and renegotiation with MOFA as to what numbers were permissible for publication. It ended up with the statement that 'many children are out of school' in CPD (UNICEF, 2016c, p.2).

Due to MOFA's political interest to portray a 'less severe' picture of educational crisis and to exert control over what is officially reported as legitimate, the scale of out-of-school children was misrepresented in the national aid frameworks. This had far-reaching implications for the UN's education resource allocation and beneficiary selection. What matters is that even if UNICEF presents the statistical findings as valid, such empirical evidence is only judged to be 'true' when it accords with, and is amenable to, the discourse of the Government of Syria. If UNICEF's statement or evidence does not fit in with the discourse of those in power, it is discredited. This experience was ethically uncomfortable and frustrating, but it also gave me an opportunity to reflect on my own presuppositions and to question what on earth evidence means and whose reality it represents in political conflict. These reflective questions spurred the drive for this research.

1.2.   Research Aim and Rationales

1.2.1. The aim of the research

This research is concerned with the interplay between empirical evidence and competing discourses of education stakeholders – namely, the Government of Syria, Western pro-opposition donors, and aid agencies. The aim of the research is to examine: **What forms of discourse are deployed behind data-driven education planning and practice, and whether and in what ways the exclusion of particular groups of children from education aid may be associated with the politicisation of evidence in conflict?** I draw on a case study of political processes around evidence production and use for beneficiary selection and resource allocation in the education sector of Syria between 2013 and 2019.

This research attempts to challenge predominant empiricism in education planning and decision making, where aid professionals tend to treat measurable evidence as if it can objectively depict the whole universe of the educational needs of vulnerable children and inform what policies and actions work. I seek to unpack the underlying discourses in the data-driven approach, and offer critical insights into the politicisation of evidence and aid professionalism in the context of Syria.

1.2.2. Rationales

The rationale for this study is to address a research gap in the scholarship on the complexities around production and use of education evidence in conflict

settings. Analysing the political nature of empirical evidence is not new in the educational research arena, but little research exists around the politics of evidence in conflict-affected contexts. Historical studies show that by the mid-nineteenth century, numerical data were recorded and used to enforce the policy of payment by results in education systems in Western democracies (Moss, 2014; Weiss and Gruber, 1987). In the mid-twentieth century, quantification and measurement were appreciated by policymakers and practitioners as 'accurate representations' of education systems (Lawn, 2013, p.8) and thus widely utilised to seek better school governance and performance (Ball, 2017; Lawn, 2013, 2018; Ozga et al., 2011). In other words, the quantitative way of knowing or the positivistic data-driven approach has grown as social instrument to ensure that 'those who intervene in other people's lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm' (Oakley, 2000, p.3).

In education and development, acts of performance measurement and quantification, coupled with prescribed targets and indicators, have become standard managerial practice. This phenomenon is epitomised by the SDG4 progress monitoring. However, the global trend of managerialism and performance measurement has been critiqued for reducing the meaning of quality education to matters of inputs (i.e. aid spending; access to school) and outputs (i.e. school efficiency; learning outcomes) (McCowan, 2011; Sayed and Ahmed, 2015). Further, there are critical debates around how metrics and data analytics are really able to gauge educational values, processes and relationships that cannot simply be observed and quantified, such as gender and inclusiveness (Unterhalter, 2017, 2019). The way

education policymakers and practitioners interpret the realities and educational needs of children is not always guided by scientific rigor; rather, it is deeply embedded in their value assumptions (Crewe, 2014). These critiques of the evidence base should also be relevant to conflict contexts. Nevertheless, few studies analyse the political dimension of education data in conflict, despite the fact that aid practitioners in conflict settings struggle with unseen competing discourses and unequal power relations that may be even more at play than in non-conflict development contexts.

Another rationale for this study is the timeliness of my research in the era of 'post-truth' politics. Post-truth means that appeals to personal emotion are seen as more influential than providing factual evidence in the site of political deliberation and policy formulation (Kakutani, 2018; Mcintyre, 2018). The term post-truth emerged in 2016 when the US presidential election and Brexit vote were manifested as the assault on democracy and reasoned debate through the distortion of facts and abandonment of accountability (Kakutani, 2018; Mcintyre, 2018). The phenomenon of post-truth is pertinent to education in conflict. My experience in Syria suggests that the contending parties do not always judiciously weigh up varying evidence; instead, they fabricate, reinterpret or selectively deny evidence, and allocate education resources in ways that favour their supporters over those seen as hostile. Consequently, vulnerable groups of children fall into political factions and some are marginalised from education aid. Thus, the politicisation of evidence can be compounded by post-truth, resulting in exclusionary and unfair outcomes. It is in this context that the political nature of evidence and the resulting exclusion deserve in-depth analysis in education and conflict.

1.3.   Defining Evidence, Discourse and Politicisation

Evidence, discourse and politicisation are key concepts which run through this research. It is therefore vital to understand what they mean at the outset.

1.3.1. Evidence

In the natural and social sciences, the definition of evidence by scholars often revolves around empirical accounts. Davies and colleagues (2000, p.3) frame evidence as formal research findings, noting that 'evidence comprises the result of "systematic investigation towards increasing the sum of knowledge"'. Similarly, Oakley (2000, p.4) refers to evidence as scientific enquiry or experimental research that can help 'human beings to make informed decisions about how best to lead their lives'. However, evidence is formed and shaped by a continuum of knowing which stretches from positivistic insights at one end of the spectrum, to interpretive awareness at the other end (Davies and Nutley, 2008). With this in mind, I broadly consider evidence as a spectrum that encompasses quantitative and qualitative knowing. In this thesis, I define evidence as:

> Any forms of data and information that are produced and interpreted
> in a continuum from positivistic to interpretive knowing and that can be
> used as valid knowledge to inform policy, planning and practice.

In addition, I refer to 'empirical' evidence throughout this research. By empirical evidence, I mean specific data and information that are observable, measurable and quantifiable. What consists of 'good' evidence is epistemologically contested. As Nutley and colleagues (2013, p.6) point out,

it 'depends on what we want to know, why we want to know it and how we envisage that evidence being used'. As such, the data and information we call evidence do not always speak for themselves. This is where forms of power or discourse come in.

1.3.2. Discourse within power/knowledge

A concept of discourse is associated with the interplay between power and knowledge. Drawing on Foucault's accounts, let me first explain the power/knowledge nexus and then clarify the meaning of a discourse for this thesis. Foucault (1978) explains that power is dispersed throughout the entire social sphere and enacted at every moment. He considers that power 'is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere' (1978, p.93). Foucault regards power and knowledge as inseparable. He holds that all the knowledge we have is the effect of power relations and struggles.

> The subject who knows, the objects to be known, and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations.

> (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984, p.175)

Recognising the effects of power on the production of knowledge, Foucault is concerned with the abstract structures that regulate the range of what is known and what is not known (Ball, 2013; Rabinow, 1984). Foucault (1972) sheds light on the regulatory process derived from power/knowledge, where particular facts are perceived as true, and others denounced as false. For

Foucault, 'discourse' plays a pivotal role in the exclusionary process. He defines a discourse as a 'regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements' (1972, p.80). Discourses are not reducible to speech acts and utterances. Rather, discourses are more abstract mechanisms that govern who we are, what we think and how we act in favour of particular values at the expense of others. Examining the exclusionary nature of power/knowledge is integral to my research on the politicisation of evidence. Following Foucault's line of thought, I refer to discourse as an unseen mechanism that produces and reproduces our thinking and behaviour.

1.3.3. Three forms of politicisation of evidence

In everyday life, the politicisation of information emerges in different forms, such as fake news in social media and disinformation campaigns by political parties (Kakutani, 2018). In armed conflict, empirical data and evidence can be politicised to serve the needs of politics, at the cost of suppressing crucial information (UN-DPPA, 2019). By politicisation, I suggest that three forms stand out in the field of education and conflict: I) data fabrication, II) political data interpretation, and III) selective data use and non-use (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Three forms of politicisation of evidence

I Data fabrication

To invent the official statistics as convenient – i.e. population estimate and EMIS data

Politicisation of evidence

II Political data interpretation

To make sense of data and information (i.e. severity of needs) in ways that favour particular values

III Selective use and non-use of data

To selectively use or deliberately neglect particular data for political ends. This is also called cherry picking and policy-based evidence

Form I: Data fabrication

Data fabrication refers to the way in which information and evidence is manufactured, tailored or manipulated in order to serve particular interests. Fabrication can occur in the process of data production, analysis and use. For example, some populations are methodologically excluded from the process of data collection, the result being that they are not represented in the data that may affect their lives. As such, authorities may twist official data (i.e. demographic statistics, EMIS) and invent false narratives to serve their political positions, justify their ideologies and challenge rival claims. Weiss (1979, p.429) problematises the practice of fabrication, noting that, when evidence is falsified, the use of evidence itself becomes 'illegitimate'.

Form II: Political data interpretation

The second form of politicisation is the value-laden interpretation of data. People make sense of information in ways that favour their political values. They overtly or covertly engage in this practice in conflict settings. In Syria, for example, Western pro-opposition donor governments have politically (re)interpreted the severity of humanitarian needs according to their foreign policy and political interest, thereby manoeuvring resource allocation in favour of opposition-held areas. This is further examined in the thesis.

Form III: Selective data use and non-use

Policy professionals and practitioners have their predetermined positions to take, according to organisational mandates and personal values. To prop up their positions, they may selectively use or deliberately neglect particular data and information in the process of decision making. Several scholars (Hertin et al. 2009; Pielke, 2007) refer to this phenomenon as the post demonstration of reasoning for preconceived decisions – put differently, cherry picking and policy-based evidence. In international aid, Chambers (2014, p.33) warns that the selective use of data 'packages realities in conventional forms, excludes discordant evidence, and prevents new understandings'. This suggests that selective use or non-use of evidence is a political act that may exclude alternative views.

1.4.   Organisation of the Thesis

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the research context. I provide the background of political conflict, humanitarian situations and education aid in Syria.

Chapter 3 reviews some of the theoretical and empirical literature on education and conflict. I examine how literature in this field addresses the politicisation of evidence. I also present critiques of the 'what works' agenda.

Chapter 4 focuses on methodology. I explore what ontological and epistemological assumptions positivism, interpretivism and critical realism hold regarding evidence and the reality it claims. I then explain how critical realism is relevant to research on the politicisation of evidence.

Chapter 5 explains research methods. It clarifies the process of data collection and analysis, and the ethical considerations and limitations.

Chapters 6 to 8 present the findings of my interview data. Chapter 6 shows how and why research participants tend to perceive the evidence base as an ability to depict reality. I then critically examine whether empirical data can really capture children's realities and educational needs in Syria.

Chapter 7 investigates the politicisation of evidence production and use by each stakeholder in Syria. I explain that the methodological bias through the politicisation of evidence results in educational aid exclusion.

Chapter 8 unpacks what forms of discourse stakeholders deploy and how these discourses play out under the guise of data-driven education aid.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by reflecting on the emerging findings. I explain the contribution to knowledge, and areas for further research.

Chapter 2. The Context of Syria:

Conflict, Humanitarian Situations and Education Aid

In this chapter, first, I review the geopolitical background of conflict in Syria. I then look at the humanitarian situations and the aid architecture. Lastly, I explain the political dynamics of the education sector in Syria.

2.1.   The Background of Political Conflict

The conflict in Syria flared with pro-democracy protests in March 2011. It has escalated into a multi-party conflict amongst the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government, the political opposition (i.e. the interim government), opposition rebel forces (i.e. Free Syrian Army etc), Kurdish self-administration (including Syrian Democratic Forces), and extremists, such as Islamic State (IS) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The conflict has been characterised by a proxy conflict by external powers. Russia, Iran and Iran-backed Hezbollah support the Government of Syria, whereas the Western coalition – i.e. the United States (U.S.), the United Kingdom (UK), the EU and others – backs the opposition (Idris, 2017; Phillips, 2018). The polarisation between Qatar close to Syria *versus* Saudi Arabia antipathy to Iran in the Gulf also casts a shadow on the proxy conflict. Unlike other conflict situations, the Syrian crisis is unique in that the Western donor governments do not accept the recipient government legitimacy; instead, they support the opposition for a political transition as of April 2020.

In recent years, the Government of Syria has had the majority of the country under its control. However, conflict remains active in north-eastern and north-western Syria, where some areas are contested by the opposition.

Map: Areas of control by different actors as of April 2020
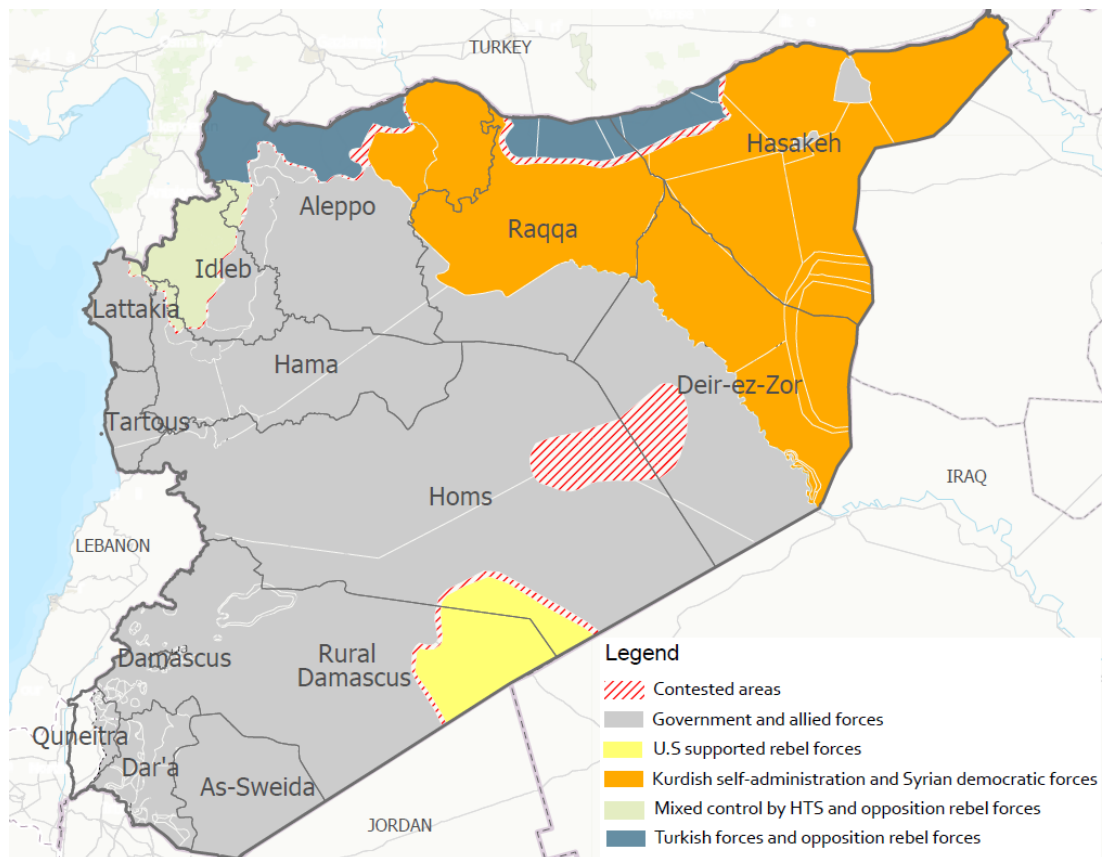
Kurdish self-administration exerts control over the north-east, including Hasakeh, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates (Petkova, 2020). Turkish forces have controlled some part of northern Syria. In October 2019, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish a safe zone on the northern Syrian border in order to de-escalate the fighting, in parallel with the U.S. military withdrawal from Syria. The buffer zone has allowed Turkish forces to retain the space of the opposition-held territories in the north. IS remains in control of some pockets of Deir-ez-Zor surrounded by Kurdish forces in the east. In north-

western Syria, some areas of Idleb and rural areas of Aleppo were contested by HTS, opposition rebel forces and the Government as of April 2020.

In 2013, the Syrian rebel leaders, backed by the Western pro-opposition coalition, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, formed a Turkey-based interim government and established local councils for governance in opposition-held areas in Syria (Lund, 2018). The rebel groups presented themselves as 'moderate' or 'non-ideological' by avoiding the Islamist rhetoric and distancing themselves from radical groups (ICG, 2015; Phillips, 2018). This was a key to obtaining support from the West. The Western coalition longing for the departure of Assad expected the moderate rebel groups to serve as a platform for post-Assad Syria. Thus, the coalition provided those opposition groups with military and financial assistance (ICG, 2015; Phillips, 2018). By mid-2015, some opposition factions expanded territories in the south (i.e. Dar'a governorate) and in the north-west (i.e. Idleb and East Aleppo).

Radical extremists, such as IS, swept across north-eastern Syria. In 2014, IS seized the city of Raqqa governorate and made it their de facto capital. They also put Deir-ez-Zor governorate under their control. In May 2015, IS accelerated their offensives in the ancient city of Palmyra in Homs governorate and extended the territory under its control. With the prevalence by the opposition groups and IS, the Assad government saw a series of setbacks and came close to collapse. However, Syria's geopolitical landscape started to change in September 2015. Alarmed with the growing possibility that Assad might fall, Russia intervened the conflict by supporting the Syrian government forces.

Importantly, Russia and its allies justified their military interventions in Syria in the name of fight against IS, but they primarily aimed to attack not only IS but also opposition groups in order to bring their territories back in Assad's control (Phillips, 2018). Indeed, the Russian-Iranian military assistance, combined with Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia, re-boosted the Syrian government forces and helped Assad to retake territory from both IS and opposition groups. By the end of 2016, the government forces had succeeded in re-conquesting major opposition-held areas in the south (i.e. Dar'a governorate, Daraya of Rural Damascus) and the north-west (i.e. East Aleppo) after bitter bombardment and siege. In April 2018, East Ghouta in Rural Damascus that had been controlled by opposition groups and besieged by the government forces since 2012, was also retaken by the Government. In the north-east, the U.S. airstrikes coupled with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces on the ground pressured IS. In May 2016, Raqqa city, the capital of IS, was recaptured by Kurdish self-administration. By late 2017, most of the IS-held Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates were retaken by Kurdish self-administration and the Government of Syria.

The protracted conflict has witnessed brutal violence, such as indiscriminate bombardments, attacks on civilians and the alleged use of chemical weapons (Siege Watch, 2019). To end the conflict and accelerate reconciliation, the international community has also made diplomatic and political efforts at different levels. The UN General Assembly adopted the UN Security Council Resolutions (SCR) 2254 (UN, 2015) calling for a ceasefire and political settlement, SCR 2268 (UN, 2016a) for the cessation of hostilities, and SCR 2401 (UN, 2018a) for the nationwide ceasefire. In

parallel, political stakeholders organised a series of high-level peace talks between the government representatives and opposition leaders under UN auspices in Geneva and Vienna between 2012 and 2019. However, these negotiations were neither straightforward nor successful due to the continued polarisation. The opposition leaders viewed Assad's departure as non-negotiable in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, whilst Russia and its allies by no means saw political transition as a priority.

What matters is that these peace deals and reconciliation efforts have also been turned into the political and military tactics. For instance, even after the UNSCR 2254 for local ceasefires was agreed in December 2015, areas controlled by IS and other extremists were outside of the ceasefire agreements; therefore, attacks on those areas legitimately continued by either the government forces, rebels, Russian, Kurdish or U.S. forces. This became a loophole for Syrian-Russian-Iranian allies to keep attacking opposition-held areas by claiming that they were targeting IS (Phillips, 2018).

The Astana peace process for Syria is another source of scepticism against reconciliation arrangements by the Government of Syria and its allies. In the first round of Astana talks in Kazakhstan in January 2017, Russia, along with Iran and Turkey, re-emphasised SCR 2254 to freeze the fighting by both parties. Following a series of Astana talks, Russia and its allies put forward the 'de-escalation zones' for four major opposition strongholds – Idleb, Rastan of Homs, East Ghouta in Rural Damascus, and Dar'a. In these zones, the Syrian government forces and opposition groups were forbidden from bombing and shelling against each other, so that humanitarian aid was supposedly allowed to be delivered (Phillips, 2018).

However, the opposition groups were furious about the framework of de-escalation zones and became increasingly sceptical about the reconciliation process (Hall, 2019). They saw the process as a political ploy by Russians to prepare for the next attack on the opposition forces and consolidate the power of the Government of Syria (Adleh and Favier, 2017).

The sceptical accounts of reconciliation are also expressed by a group of Syrian writers and researchers who post their critiques and opinions in the online social journalism platform – Al-Jumhuriya Collective. They express how opposition activists, former rebel members and military defectors are treated by the Government without mercy and amnesty (Al-Saleh, 2019; Amin, 2020). Although local reconciliation agreements guaranteed their safety, some surrendering rebel commanders and opposition figures were arrested, physically abused or assassinated. Others were sent out to the frontlines against IS in the eastern desert or to Idleb governorate to fight opposition groups. Al-Numayri (2019) casts doubt on the reconciliation process, noting that 'the regime believes no stability can be attained without "cleansing" and "homogenising" society (to use Assad's own vocabulary), and eliminating all dissident voices without exception; and that no reasonable solution to the conflict is possible in conjunction with such a mentality'.

Indeed, these local reconciliation deals may appear neutral but actually allowed the Assad government to push opposition fighters who had surrendered away from the major central cities of Syria into the rural north-west, such as Idleb, and other battlefields. Idleb was the last major stronghold of Turkey-backed opposition rebel groups and jihadists. However, since November 2019, the government forces have tactically stepped up

their offensive on Idleb. Heavy violence in Idleb has killed and injured large numbers of civilians, triggering new waves of forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Fierce fighting between the government forces, opposition rebels and jihadists continues in Idleb as of April 2020. This has reproduced deep hostilities and grievances amongst those displaced and caught in conflict. The conflict dynamics also complicate humanitarian access and aid delivery, shaping the aid architecture in Syria. Importantly, the complex geopolitics, deep hostilities and lack of access also deeply influence the process of evidence gathering and use for aid planning and decision making.

2.2. Humanitarian Situations and Aid Architecture in Syria

2.2.1. Siege tactics and the uncertainty of knowing

The almost decade-long conflict in Syria could lead to the 'biggest humanitarian horror' of the 21st century (UN, 2020). The continued violence has caused massive civilian deaths, injuries and forced displacements since March 2011. The UN stopped updating the official number of casualties in 2014, because the limited access on the ground did not allow them to verify the multiple sources of information and produce reliable estimates (Heilprin, 2014). Although the verification process remains challenging, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR, 2020) keeps updating the death toll estimates ranging from 384,000 to 586,000 persons as of March 2020. These estimates, albeit not verified, give a sense of appalling injustice in the conflict. Indeed, the people of Syria has experienced 'the normalisation of an

unprecedented level of violence' with severe implications for women and children (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016, p.7). Humanitarian needs in Syria continue to grow, with 11.7 million people requiring assistance, more than half the pre-crisis population of 21 million (OCHA, 2019a). Over 6.2 million people are internally displaced, 5 million are in acute need in the country, and 5.7 million become registered refugees worldwide (OCHA, 2019a).

The Syrian conflict saw human rights violations and injustice, including the use of hunger and water scarcity as a tactic of war in besieged areas. The merciless siege tactics by parties to the conflict represented a humanitarian catastrophe as part of the crisis. As of April 2020, areas in siege no longer exist in the country. However, some opposition areas, such as Muadamiyat, Daraya and East Ghouta in Rural Damascus, and East Aleppo, used to be militarily encircled by government forces. Fua and Kefraya of Idleb and Deir-ez-Zor were also besieged by armed opposition groups and IS forces, respectively. Provision of humanitarian aid was totally cut off in these besieged areas. Civilians and fighters under siege were deliberately denied access to food, water and basic medical care, the result being that hundreds of deaths were recorded from starvation and dehydration. In February 2015, OCHA recognised 11 besieged areas in Syria with an estimated population of 212,000. At this point in time, however, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS, 2015) also estimated 640,000 people under long-term siege in its report called 'Slow Death', noting that local ceasefire agreements did not function to end the horror in siege and that the UN failed to capture the real magnitude and severity of those under siege. By June 2017, the UN updated the estimate, reporting that 540,000

people were trapped in siege, with the majority militarily encircled in East Ghouta (OCHA, 2017). The significant uncertainty of what is really going on in the field is a crucial point in relation to the politicisation of evidence.

In fact, there was and is almost always some uncertainty as to how many people are in government-controlled and opposition-held areas, and who is deserving more and less humanitarian assistance. Heavy insecurity and deliberate access control on security checkpoints restricted the autonomy of the UN and NGOs to collect data rigorously and analyse them especially in besieged and hard-to-reach opposition areas. The practice of knowing about real humanitarian situations through needs assessments, research evaluations and field monitoring is never easy in the context of Syria. Aid professionals often have to rely on partial data from the Government and anecdotal stories from field workers and community members, when they try to make sense of what is happening in Syria (Darcy, 2016; Haid, 2019). In other words, the lack of certainty about what is going on might allow the contesting parties to take advantage of room available for manoeuvre and interpret humanitarian situations for their advantage. This has led to the actual politicisation of evidence in aid planning and practice in Syria.

2.2.2. Political polarisation in the aid sector

Humanitarian access control by the Government

Since the outset of the conflict, the Government of Syria has enforced approval procedures across the aid sector. Under existing forms of this bureaucracy, Damascus-based UN agencies and NGOs are always required

to gain multiple access permissions from line ministries and local governors before they deliver humanitarian assistance to particular locations. That is, the Government is in a powerful position to grant or withhold permission for humanitarian support. Syria's MOFA sits at the top of the hierarchy, whilst Damascus-based UN agencies and NGOs are heavily regulated by MOFA and other line ministries. The centralised approval culture and fragile power relationship between the Government (with more access control) and aid agencies (with less control) represent the unique aid architecture in Syria.

Even when the delivery of humanitarian aid is urgent, not all requests from aid agencies are approved immediately (Czuperski et al., 2017; OCHA, 2019a). In particular, the UN aid convoys and airdrops to hard-to-reach opposition areas and besieged areas were often deliberately denied by the Government. According to the UN inter-agency approval record (UN, 2018b), in 2016 when the conflict over territorial control had intensified, only 117 of 258 UN inter-agency aid convoy requests (45.3 per cent) were approved by the Government. This means that the UN convoy assistance reached only 419,650 people (20 per cent of the target) in hard-to-reach areas. In 2018, there is no available information on the approval rate, but the UN convoy coverage remained limited to only 638,600 people (54 per cent) in hard-to-reach areas and 60,800 (17 per cent) in besieged areas.

Most notably, the Damascus-based humanitarian assistance was and remains subject to the top-down Syrian government bureaucracy. Under the system, the Government is positioned to freely exert control to benefit only populations in government areas and exclude those seen as hostile in opposition areas from humanitarian aid. To address this challenge, the UN

Security Council adopted SCR 2139 (2014a) to call on all parties to permit free access to humanitarian aid, SCR 2165 (2014b) to allow cross-border aid operations from Turkey and Jordan, and SCR 2336 (2016b) for safe and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Syria. Whilst these UN efforts have accelerated some humanitarian response, the approval culture persists in the aid architecture. The Government of Syria continues to serve as a gatekeeper in controlling humanitarian access to opposition areas. Importantly, Western pro-opposition donors also have powerful influence over the allocation of financial resources and the selection of beneficiary groups within the architecture.

The Whole of Syria approach and the West's economic sanctions

Since the 2014 UN adoption of SCR 2165 for cross-border operations, the international aid community has applied a Whole of Syria (WOS) approach to enhancing operational coherence amongst aid agencies in different areas of control. Damascus-based aid agencies mainly support vulnerable populations in government-controlled areas and some contested and besieged areas, whereas cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan aims to support opposition strongholds, such as Idleb (OCHA, 2019a). The WOS arrangement takes a needs-based approach to humanitarian impartiality and neutrality. However, the WOS coordination is not that simple due to the government approval procedures outlined above and also the underlying political interests of Western donor governments.

The Western pro-opposition donor governments, such as the U.S., UK and EU, have denied the legitimacy of Assad and imposed restrictive measures and economic sanctions against the Government of Syria. The sanctions are mainly designed to suspend most of the economic cooperation agreements – i.e. banking and trade – with the Government, its affiliated institutes and individuals. Whilst halting the direct financial aid flow to the Government and its controlled areas, the Western donors have also diverted assistance to areas controlled by moderate opposition groups. DFID (2017, p.2) explicitly stated in its operational strategy for the Syrian crisis that DFID has worked 'to improve the effectiveness and funding of the international humanitarian response and support the moderate opposition to deliver education and livelihoods assistance'. This is a politically motivated area-based approach, contrary to the WOS's humanitarian needs-based approach. Opposition-held areas suffer massive humanitarian and educational needs. However, from a needs-based perspective, it is also important to remember that there are a large number of vulnerable children with equivalent needs in government-controlled areas. Nevertheless, due to political and economic sanctions imposed by the Western donors, education aid has been restricted in the areas under the government control. For instance, the geographic earmarking by EU only allows for its assistance to north-eastern and north-western Syria. This has left major areas in the country underfunded, even though there is a need for humanitarian aid to more than a million internally displaced persons in the areas that have been retaken by the Government (OCHA, 2019a). The exclusionary aid practice is interwoven with the political economy of humanitarian financing in Syria.

Alongside humanitarian aid, the Western pro-opposition donors have mobilised stabilisation assistance to bolster the governance of the interim government in opposition areas. The stabilisation initiative originally aimed to seek political transition and promote post-Assad Syria. Indeed, the pro-opposition donors have financed tens of billions of dollars in stabilisation assistance to opposition-held areas (Brown, 2018). However, the geopolitical landscape has been shifting over the past few years. As the Assad government has regained control over the majority of Syria, the moderate opposition groups are gradually losing their control and presence. Idleb governorate remains the last stronghold of the opposition, but a large part of Idleb was taken over by a jihadist group of HTS and is currently being retaken by the Government as of April 2020. This may have implications for the Western aid policy and strategy. However, some of the pro-opposition donors persistently seek political change. In December 2019, the EU (2019a, p.1) reaffirmed that 'working towards a political settlement between the regime and the opposition in accordance with UNSCR 2254 will remain the priority for the European Union'. What matters is that, whether it be humanitarian or stabilisation assistance, decisions around humanitarian resource allocation and beneficiary selection in Syria are highly politicised by the foreign policy and political interest of Western donor governments.

In the proxy conflict, the aid sector can be a political battlefield where the Government of Syria and pro-opposition donors seek to compel the agendas that cater to their political values and ideologies. The UN and NGOs try to adhere to humanitarian imperatives for impartial aid delivery even in such complex political webs and power imbalances, but they are often squeezed

into the middle between the Government and the donor group associated with European governments. The political economy dynamics influence the way aid professionals interpret priorities and make decisions about response planning in the education sector, as will be explored in this thesis.

2.2.3. Education aid to Syria

The education sector, led by the MOE and UNICEF, consists of 70 agencies in the country. These organisations have made collective efforts to improve equitable access to formal and non-formal education for crisis-affected children in all 14 governorates. Approximately 63 per cent of school-aged population (5-17 years old) are in government-controlled areas and the rest in opposition-held areas (OCHA, 2019b). More than 5.8 million school-aged children and 120,000 teachers are in need of educational assistance (OCHA, 2019b). The crisis has left 2.1 million children – more than one-third of Syria's children – out of school in both government and opposition areas (OCHA, 2019b). The education system was politically fragmented with six different curricula taught in different control areas (OCHA, 2018). The fragmentation has serious implications for the certification of education especially for children in opposition areas. In 2019, the education sector required USD 255.5 million to improve access to formal and non-formal education. The multilateral and bilateral donors (i.e. EU, DFID) and the global fund (i.e. ECW: Education Cannot Wait) play an important role in financing the sector.

Despite the massive needs, education planning and practice are often politicised and disrupted by the contested interests held by different stakeholders. For instance, UNICEF Syria's education programme aims to ensure that out-of-school children are integrated into the formal education system where trained and qualified teachers perform. This requires providing direct financial support to the MOE education system. However, the EU funding to aid agencies, restricted by economic sanctions against the Government of Syria, did not allow UNICEF to work with the MOE in order to prevent any direct aid spending for the Syrian government entities; instead, UNICEF was only allowed to partner with NGOs and private sector companies. This financial conditionality made education interventions more expensive and less efficient in terms of cost and scale. The technical partnership with MOE would have enabled UNICEF to reach more teachers and children and make interventions more systemic and sustainable. Yet, that was not permitted. Given this constraint, UNICEF had to withdraw from the education pillar of the EU-UN joint programme in 2018. This withdrawal was not a favourable decision for Syrian children in need of educational aid.

Before moving on to the next chapter, let us look more closely at subjects in research – Syrian children. I do not aim to provide a comprehensive description of the daily lives and plights Syrian children have undergone in the crisis; rather, I seek to acknowledge children's real individual experiences in conflict and rethink about the meaning of education aid to Syria from their perspectives. I draw on my personal interaction with a Syrian girl in Aleppo documented in UNICEF's website '#Children of Syria', as well as published

reports on conflict-affected children's voices in Syria. Children's names are all referred to by pseudonyms.

Salma, a sixteen-year-old girl, lives with family in Aleppo city. I gained an opportunity to talk with her in May 2014 when traveling to Aleppo for UNICEF's education project monitoring. This story of Salma relies largely on my short blog (UNICEF, 2014). When Aleppo city was under heavy fighting, gunshots were cracking day and night, and shells and bombs continued to land and explode at random. A shell landed in Salma's neighbourhood whilst she was drying clothes on her balcony. When the shell exploded, a piece of shrapnel hit Salma in the face. She has a life-long scar on her cheek. This is one example of the violence facing millions of children in Syria. Salma and her family used to reside in East Aleppo, but the escalated fighting forced them to leave their home village for Aleppo city. She had to miss out on schooling for one year because of the conflict and forced displacement. Salma reflected on what she had gone through, mentioning that:

> Life goes on even if we live in rubble. This is my home and I have nowhere else to go.

> (UNICEF, 2014)

Whilst some families are displaced multiple times or flee to another country, others do not even have such an option for economic poverty and other conditions. At the time of my time in Aleppo in 2014, Salma received some educational assistance from a local NGO in Aleppo city to prepare herself for the placement exam to receive a ninth-grade certificate. Under the challenging circumstance, she motivated herself to learn and remained upbeat with her dream to become a journalist in the future:

> Writing, reading and getting knowledge is fun. Education gives me a sense of hope in my life. … Life is tough and unfair. I hope to find out the truth and share it with people of the world.
>
> (UNICEF, 2014)

Salma has undergone physical violence, pain and a feeling of unfairness that emanate from her actual conflict experience, such as her scar from a mortar shell, forced displacement and school dropout in Aleppo. Despite these predicaments, she also retains a sense of resilience and learning motivation.

Lina, a thirteen-year-old girl, fled the siege in East Ghouta of Rural Damascus and is currently displaced with her relatives and younger brother in Idleb. She shared the following experience (Save the Children, 2019, p.5):

> We spent the last year in Ghouta in shelters because many schools were bombed. Both of my parents were killed when our house was shelled and I hope I would follow them, but God had other plans. What is left of my family is my brother, grandmother and my disabled uncle. Now we stay in a house without heating or running water. I wish the war would stop so I can go back to my old house in Ghouta and finish my education and become a teacher. I wish I did not lose my parents.

Lina's sorrow of losing family members is echoed again and again by other children in the Syrian crisis (Save the Children, 2019; UNICEF, 2017a). Majed, a thirteen-year of boy, lost his eleven-year old brother, Omar, when an explosive remnant of war hit them in East Aleppo. They were on their way to a public park near their homes to play and ride their bicycles and found a green metal object like a soda can. Majed (UNICEF, 2017a, p.8) said that:

> I stepped on it, and it exploded. I was worried about Omar. Two men came and rushed us to the hospital. I watched Omar die in the car five minutes later. I will never forget that day.

These personal stories of Salma, Lina and Majed suggest that their individual fears, pains and sufferings are not always documented and known to us but actual and real. Their levels of hardship do vary. In the aid planning process, however, these children's real heterogeneous experiences and humanitarian needs may be lumped together into an indistinguishable mass. For instance, if they reside in or are displaced to government-controlled areas, their educational needs may probably be categorised by Western pro-opposition donors as minor or moderate that do not necessarily require immediate assistance. In other words, children in government-controlled areas are homogenised as an undifferentiated mass, judged presumably as less vulnerable 'others' who belong to the Syrian regime, and denied the benefit from educational assistance financed by the pro-opposition donors. Importantly, however, Syrian children's lived experiences and unseen inner struggles through the conflict are ontologically certain and real, no matter how donor diplomats and aid professionals categorise and describe their lives. Accepting such ontological real being is integral to a philosophy of critical realism. I will further examine critical realist thinking in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, I have set the context for the research by showing how the Syrian crisis is politically charged and how humanitarian action including education aid comes to be politicised by multiple parties to the conflict. I acknowledge that further exploring the historical and geopolitical roots of the conflict is relevant and useful as a research background, but I leave it out due to the limited space. The political contestation associated with the Syrian crisis I have demonstrated in this chapter helps pose an important question as to whether and how the idea of an objective evidence base in education

programming is put into practice in conflict-affected environments. In the next chapter, I will review some of the key literature on education and conflict, particularly examining the current mainstream debate around the 'what works' agenda. I will also present some of the key critiques and alert evidence advocates to the danger of predominant empiricism and data-driven education planning and practice.

Chapter 3. Exploring the Evidence Agenda within

Education Planning and Politicisation in Conflict

In this chapter, I review some of the key theoretical and empirical literature on education and conflict. First, I show that the supposed superiority of scientific measures of what works has been increasingly debated in the literature on education in emergencies. I aim to challenge the dominance of empiricism by presenting several critiques. Second, I also look at how the politicisation of evidence by different stakeholders in conflict is documented, suggesting that their underlying political values may run counter to the principle of an evidence base. Lastly, I explore the fact that the theoretical investigation of evidence is almost absent in research on education and conflict. I thus underline the criticality of the theoretical analysis.

3.1. Can Data Really Tell What Works in Conflict?

In this section, first, I review the recent discussion of what works in the field of education and conflict. I focus on a model of severity measures that gauge humanitarian and educational needs in order to exemplify some of the difficulties with this approach. Second, I problematise the dominance of data-driven education planning in conflict by introducing key critiques presented in non-conflict contexts. I also present an empirical case of data fabrication, showing how numerical data, albeit seemingly objective, are prone to political values in conflict.

3.1.1. The premise of the 'what works' agenda

A severity measures model

Demands for an evidence base in education and conflict have been striking. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there has been a growing concern about security, and there is also a logic that conflict-affected countries which lack strong educational systems are more likely to generate violence that would impact on the safety of the West (Novelli and Lopez Cardozo, 2008; Novelli, 2010; Pherali, 2016, 2019; Stewart, 2008). Development approaches to education also started failing in unstable contexts; therefore, the international community has become desperate to see evidence around how education policies and programmes would succeed in conflict-affected states (Burde, 2015; Burde et al., 2019). Recent enthusiasm amongst donors and aid agencies for producing and using scientific measures in education and conflict mirrors a growing recognition that robust data have been lacking in this field. Burde (2015, p.6) points out that rigorous evidence on what works, underpinned by experimental designs, is 'scarce and diffuse' in emergencies.

UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) and the World Bank are amongst the leading proponents for the superiority of quantitative measures in education planning in development and humanitarian contexts. Montoya (2019b), Director of UIS, has globally advocated the use of empirical data as an ability to depict precisely what children's educational needs are and inform what policies do and do not work for them. Indeed, she mentions that UIS commits itself to 'push for the disaggregated, deep-dive data that show us precisely what is happening and when children make their way through their schooling,

what works' (Montoya, 2019b). The World Bank sees education provision for conflict-affected children as a development priority, noting that the evidence base on what systems matter most can shape education reforms to improve children's learning (Clarke, 2012; Wodon, 2016). Indeed, the World Bank (2019, p.36) has formulated its 2020-2025 fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) strategy, advocating the use of empirical research methods in order to 'generate data, experimentation, and evidence to … ultimately enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of program and policy design' in FCV settings.

Along the same line, NORRAG (2019)[1] and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) organised the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Data Summit in 2019, where policymakers and practitioners discussed how challenging it is to collect timely precise data in crisis contexts and how they could accelerate collective efforts to 'make existing data and evidence in EiE more accurate, available, and accessible' (Mendenhall, 2019, p.9).

One practical model that epitomises the evidence agenda in humanitarian settings is a severity measures approach. The severity approach is a technique of measurement with which geographically dispersed crisis-affected people are categorised and ranked on the basis of levels of vulnerability, intensity and exposure to threats (Benini, 2016; OCHA, 2019a, 2019b). The scales range from low severity 0 to 1 for 'no need of humanitarian assistance', through moderate severity 2 to 3 for 'need of humanitarian assistance', to high severity 4 to 6 for 'acute and immediate need of humanitarian assistance' (see Table 3.1). Severity measures

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[1] NORRAG is a global network of policies and cooperation in education based in Geneva.

transform humanitarian needs into data-driven ratio-level scales and make the highest priority groups stand out. In so doing, frontline practitioners and donor officials are presumably able to make statistically legitimate judgements about beneficiary selection and resource allocation with greater impartiality and financial accountability. In this sense, measuring the severity of humanitarian needs and presenting it as empirical evidence is 'practical and legitimate' (Benini, 2016, p.68).

Table 3.1. Scales of severity for the Syria education sector (UNICEF, 2018)

Severity scale	No need of humanitarian assistance		Need of humanitarian assistance		Acute and immediate need of humanitarian assistance		
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Topics	No problem	Minor problem	Moderate problem	Major problem	Severe problem	Critical problem	Catastrophic problem
Humanitarian situation	-	-	-	-	-	Under mixed control or military encircled	Under the control of ISIL, contested or besieged
1. Access to educaiton (60%)							
1.1. Enrolment of school-aged children (5-17 years)	Enrolment 95-110%	Enrolment 6-10% lower or 11-20% higher than the reported school-aged children	11-15% lower or 21-30% higher	16-20% lower or over 30% higher	21-25% lower	26-30% lower	30% lower
1.2. Availability of functional learning facilities	100% functional	99-95%	94-90%	89-80%	79-70%	69-60%	< 60%
1.3. Availability of teaching and learning materials	100-90% of school-aged children receiving materials	89-85%	84-75%	74-65%	64-55%	54-45%	<44%
2. Provision of quality education (30%)							
2.1. Availability of teachers	Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) <15	PTR 16-20	PTR 21-25	PTR 26-30	PTR 31-35	PTR 36-40	PTR >40
2.2. Percent of teachers receiving salary / incentives	100-90% teachers receiving salary / incentives	89-85%	84-75%	74-65%	64-55%	54-45%	<44%
3. Education system strengthened (10%)							
3.1. Education actors professional development	100-90% receiving professional development	89-85%	84-75%	74-65%	64-55%	54-45%	<44%

In Syria, educational severity rankings are calculated with statistical datasets, including the MOE EMIS, data from opposition-held areas and other sources. As seen in Table 3.1, multiple variables – i.e. access to schooling and availability of qualified teachers etc – generate the ranking order. For instance, communities with low enrolment and high dropout are marked out as higher severity. The severity measurement, which is coloured, tabulated and mapped by scale and ranking, renders vulnerable children in educational need visible, calculable and comparable. Severity measures function as

robust evidence to 'substantiate priorities that, together with parameters like access and cost, guide decisions on the humanitarian response' (Benini, 2016, p.7). This helps aid agencies and donors to justify the selection of beneficiaries and account for their decisions (see OCHA, 2019a, 2019b).

Reflecting on the predominance of severity measures in humanitarian response planning, I raise a question as to what makes scientific measures so readily accepted by aid professionals. My review of social policy studies suggests that there is a presupposition around the power of numbers and legitimacy. Data analytics and metrics, modelled by positivism, carry the rhetoric of objectivity and fairness. Rose (1999, p.208) posits that statistical and numerical data endow policy professionals and practitioners with 'a public rhetoric of disinterest'. He articulates that 'numbers conferred certainty, they contributed to knowledge, they revealed regularities, they created regularities. And, in doing so, numbers fostered detachment from feeling, passions and tumults' (Rose, 1999, p.225). In social policy arenas, Nutley and colleagues (2007, p.304) also suggest that evidence advocates are inclined to 'depict research evidence as rather uncomplicated, providing more-or-less isolated "facts"' that are objective and power-neutral. In other words, the more we display observable and measurable claims, the more we can appear technical and apolitical (Mosse, 2005).

Presenting numbers in decision-making processes serves as a means of establishing strong legitimacy. By legitimacy, I refer to a perception of being 'trustworthy' (Zürn et al., 2012, p.86) or 'rightful, justified or acceptable' by the public (Heywood, 1999, p.122). Drawing on the verified statistics and numerical data, individuals and organisations can symbolise their decisions

as legitimate or rightful. That is, empirical evidence, in the form of numbers, can endow them with 'epistemic authority' (Boswell, 2008, p.472). In this way, numbers as evidence possess power to lend epistemic authority to particular claims, thereby substantiating individual and organisational perspectives. In education and conflict, the measuring of severity of children's educational needs epitomises this phenomenon.

Following this presupposition, evidence advocates, such as the World Bank, UIS and NORRAG, assume that scientific measures and analytics enable them to accurately gauge children's real educational needs and legitimately inform what interventions work. Indeed, Burde and colleagues (2015, 2017, 2019) call for an increase in scientific rigorousness and data precision in research on education planning and practice in emergencies. They commend quantitative measures modelled by experimental designs, such as impact evaluations and cost-benefit analysis, in order to identify causes to increase children's education access, quality and well-being in conflict and crisis. However, I argue that these evidence proponent standpoints with regard to quantifiable evidence appear to have paid insufficient attention to the underlying power struggles and politics that may distort the production and use of evidence in conflict and crisis.

For instance, Burde and colleagues (2015, p.1, original emphasis) admit that their analysis is 'based exclusively on *existing* evidence. … This does not include questions that we and our practitioner colleagues believe should be asked in the future'. In addition, Burde and colleagues (2019, p.83) reaffirm in the context of education in emergencies that:

> Employing a literature review to understand what works is only as good as the data available. …. We rely on authors' descriptions of their research designs, methods and analyses to assess rigour. Although we maintain that observational designs offer critical insights into many aspects of EiE and include them here, we privilege experimental and quasi-experimental designs for assessing cause-and-effect relationships.

Whilst adhering to faith in empirical measures and experiments, Burde and colleagues (2015, 2017, 2019) do not necessarily question the unseen political dimension of education data per se with which frontline practitioners actually struggle in day-to-day professional work. These authors and researchers tend to reduce the real human lives, sufferings and politics into numerical data and observable variables. For them, what they empirically see and quantify can be known to exist, but what is unobservable cannot be known as real. Further, they present such statistics and artefacts as if they can exactly depict how children's lives and educational situations are in emergency settings and what interventions work (see Burde et al., 2015, 2017, 2019; Montoya, 2019a, 2019b; NORRAG, 2019; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). I see their empiricist way of knowing the world as problematic and even dangerous. What if the quantitative and qualitative data that these authors and practitioners believed were 'rigorous' had been distorted by parties to a conflict behind the scenes? What about the existence of 'invisible' vulnerable children uprooted by conflict, violence and poverty who might not be captured and counted in the existing government statistics and empirical research? In political conflict, as will be examined, different forms of discourse come into play in the methodological process of data generation and its use in a subtle manner. Discourses can also affect

who is included and excluded from research samples. Therefore, these discourses structure and even manipulate our knowledge as to who deserves education aid most and what policies we deem appropriate. Given the contested nature of evidence in conflict, it is crucial to constantly question the existing evidence and investigate the presence of political and methodological bias that may run deep underneath the evidence claims.

In non-conflict development and education policy arenas, the dominance of empiricism has been subject to substantive critiques. It should therefore deserve consideration to reflect on those critiques and apply them in the field of education and conflict. In subsequent subsections, I will look at three key critiques of the empiricist evidence agenda: I) the danger of counting the only thing countable; II) the risk of overlooking multidimensional inequalities; and III) the myth of evidence to de-politicise decision making.

3.1.2. Critique I: Danger of counting the only thing countable

Whilst the evidence proponents readily accept the growing momentum for greater rigorousness and precision through disaggregated data and metrics, pragmatic critics in the education field (Meyer, 2017; Tomlinson, 1997) call into question the dominant technocratic practice of reducing educational values and processes (i.e. gender, inclusiveness, power imbalance) to a set of standards and measures. In education and development, for instance, gender equality is bound up in complex dimensions as to how people see and value women's rights, agency and social justice (Unterhalter, 2017, 2019). These dimensions are not necessarily simply observable, measurable

and quantifiable. However, in the Education 2030 Agenda and other policy writing, gender equity is judged and demonstrated by single gender parity index. This ceases to capture the unmeasurable but invaluable processes and relations. Unterhalter (2017, p.2) alerts us to the fact that 'the precision claimed for measurement may actually obscure the importance of what is not measured'. Roche and Kelly (2012, p.7) also suggest that dogmatic faith in metrics pushes aid practitioners to seek only tangible outcomes, 'instead of the processes and other changes that would help assess the less tangible, but often critical changes in the political and social context'.

Central to this critique is that aid professionals tend to reduce different people's lives to pre-ordained labels and measurable units (Moncrieffe and Eyben, 2007). Moncrieffe (2007, p.2) warns that the reductionist ways of seeing the world have a risk of rendering unseen power relations and political values 'normally diluted or flatly overlooked'. My experience in Syria also suggests that, for instance, out-of-school children's individual experiences, such as forced displacement and absence from schooling, are often translated into numerical data and categories amenable to programmatic decisions about the allocation of resources. Their educational needs are assessed with measurable indicators (i.e. age and months/years of being out of school, and test scores), ranked with severity measures, and grouped into certain categories of either priority or non-priority (i.e. the most vulnerable or less vulnerable). The framing of children's heterogeneous experiences and realities into artefacts, such as severity rankings and administrative labels, is common in humanitarian response and education planning (OCHA, 2019b). However, reflective questions are rarely asked. For

instance, queries as to how power relations amongst local authorities, donors and aid agencies influence knowledge on who is deserving education assistance, and whose claims are deemed valid or invalid within the political dynamics, remain unexamined in everyday professional judgements which draw on these rankings.

Furthermore, aid professionals are preoccupied with measurable evidence for managerial accountability and auditing. However, Syrian children's lives that have undergone forced displacement and school dropout are not always quantifiable and knowable to aid professionals. Therefore, the unmeasurable and unknowable entities can be simply denied. The problem is that empirical constructs that we routinely produce and use as evidence are mistakenly treated as representing what children's educational situations really are. The point I make here does not mean that professionals have to immediately jettison techniques of measurement and quantification. Rather, I suggest that it is crucial for them to remember that transforming education into quantifiable variables entails the danger of ignoring unmeasurable substance. That is, the only thing 'which can be counted is permitted to count' (Henderson, 1977, p.165, cited in Minogue, 1997, p.16). This is problematic as it blinds professionals and perpetuates their habitual pattern to ignore the unmeasurable. This allows for their business-as-usual mentality and maintains 'deep vested interests in the status quo' (Slim, 2020).

3.1.3. Critique II: Risk of overlooking multidimensional inequalities

The political economy analysis in the literature on education and conflict offers insights into the risk of an empiricist evidence agenda. When analysing the relation between educational inequalities and violent conflict, Stewart (2008) points to the importance of examining horizontal inequalities between socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups, rather than only vertical differences that exist amongst random individuals. Stewart and Brown (2007, cited in Stewart 2010, p.1) articulate that 'when cultural differences coincide with economic and political differences between groups, this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent struggles'. For Stewart (2008), horizontal multidimensional inequalities produce grievances amongst disadvantaged groups and potentially lead to violent conflict. This suggests that education policy and practice in situations of conflict should address multidimensional economic, cultural and political inequalities amongst different social groups.

Along the same theoretical line, Fraser (2008, p.405-6) asserts that inequalities and injustices in society consist of three dimensions: first, disadvantaged groups face economic inequalities in access to resources they need (economic distributive injustice); second, those disadvantaged suffer from the structured hierarchies that deny their cultural ethnic standing (cultural misrecognition); and third, those disadvantaged are denied equal voice in democratic decision making (political misrepresentation). Fraser (2008) points out that justice or parity of participation requires more just social arrangements to ensure 3Rs – *redistribution* of economic resources, *recognition* of cultural differences and *representation* of political voices.

Building on Fraser's 3Rs framework, several scholars (Novelli et al., 2015, 2017, 2019; Shah and Lopez Cardozo, 2015; 2019) have added the fourth R – reconciliation – to the analytical framework. They attempt to reposition education in conflict as promoting peacebuilding and transformation. The 4Rs model helps education policymakers, researchers and practitioners to 'reflect on the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in supporting the positive role that education might play in conflict-affected contexts' (Novelli et al., 2019, p.71). All the models – namely, horizontal inequality theory and 3/4Rs frameworks – commonly indicate that education planning and practice should address the multifaceted interactions between education and conflict, because violent conflict is associated with deep inequalities and disparities in opportunities for education associated with wealth, ethnicity, language, gender, geography, and political affiliation (Pherali, 2019; UNESCO, 2011).

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, a dominant empiricist approach to education in conflict – for example, one that uses severity scales and rankings – often frames education within a narrow range of measurable entities. Where the 'what works' agenda is uncritically promoted, education planning tends to be reduced to matters of inputs (i.e. access to schooling) and outputs (i.e. enrolment rates, cost efficiency). Several commentators (Novelli et al., 2015, 2017, 2019; Shah and Lopez Cardozo, 2015, 2019; Phelali, 2019) maintain that the reductionist way of viewing education as the mere distribution of services and resources is perilous, because it may divert our attention away from deeper horizontal political and cultural structures and then potentially perpetuate conflict. Looking at the evidence agenda through these discussions helps us to question the dominance of empiricism in some

of the literature on education and conflict. This also helps us to investigate whether and how ethnicity, gender, geography, and political and ideological affiliations are at play in the decision-making process of resource allocation, beneficiary selection and priority setting. The recognition of multidimensional inequalities is crucial in order to understand 'why, what and where the structures of exclusion are, how histories have shaped this, in what dimensions they are different and what feelings and actions are elicited in response' (Unterhalter, 2014, p.864). The in-depth analysis of such structural causes for social injustice and educational exclusion is indispensable to change the status quo and bring about authentic transformation.

This insight is particularly important in relation to the evidence base within education aid to conflict. It reminds policy professionals and practitioners that education data and evidence should not be reduced to only numerical entities amenable to measuring aid effectiveness, counting the number of beneficiaries and determining the allocation of resources; rather, the analysis of education data and evidence should also entail unobservable political economy dynamics and unmeasurable human emotions (i.e. hostility) that may cause educational exclusion in conflict.

3.1.4. Critique III: Myth of evidence for de-politicisation

Can data really put us above politics?

In contemporary education policy, measurable and quantifiable data are embraced as 'governing knowledge', a resource for managing rationality and efficiency in education systems (Ozga, 2008). Porter (1995, p.189) asserts

that numerical data and statistics are seen as governing resources and provide 'a sensible, unbiased, decision rule'. Empirical evidence is widely believed to contribute to 'limiting the play of politics in public investment decisions' for greater rationality and efficiency (Porter, 1995, p.189). The use of evidence, in this sense, is thought of as 'a neutral and objective policy tool that is above political ideology' (Marston and Watts, 2003, p.149). This empiricist belief reflects the growing attraction of data-driven education planning and practice in conflict and crisis. As such, the rhetoric of an evidence base is increasingly believed to de-politicise policy deliberation and decision making and create the state of power neutrality for the benefit for all (Hammersley, 2014; Owens et al., 2004).

However, several scholars are sceptical about the role of evidence in relation to de-politicisation and problematise the empiricist way of thinking about rationality and efficiency. Ball (2006, p.57) observes that contemporary education policies and practices, underpinned by positivistic technicism and rational empiricism, 'exclude many of the mobile, complex, ad hoc, messy and fleeting qualities of lived experience'. For Ball, the production and use of evidence for education policy and practice decisions is far from simple; rather, it is adapted and shaped within the constellation of power imbalance and micro-politics in the real world (Ball, 2013). That is, education authorities, policymakers and researchers negotiate data generation and application on the basis of their political discourses, through which they can construct decisions in order to advance their desirable ends.

Despite these critiques, the belief that the use of evidence can bring about rationality and value for money persistently prevails in aid policy texts.

Blanchet and colleagues (2018, p.4) claim that evidence use can improve aid

effectiveness in humanitarian policy and action, saying:

> Evidence coming from research and evaluation can help you
> understand what works, where, why and for whom. It can also tell you
> what does not work, and help you avoid repeating the failures of
> others by learning from evaluations of unsuccessful humanitarian
> programmes. Evidence can also guide the design of the most effective
> ways to deliver specific interventions.

Furthermore, the 'what works' agenda becomes more prominent when aid

agencies and donors seek to account for their decisions about aid spending

and financial resource allocation. In conflict and crisis where the funding

scale is outmatched by the humanitarian needs, aid agencies and donors are

under increasing scrutiny and pressure to arrive at the most rational decision

and meet 'new demands on the cost-effectiveness of humanitarian financing'

(Obrecht, 2017, p.4). In development and humanitarian arenas, the

instrumental use of evidence on what works is readily embraced as 'the

solution which can rise above politics, rational, efficient and accountable

decision-making about resources' (Trinder, 2000, p.9). In this way, empirical

and factual evidence is treated as if it is produced and used in value

freedom, and perceived to de-politicise aid planning and spending.

However, I challenge this empiricist line of thought that facts and values

are separated. Instead, I suggest that science (facts and evidence) and

politics (values and discourses) are intertwined in the real-life aid frontline

(see Crewe, 2014). Data analytics on what works might inform the 'most

effective' course of humanitarian action (Blanchet, et al., 2018, p.4), but what

matters is to critically reflect on whose interest and priority we really serve

with such evidence (Unterhalter, 2009). Especially, the politicisation of evidence becomes intensified in conflict.

One example is data fabrication in Iraq. In 1999, the Government of Iraq claimed that the 1990 UN economic sanctions had resulted in the alarmingly high under-five mortality rate based on the Government of Iraq and UNICEF survey called the Iraq Child and Maternal Mortality Survey (ICMMS), and advocated the lifting of the sanctions (Spagat, 2010). UNICEF (1999) also noted that 'under-5 mortality more than doubled from 56 deaths per 1,000 live births (1984-1989) to 131 deaths per 1,000 live births (1994-1999)' in the south and centre of Iraq. However, Dyson and Ctorelli (2017, p.4) employed a comparative analysis of four retrospective surveys between 1974 and 2010 including ICMMS, concluding that 'the ICMMS data were evidently rigged to show a huge and sustained – and largely non-existent – rise in child mortality. The falsification might have occurred during the data entry stage at the behest of the Iraqi government'. They sharply criticise that 'the rigging of the 1999 UNICEF survey was an especially masterful fraud. That it was a deception is beyond doubt, although it is still not generally known' (Dyson and Ctorelli, 2017, p.5). Interestingly, the statistics fabricated by Saddam Hussein's government were also utilised by Tony Blair as a baseline to justify the British invasion of Iraq. In the 2010 Iraq Inquiry, Blair justified his decision by stating that before the invasion in 2000-2002, Iraq 'had a child mortality rate of 130 per 1,000 children under the age of five. … The figure today is not 130, it is 40. … That's the result that getting rid of Saddam makes' (The Iraq Inquiry, 2010, p.243-4). The distorted statistics were used and re-used by those in authority to both challenge and support the invasion of Iraq.

Similar cases of manipulation have occurred in other conflict settings. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, aid agencies accused the UN of 'bowing to government pressure' and underestimating displaced populations ahead of elections to give an overly positive impression of the country situation (Peyton, 2018). In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education loosely counts the number of girls in school (HRW, 2017). Numbers are susceptible to politicisation and thus fallible in conflict-affected contexts. These cases show how political values can come into play in the production and use of factual data in conflict. In other words, analysing who says what using which figures is crucial. Nevertheless, in the literature on education and conflict, there is a dearth of knowledge around this theme.

Empirical data and evidence are often politically influenced in conflict contexts and thus cannot fully represent what is real. My literature review reveals that an analysis of the politics of evidence seems almost absent in research on education and conflict. However, there are debates around the politicisation of education itself. It is crucial to review what political dimensions have been discussed in the scholarship on education and conflict, and what insights they may offer to my research theme. The following section will look into the political roles of education in conflict and examine how education is politicised in such a situation.

3.2.   The Politicisation of Education in Conflict

In this section, first, I discuss the contested roles of education in conflict. Next, I look at the fact that formal education is politically targeted by

opposition groups to delegitimise state authority. Third, I explore the post 9/11 context where education aid is increasingly politicised by donor governments for their homeland security. I suggest that, given the politicisation of education, the competing values of stakeholders make the evidence base more convoluted in education planning in conflict.

3.2.1. The contested roles of education in conflict

Since the 9/11 attacks, the field of education and conflict has received growing attention (Davies, 2011; Gross and Davies, 2015; Novelli and Lopez Cardozo, 2008; Novelli, 2010; Pherali, 2019). Bush and Saltarelli (2000) unravel two contrasted faces of education in conflict, showing that education contributes to both escalating violence and fostering reconciliation. Similarly, other commentators (King, 2011; Winthrop and Kirk, 2011) argue that education plays multiple different roles in driving and preventing violent conflict. The political economy aspects of education and the transformative roles of education for peacebuilding are increasingly debated in the field of education and conflict (Novelli et al., 2014, 2017; Pherali, 2016; 2019).

Pherali (2016, p.193-8) encapsulates different features of education in conflict as 'victim' (i.e. ideologically motivated attacks on schools, and securitisation); 'perpetrator' (i.e. unfair resource allocation and reproduction of social inequalities); and 'peacebuilder' (i.e. reconciliation, transformation). Arguably, the contested nature of education appears to have amplified the complexity and politics of education planning and practice in conflict. Related to my research theme, the politicisation of education may catalyse the

interplay between politics and empirical evidence in the process of decision making by local authority, bilateral and multilateral donors, and aid agencies. I will review some of the key debates around the political dimension of education in conflict and raise questions as to what insights these debates may have into analysis on the politicisation of evidence.

3.2.2. Political dimensions of education

Attacks on education

In conflict, students and teachers continue to be attacked by multiple parties (GCPEA, 2018). For the local government, the continued provision of public services, including education, is essential during and after conflict, because it serves as a means to demonstrate to the public the state legitimacy, stability and power associated with territorial control. For armed opposition groups, however, public schools represent state authority and ideology through curricula, languages and values; thus, attacking these schools can be a key strategy to undermine and delegitimise the government control (Novelli, 2010; Pherali, 2016). For example, Pherali and Sahar (2018, p.247) assert that violence against public schools remains in Afghanistan, where the Taliban insurgency has opposed the curriculum and textbooks promoting Western values and demanded the mujahedeen-era textbooks 'glorifying jihad, indoctrinating a generation with Islamic ideology and radicalisation'. As such, opposing forces target government education institutions for their own ideologies. In some cases including Syria, the government forces and its

allies also attack education and pose threats to safety in school in opposition areas in the name of counter-insurgency.

The attacks on schools not only disrupt children's rights to education and protection, but they also indicate how education becomes an ideological symbol by the state and opposition groups to advance their propaganda. When it comes to the aid sector, education is also highly politicised by donor governments for the sake of securitisation.

The securitisation of education

The securitisation of education is another strand of politicising the role of education in conflict. This reflects the merging of international aid and security agenda. Since the war on terror, development aid policy and practice has been framed within national security concerns amongst the Western governments (Novelli, 2010). International development has become entangled with foreign policy for conflict countries and increasingly translated into the counter-insurgency strategy (Novelli, 2011). For instance, since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government has taken a 3Ds approach (development, diplomacy and defence) to development aid to conflict and fragile states. The Bush administration sought to align development aid to conflict countries with political diplomacy and defence in order to 'protect the homeland for the American people' (U.S. White House, 2002, p.31). The current Trump administration follows the Republican hawkish foreign policy tradition, taking a more aggressive stance to advance his promise to put 'America First' based on populist nationalism (Phillips, 2018; Sestanovich,

2017). Trump has pushed forward the 3Ds strategy explicitly for America's national interests, saying that the U.S. will continue to 'assist fragile states to prevent threats to the U.S. homeland' (U.S. White House, 2017, p.39).

Along the same strategic lines, major multilateral and bilateral donor agencies in Europe have taken the 3Ds approach to development and humanitarian assistance. For instance, DFID states that IS is a threat not only to regional stability but also to UK security, and it is important to support a political solution to end the fighting in Syria and enhance humanitarian aid for stabilisation (DFID, 2014, 2017, 2018). Duffield (2006, p.17) maintains that development assistance and security agenda become mutually dependent, arguing that 'securing self-reliant species-life and maintaining its cohesion is essential for the defence of mass society and international order'.

In the education sector, Novelli (2010, p.453) points out that education aid to conflict countries has been reconfigured within the post 9/11 security strategy and seen as a political enterprise of 'socializing target populations towards accepting Western and "capitalist" hegemony'. The Western donors no longer see education aid to conflict countries as charity for children's learning needs; rather, they more strategically invest in stabilising the countries whose instability might pose threats to safety in the Western world (Burde et al., 2017; Pherali, 2016). In Syria, the Western discourse against the Assad government and extremism manifests itself as economic sanctions. As explained in Chapter 2, several donor governments in the West try to ensure that their taxpayers' money is not diverted to extremist groups, and they even cut off assistance to crisis-affected populations in the areas controlled by the Assad administration. Instead, these donors have

provided stabilisation assistance to opposition areas in line with their foreign policy and political interest. However, these politically motivated donor strategies become controversial when political interests and humanitarian imperatives clash with each other. The UN and NGOs seek out the most vulnerable based on empirical evidence and field monitoring. The thing is that many of these aid agencies, even though claiming that they are neutral and independent, are financed by the Western pro-opposition donors and thus have to comply with their economic sanctions. Consequently, even if these agencies identify the vulnerable populations, they may not be able to support those populations simply because those in need reside in areas under Assad's control. This issue will be further discussed in later chapters.

Insights into an evidence base

Both school attacks and securitisation suggest how education is ideologically symbolised by different stakeholders in conflict settings. It is therefore important to acknowledge that these underlying discourses are almost always played out in relation to education planning. In such contexts, decisions about who deserves education assistance most and how much funding should be allocated to whom are made based 'less on perceived humanitarian need and more on political alliances' (Novelli, 2011, p.119).

Putting greater weight on political values than humanitarian imperatives has profound implications for the construction and use of an evidence base. This leads to institutional bias in the site of education resource allocation and beneficiary selection. I argue that the political bias can run counter to the

principle of drawing dispassionately on an evidence base in decision-making

processes. As a result, this may enact the politicisation of evidence, such as

data reinterpretation and policy-based evidence. Reflecting on this, I pose

questions as to whether the underlying discourses of different education

stakeholders could outweigh empirical evidence when they engage in data-

driven decision making in Syria, and why? What is the implication of these

discourses for education aid to children? These questions will be explored

and analysed. The interplay between politics and evidence is a crucial point

in delivering more just education aid. Nevertheless, the issue seems to have

been unexamined in the scholarship on education and conflict. I will below

elaborate the necessity for a theoretical analysis of it.

3.3.   The Need for Theoretical Understandings of Evidence

What becomes clear from the literature review is that grounding judgements

in data analytics and severity measures has become increasingly integral to

education planning and practice in conflict. Indeed, much of our situation

analysis and strategic thinking in professional work is 'shaped by the realities

that statistics appear to disclose' (Rose, 1999, p.198). In this sense, there is

nothing contentious about the idea that educational policy and practice

decisions should be based on reasons or evidence. However, what counts

as evidence and what it claims about reality are contested, as they depend

on what ontological and epistemological assumptions we hold (Fraser and

Davies, 2019; Nutley et al., 2007). As Davies and colleagues (1999, p.4)

note, 'the different ontological and epistemological starting points in different

professional traditions undoubtedly colour the methods and enthusiasm with which professionals engage with evidence'. The theoretical investigation of what we believe exists (ontological assumption) and how we believe we can know it (epistemological assumption) is necessary and essential for a clearer understanding of evidence use and the politics behind it.

Nevertheless, we do not always question and document our discourses and beliefs in professional work. Alderson (2019) suggests that we should critically reflect on the ways we make sense of the real world so that we can gain more sophisticated and coherent understandings of causal mechanisms in the field of education and conflict. She points out that a philosophical approach allows professionals to 'analyse the theories and beliefs that underlie their range of research methods, qualitative or quantitative, interpretive or more positivist/realist' (Alderson, 2019, p.57). I concur with her, suggesting that it is crucial to examine our underlying presuppositions about evidence and the reality it claims. The theoretical analysis of evidence and reality would allow us to reflect on our own taken-for-granted premises that evidence tells us what works, and to better understand the politicisation of evidence. Despite the significance, little research has been undertaken to theoretically analyse the politicisation of evidence in education and conflict.

In the next chapter, I will examine how evidence and reality have been conceptualised by different social research models – positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism – and explore what philosophical advantages and flaws these models have. I then propose that a critical realist approach provides a coherent framework in explaining the politicisation of evidence in education and conflict.

Chapter 4. Critical Realist Methodology

This chapter frames the ontological and epistemological positions of three distinctive research models – positivism, interpretivism and critical realism. The notion of an evidence base is understood differently by different people and that these divergences are derived from their different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Critical realism holds that a social phenomenon exists independently of our perception of it. It also recognises that part of the phenomenon consists of socially constructed interpretations. The double articulation of both objective reality and subjective constructs of it is the novelty of critical realism (Archer et al., 1998). Bearing this in mind, this chapter first clarifies how the nature of reality and evidence has been apprehended by two traditional models – positivism and interpretivism – and presents criticism of both models. Second, I explore some of the fundamental theoretical concepts of critical realism. I suggest that critical realism provides the most coherent explanatory framework in order to understand the politicisation of evidence in education and conflict.

4.1. Positivistic Model

4.1.1. Reality as an objective fact

The positivistic social research model holds that events and phenomena in society exist and are real, whether we experience them or not. Positivists believe that the world exists out there so that they can depict 'an objectively existing reality which lies outside the discourse of science' (Delanty, 2005, p.10). Ontologically, positivists share a critical realist commitment to an objective reality that exists independently of what anyone thinks about it. However, positivists differ from critical realists in that they reduce the nature of being into 'a singular, verifiable reality and truth' (Patton, 2002, p.134). That is, reality is limited to an empirically observable and verifiable fact. This is a crucial point in considering what reality means within positivism.

According to the positivistic model, reality can be accurately known through our sensory experience, direct observation and pure experimentation (Bryman, 2016). Positivism relies on empiricism, an epistemological position that values our sense perceptions and observations (Chalmers, 1999). That is, empiricism places emphasis on observable, measurable and quantifiable knowledge (Paley, 2008). In methodological terms, positivists hold that the empirical ways of knowing, such as scientific measurement and quantification, enable them to discover general laws or cause-effect relations and to predict events in the social world. In this model, 'only observable things can be included in valid knowledge' (Oakley, 2000, p.31). From this standpoint, 'evidence pertains to verifiable and measurable facts as categories of things' (Eyben, 2013, p.6). For positivists, empirical evidence, derived from observable and measurable facts, objectively depicts social

reality. This is a key epistemological assumption of positivism. Positivists claim that policy professionals and practitioners can precisely capture the real world through rigorous scientific research, thereby making objective and rational decisions (Delanty, 2005).

Positivism bears a theoretical resemblance to scientism. Many policy scholars (Boaz and Nutley, 2019; Nutley et al., 2007; Sutton, 1999) observe that the positivistic model presupposes that, when a particular problem exists and knowledge is missing to provide a solution to it, scientific enquiry can generate empirical evidence that informs conclusive decisions to resolve the problem. Science is seen as providing decision makers with the missing knowledge and increasing their certainty of the world. The knowledge-driven model is called 'scientism', in which scientific enquiry, grounded in empirical knowledge, is believed to clarify what works for greater rationality (Doherty, 2000, p.180). Porter (1995, p.20) equates positivism to scientism, saying that 'since [positivism] presupposed nothing about the real causes operating, it was very nearly neutral as to subject matter. Not by accident has positivism become almost a synonym for scientism'.

In essence, positivists hold that the application of science enables policy professionals and practitioners to know the social world as it actually is. They equate the use of empirical data with the ability to know objective and 'verifiable facts about reality on which rational policy decisions can be based' (Gulbrandsen, 2008, p.100). The linear trajectory from empirical knowledge to rational decision making reflects a positivistic belief that the use of evidence is directly translated into clarity on what works.

4.1.2. A linear progression from evidence to practice

For individuals and organisations that have faith in positivism, the relationship between science and policy, evidence and action, is linear (Black, 2001; Holmes and Clark, 2008; Sarewitz, 2004). They believe that evidence from scientific data can be turned unidirectionally into policy solutions and rational decisions. Such linear thinking is prevalent in aid policy and planning (Montoya, 2019a). UNICEF, for instance, upholds data-driven policy, advocacy and programming, highlighting a straightforward relationship between evidence and practice. UNICEF (2017b, p.8) states that:

> To translate data into results for children, UNICEF must directly connect the facts that the data reveal with their relevant policy and programming implications. Going forward, UNICEF is committed to strengthening both directions of this evidence-to-action pipeline: making sure that our actions are based on evidence and that our evidence turns into action.

Thinking this way is associated with a rational choice theory (Elster, 1989). The use of statistics and data is seen as a rational enterprise 'to help identify and select appropriate means to reach the goal' (Weiss, 1979, p.427). The application of empirical evidence is assumed to guide the reasoned selection of the most prudent or efficient solution out of a set of technical options. Nutley and colleagues (2007, p.268) observe that the idea of an evidence base is 'underpinned by a linear, rational and instrumental model of the research use process, which views evidence from research as relatively straightforward facts to be weighed in the making of policy decisions'.

However, Hammersley (2014), an interpretivist in social research, critically looks at the positivist tenet of linearity within the relationship between facts

and values. He contends that positivists or linear thinkers mistakenly draw a sharp distinction between facts and values, believing that they can 'derive value conclusions from factual evidence' (Hammersley, 2014, p.69). He goes on to maintain that 'while factual evidence from research is often important in reaching value conclusions, such conclusions necessarily also rely upon value principles' (2014, p.68). For positivists, science and politics are separated. The belief that facts and values are separable is underpinned by their ontological assumption that social reality exists as an objective fact, independently of one's knowing. Accordingly, empirical evidence is seen as detached from social, political values (Delanty, 2005; Vestman and Conner, 2006). Figure 4.1 shows a linear progression from empirical research, through data generation and then to factual evidence and its instrumental use, before reaching value conclusions. Evidence generated in positivism is directly translated into value conclusions – i.e. interventions and solutions.

Figure 4.1. Linear thinking of evidence-into-practice
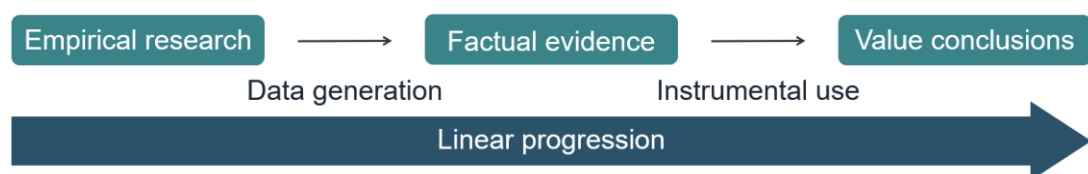
Recent enthusiasm for an evidence base in education and conflict, promoted by UIS and NORRAG (see Section 3.1.1), embodies this positivistic line of thought. For example, aid professionals routinely produce and use statistical severity measures as factual evidence, and make value judgements about educational resource allocation and beneficiary selection based on those measures. However, this linear trajectory from evidence into practice has

been subject to criticism, because the play of political values and power relations is often muted in the process.

4.1.3. Criticism of positivism: Absence of the politics of evidence

Positivism and empiricism prevail in many policy frameworks about education and conflict. However, I have serious reservations about the positivist/empiricist approach, because it is often silent about the politics behind evidence. The use of evidence does not always lead us to clarity on what works; rather, it brings ambiguity and contestation in decision making especially in complex conflict contexts. In Syria, for instance, the Government of Syria and opposition groups tend to invent different statistics and disinformation as convenient in the hope that their political desires are substantiated. As demonstrated in later chapters, the politicisation of evidence, such as data fabrication, reinterpretation and selective data use, is happening behind the scenes.

The practice of an evidence base can be a political act of advancing the legitimacy of particular political desires that those in power want to promote. Heywood (1999, p.126) refers to the political nature of legitimisation as the 'mobilisation of bias'. When validated or claimed to be so, evidence does not only lend credibility to political claims, but it also mobilises them as legitimate. The legitimate authority helps make those particular claims deserve public attention, even if they are incorrect and inaccurate. Jordan (1997, p.58) rightly says that 'the power of authoritative knowledge is not that it is correct but that it counts'. Legitimacy serves to rule out rival perspectives

and alternatives (Heywood, 1999). In this way, the use of legitimate evidence works to make particular values appear more consensual and acceptable than others, and progressively harder to refute. In this sense, the deployment of evidence, I argue, can be reconfigured as a hegemonic technique to confer a form of legitimate authority on particular ideological values and biases. Despite the political dimension, positivistic evidence proponents and those who uncritically advocate the 'what works' agenda based on the supposed superiority of measurement and quantification, appear to have paid scant attention to hegemonic power implicit in the forms of evidence they promote. The problem is that evidence is treated as if it is produced and utilised in a political and moral vacuum.

In this section, I have explored how the nature of reality and evidence has been conceptualised within positivism. Positivism, empiricism and scientism commonly assume that empirical knowledge and evidence, grounded in observable and measurable facts, are able to objectively depict what really exists in the social world. The positivistic belief is manifested as the use of severity measures for education aid planning and practice in the conflict context of Syria (see Section 3.1.1). In other words, positivists see the world as context free and value neutral, or at least claim that such factors can be controlled by scientifically rigorous research methods. However, I argue that positivists often wrongly equate complex reality with how it appears in empirical data and evidence. Due to this illusionary belief, the positivistic model has been substantially critiqued as the myth of an evidence base in political science and policy studies (Boaz et al., 2019; Nutley et al., 2007). This critique leads to another traditional strand – interpretivism.

4.2.   Interpretive Model

4.2.1. Reality as a social construction

The interpretive social research model holds that events in the world are socially constructed, with a multitude of subjective meanings and narratives given to the world (Bryman, 2016). In other words, people can claim that their perceived realities are true or that nothing is real. Let me clarify this point more precisely by differentiating 'radical' and 'moderate' interpretivism (Elder-Vass, 2012). This distinction will help avoid confusion in discussing critical realism later on. Radical interpretivism holds that there is no objective reality, and everything in the social world is filtered through our perspectives. From the extreme point of view, 'reality is nothing more than the beliefs we have about it' (Elder-Vass, 2012, p.246). In contrast, moderate interpretivism does not deny the existence of the social world external to our knowledge of it. However, the external world can also be open to divergent interpretations. When I refer to interpretivism, I broadly mean both radical and moderate strands throughout the research.

The interpretive model is associated with relationalism (Emirbayer, 1997). There exist multiple and situated ways of 'being' in the social world, contrary to the positivistic singular reality. For interpretivists, it is crucial to recognise the active role of context, because those multiple realities need to be defined in their specific situations (Robson, 2011). They believe that abstract contextual elements – i.e. forms of power and discourses – precede empirical enquiry and have a decisive influence on how we make sense of reality out there (Nutley et al., 2008). For radical and moderate interpretivists, how social reality is perceived depends on the social and political

arrangements. This is a crucial point in considering what reality means and how it is understood within interpretivism. For them, reality or ontological being is not necessarily derived from objective facts; rather, it is socially constructed and contextual.

Epistemologically, interpretivism holds that knowledge and evidence about reality are not necessarily absolute; rather, they are 'ambiguous, tentative, and fallible' (Stone, 2008, p.266). As Hammersley (2013, p.42) argues, 'the knowledge produced by science … can never be shown to be true, or for that matter false, with absolute certainty'. Interpretivists do not place so much value on discovering universal rules and causality. Rather, they are more concerned with bringing out the meanings given to social phenomena. For them, evidence generation and use should be contextualised within the constellation of 'different institutional interests, values and discourses' (Amann, 2000, p.vi). This is contrary to positivist/empiricist accounts of context-free and objective evidence.

In education and conflict, different actors – i.e. the local state and bilateral donors – do not simply operate for humanitarian imperatives, but they carry their political agendas (Novelli, 2010, 2011; Novelli and Lopez Cardozo, 2008; Pherali, 2016, 2019). As examined in Section 3.2.2, the local government in a conflict situation sees education as a means to present state authority and control, whereas some Western donor governments, such as the U.S. and UK, tend to link educational aid allocation to conflict-affected countries with homeland security priorities through the 3Ds framework. As such, ideological values and desires are often played out behind education resource allocation and beneficiary selection in conflict. For interpretivists,

these context-relevant political economy factors are key parameters that frame their understandings of what educational needs are and what counts as evidence. When introducing the 4Rs analytical framework, Novelli and colleagues (2017, 2019) underline the necessity to contextualise the conceptions of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation within particular conflict situations and analytical needs. They suggest that shifting our interpretations 'from decontextualized absolute knowledge to forms of contextualized knowledge' is crucial in order to grasp complex educational inequalities in conflict (Novelli et al., 2017, p.27). In this sense, interpretivism sees empirical knowledge and evidence as relational, discursive and contextual, rather than objective, apolitical and absolute.

4.2.2. Non-linearity and a fuzzy fact-value boundary

Interpretivism flies in the face of positivism in the practice of evidence use. Interpretivists deny positivistic linear thinking or scientism in which science and politics are separated, and evidence use is equated to clarity of what works to resolve problems. For interpretivists, science is interwoven with politics. Nutley and colleagues (2019, p.243) contend that 'prior values, interests and preferences, alongside ever-present power relations' seep into evidence-informed decision making. In Syria, the Government is in an authoritarian position to regulate humanitarian access to opposition areas and oppress aid practitioners' freedom to rigorously gather and analyse data. That is, scientific and empirical knowing is restricted. I call this phenomenon

'oppressed science' in contrast to scientism. In Chapter 7, I will revisit this issue with concrete examples of Syria.

Interpretivists hold that the process of evidence production and its use is far from linear; rather, it is 'muddling through' in messy political webs (Parsons, 2002; Hammersley, 2013). It is characterised by 'non-linearities' and un-predictability (Rihani and Geyer, 2001; Jervis, 2012). Ozga (2012, p.452) critiques linear thinkers in education governance, saying that 'data do not translate automatically into action but require constant attention and effort to build and maintain consensus, with struggles and dissent around their meaning always possible'. In a social research realm, Hammersley (2013, p.32) believes that researchers study participants' values but should exclude their own, but he also maintains that, in the real world, policy and practice decisions reflect 'other considerations than purely "technical" ones, including what is and is not politically viable'. These perspectives suggest that political values are inevitable and integral to evidence-informed decision making, which is referred to as the 'politics of evidence' (Morse, 2006).

Interpretivists think that empirical evidence is enmeshed in social and political order. They examine how the boundary between science and politics, facts and values, and evidence and practice, becomes fuzzy and entangled in contestations (Gerrard, 2015; Jasanoff, 2004). This notion runs counter to the normative centre of positivism that considers science and evidence as to some degree value-free and power-neutral. Sayer (2011, p.11) articulates that 'values are inevitable in social science, so we cannot expect to be objective'. Similarly, Hammersley (2013, 2014) points out that evidence on what works does not merely rest on factual data but it is derived

from value assumptions. He explicates that 'there is no direct or immediate route from factual research evidence to value conclusions. Rather, any such influence necessarily depends upon value assumptions' (Hammersley, 2014, p.93). Whose evidence is appropriate and acceptable depends on what value commitments people in power hold. As such, institutional and discursive values underlie the political and strategic use of science.

In summary, the interpretive model holds that policy professionals and practitioners are muddling through or struggling with 'oppressed science' where conflicting values run deep in the construction and strategic use of evidence. The boundary between science and politics, facts and values, becomes blurry. Professional decision making does not simply reach value conclusions based on empirical rationality; rather, the process entails the negotiation and compromise of different value assumptions before drawing conclusions. Amongst those values are political ideologies and emotions, such as desire and hostility. The positivistic linear progression from evidence to practice is disputed by interpretivism. Further, I stress that it is vital to examine what value assumptions are at play in the evidence use process. Figure 4.2 depicts the fuzzy boundary between science and politics.

Figure 4.2. Interplay of science and politics in the evidence use process
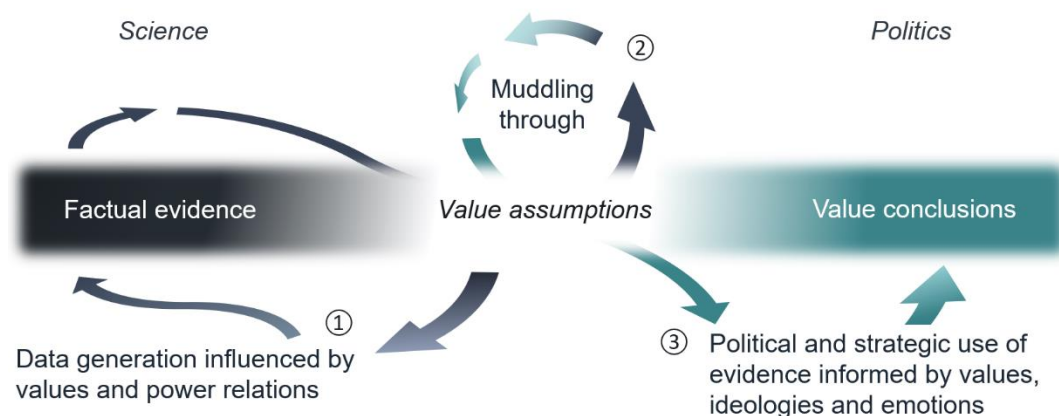
4.2.3. Political technology: Masking politics with science

Some interpretivists warn that the positivist science-politics separation can mask how politics operates under the guise of scientific knowledge making. Shore (2011, p.171) affirms that 'this veiling of the political under the cloak of legal-rational neutrality is a characteristic feature of modern power'. Foucault refers to the operation of power as a 'political technology':

> Political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science. Once this is accomplished the problems have become technical ones for specialists to debate.
>
> (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p.196)

Institutes and individuals in power can utilise science to disguise their deeper political values as technical, rather than ideological (Ozga, 2008; Ozga et al., 2011). Where such a political technology is deployed, the use of science and evidence can allow those in power to serve their vested interests without ever making their political agendas explicit. Owens and colleagues (2004) point to the danger of a political technology, saying that it allows dominant groups to control scientific enquiry and maintain current power imbalances. They posit that 'the problem is that ethical and political choices masquerade as technical judgments, reinforcing prevailing norms and existing structures of power' (2004, p.1946). For interpretivists, a positivistic model is mythical at best and dangerous at worst, because it constructs the image of evidence use as objective and rational. In so doing, positivism makes political values and ideologies ostensibly seem natural and neutral. This has a risk of undermining democratic decision making. To avoid this risk, it is crucial to

remember that those in power may deploy political technologies when they produce and use scientific data. Therefore, it is problematic to take empirical evidence at face value.

The concept of a political technology is relevant to my research in Syria. For example, when we look at a severity scales approach (see Section 3.1.1), it appears as if the humanitarian needs are dispassionately informed by the unbiased statistical depiction of reality. However, it is not apolitical to pin down who is in and out of the higher severity categories in a conflict environment. Education data and severity rankings are full of ambivalent judgements and interpretations (see Section 7.2 for a detailed instance). Indeed, Western pro-opposition donors engage in the political interpretation of severity of humanitarian needs in order to justify their discourse that denies the Syrian government legitimacy and promotes the stabilisation of opposition groups in Syria. The rhetoric of disinterest implicit in severity measures serves to overshadow the Western ideologies and political desires, and even legitimise the resulting exclusion of vulnerable children in government-controlled areas from education aid. This embodies the enactment of a political technology.

4.2.4. Criticism of interpretivism: The malleability of evidence

Reflecting on the interplay between science and politics reveals that much of what is called evidence can be malleable to 'support almost any position' (Wood et al., 1998, p.1735). Piattoeva (2018, p.31) reaffirms that numbers are highly elastic, saying that they are 'flexible and amenable to different

calculations'. As seen in the case of Iraq (Section 3.1.4), even the same statistics can support both sides that have radically different perspectives. Perhaps, people can source different scientific references as convenient and prove anything they want with malleable data.

Given the malleable nature of data, Weiss (1977, p.532) suggests that socially constructed evidence is inevitably 'inconclusive, ambiguous, and contradicted'. Due to such ambiguities of evidence, adherence to interpretivism involves an acceptance that social reality can only be captured in an abstract form; that is, it fails to explain the linear cause-effect relations – i.e. how particular interventions bring out a specific change that they claim (Brown, 2014; Fraser and Davies, 2019). So does positivism. This suggests that we can know social events and phenomena to some degree without understanding their causal mechanisms and structures. However, the inability of interpretivists and positivists to demonstrate clear attribution and causation also poses a fundamental question as to how we can truly understand what things really are and how we can adequately attribute a particular outcome to specific actions. In addition, such a tenuous relation between cause and effect allows for the construction of multiple realities and leaves room for the politicisation of evidence. This catalyses the interplay between power and knowledge analysed by Foucault. In other words, different forms of discourse come into play in evidence generation and use, thereby enacting exclusionary practice in decision-making processes.

Theoretically analysing the evidence agenda from positivistic and interpretive perspectives enables me to depict the duality of an evidence base. In other words, a data-driven approach appears paradoxically to both

negate and affirm the political process of decision making. However, professionals and decision makers strategically oscillate their positioning in between positivistic and interpretive models, depending on their specific context. For instance, aid professionals may accept the objective existence of a school-aged girl who has dropped out of school due to conflict, whether they empirically observe her or not (positivistic ontology). These professionals, at the same time, engage in their divergent subjective interpretations as to what makes her drop out and why she remains out of school (interpretive epistemology). However, positivism and interpretivism alike do neither necessarily enable professionals to bring about transformative change by redressing structural causes nor capture their ambiguous positioning between these philosophical strands. Moving beyond dualism, I suggest that critical realism can offer alternative ontological and epistemological insights into bridging the traditional models. Next, I will explain some of the key theoretical frameworks of critical realism that help reconcile methodological dualism and examine the unseen mechanisms that generate the politicisation of evidence.

4.3.   Critical Realist Ontology and Epistemology

This section introduces some of the key theoretical frameworks of critical realism. First, I explore the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical realists and explain how they seek to overcome some of the philosophical flaws presented by positivists and interpretivists. Next, I look into the ontological depth of reality, one of the core tenets of critical realism. I

clarify the theoretical resonance between Bhaskar's generative mechanisms and Foucault's discourses. I also examine the concept of absence as part of reality, another tenet of critical realism. Lastly, I clarify methodological rationales for taking a critical realist approach to my research.

4.3.1. Epistemic fallacy

Critical realism, derived from the work of Roy Bhaskar (2008a, 2008b, 2015), is a philosophy of the natural and social sciences, offering analytical frameworks of ontology and epistemology. The philosophy of critical realism is applied in the real-world research in a diverse range of ways. For critical realists, real being (ontology) is not reducible to empirical knowing (epistemology). As Bhaskar (2008a, p.156) puts it, 'given the fundamental equation of empiricist ontology, viz. real = empirical, cannot exist'. That is, the real entities or mechanisms that exist and interact to generate a social phenomenon are not the same as our empirical experience, observation and perception of the phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2008a; O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Simply put, what is real is different from how it appears in empirical data, information and knowledge.

For instance, the plights of out-of-school children in conflict-affected Syria are real, regardless of our understanding of their existence. From a critical realist perspective, their heterogeneous lived realities should not be ontologically reduced to what we think we know about them through observable artefacts (Alderson, 2012). For positivists, as explored earlier, reality objectively exists and it can only be known through empirical

observations. However, if this were the case, the existence of Syrian children's lived reality that has undergone fear of shelling, forced displacement and school dropout in the crisis, which might be empirically unmeasurable and unknowable to us, would be denied and remain ignored. The unobservable cannot be known to exist in positivism. Collier (1994, p.253) warns that 'the tendency to focus on what can be measured leads to systematic blindness to certain features of the human world'. To avoid this, it is essential to distinguish real being from empirical knowing.

Nevertheless, aid professionals and donor officials in Syria often reduce children's homogenous daily lives and varying educational experiences (real being) to pre-standardised severity categories and rankings (empirical knowing), such as 'minor', 'moderate' or 'catastrophic' needs. Bhaskar (2008a, p.36) refers to such problematic reduction of being to knowing as the 'epistemic fallacy'. For critical realists, it is crucial to acknowledge that Syrian boys and girls, either internally displaced or treated as refugees in other countries, have gone through violence, fear, distress, anger, despair and other unmeasurable experiences in the prolonged crisis. As introduced in Chapter 2, Salma, a girl who I met in Aleppo city, has undergone deep pain and unfairness in her daily life when experiencing injury to her face, displacement and one-year-long school dropout due to conflict. Children's individual experiences are all ontologically real, whether donor diplomats and aid professionals empirically recognise them or not. Accepting such an actual and material reality or ontological being is central to critical realism, regardless of how experts categorise and describe children's plights and educational needs as minor, moderate or catastrophic.

Further, aid professionals and donor diplomats tend to take empirical categorisations and labels at face value and use them as influential evidence in the process of deciding who should be included and excluded from priority groups in beneficiary selection and educational resource allocation. Bhaskar (2008a, p.40) voices the concern that the epistemic fallacy can result in 'the generation of a methodology which is either consistent with epistemology but of no relevance to science; or relevant to science but more or less radically inconsistent with epistemology'. That is, critical realism reminds us that what we can empirically know does not represent the whole reality, but it is merely a tiny part of it. For Bhaskar (2008a), both positivism and interpretivism commit the epistemic fallacy by confusing ontological being with epistemological knowing. These two traditions see reality as 'flat' and overlook the depth of it (Danermark et al., 2019, p.9). To avoid the fallacy, critical realism separates intransitive being from transitive knowing.

4.3.2. Intransitive being and transitive knowing

Bhaskar (2008a) critiques the positivistic model in which an ontologically real object is collapsed into empirical attributes, such as quantification and measurement. In other words, positivists do not distinguish between facts and realities. They commit the epistemic fallacy, which is problematic in critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008a). Positivists claim to help us to render existing social events predictable and controllable. For critical realists, however, positivism narrows the parameter of reality to what can be observed and measured, at the cost of divergent ways of being and knowing

(Danermark et al., 2019). Similarly, interpretivists commit the epistemic fallacy in that ontological reality is divergently interpreted and reduced into subjective human beliefs, perceptions and understandings within their epistemological range. 'The interpretive group,' Alderson (2012, p.182) points out, 'saw reality (being) not as real but as a form of consciousness (knowing) in such sociological approaches'. The mistaken translation of being into knowing, reality into beliefs and thoughts in the mind of each person, carries a danger of producing wrongly inferred research findings and evidence that can distort policy recommendations and practice decisions (Alderson, 2016; Gorski, 2013; Porpora, 2015, 2019; Sayer, 2011).

To eschew the epistemic fallacy, Bhaskar (2008a, p.242) introduces the 'intransitive' and 'transitive' dimensions of science. He suggests that it is essential to distinguish between intransitive being that exists and operates independently of our thoughts, *and* transitive objects of our knowing, measuring and describing that are socially produced. To be clear, Bhaskar (2008a, p.22) explains that intransitive being means 'the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world' that are independent of our knowledge of them – i.e. gravity and inequality. Transitive objects of knowledge are 'the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day' – i.e. facts and theories (Bhaskar, 2008a, p.21). When discourses and structural causes for educational exclusion are held or perceived by agents, they are transitive, but those discourses and structural causes themselves are intransitive. Both intransitive social being and transitive knowing function in parallel (Danermark et al., 2019). In Syria, for example, pro-opposition donors carry

their political discourses when they finance education assistance to children in opposition areas. These discourses exist and operate at the level of intransitive ontology, no matter how those children's experiences and learning situations are described and ranked with severity measures at the level of transitive epistemology. Thinking this way allows us to recognise that, when we try to redress educational exclusion and bring about transformative change, we must identify and address the real underlying mechanisms and processes (i.e. discourses) rather than surface constructs (i.e. severity rankings). Critical realism warns that overreliance on empirical constructs leads to 'overlooking mechanisms which make entities what they are' (Collier, 1994, p.255), and restricting our understanding of the way the real world actually is.

Critical realism, whilst pointing to the epistemic fallacy in positivism and interpretivism, never denies them. Rather, it suggests that we can unravel social reality by accepting both 'ontological realism' in which a real intransitive mechanism exists independently of our thoughts, *and* 'epistemological relativism' in which our transitive knowing is socially constructed, relational and fallible (Archer et al., 1998, p.xi). Bhaskar (1998a, p.65) explains that our perception of the world 'is a socially produced knowledge of a natural (man-independent) thing'. This double recognition of both positivistic ontology and interpretive epistemology is the novelty of critical realism. Alderson (2012, p.191) elaborates that critical realism encourages researchers and practitioners to 'combine positivist aspects of certainty of the existence of the intransitive objects and causal relationships, with interpretivist awareness of observers' transitive subjectivities, a

combination that respects parts of both strands/traditions'. Simply put, critical realists hold that a phenomenon in the social world objectively exists, but our knowledge of it is socially constructed and fallible; therefore, what we know about the phenomenon may not necessarily be entirely congruent with what the phenomenon really is. This critical realist approach is envisaged to reconcile the classic polarisation between positivism and interpretivism (Archer et al., 1998). In this sense, critical realism is concerned with unity rather than uniformity. Empiricism and scientism assume that uniform positivist methods can be applied to all kinds of research, and reductionism assumes that the methods and the objects of all research can be uniform. However, critical realism seeks to find 'a central unity-in-diversity that overcomes fracturing and splitting' (Alderson, 2016, p.40),

From the critical realist viewpoint, the idea of evidence comes to be seen differently. Empirical evidence is not intransitive being. It does not fully portray how things really are and what really works in the world. Rather, evidence is a transitive artefact that is socially constructed and thus fallible. The point I make here is not that empirical data are always wrong. I do not suggest that we should discredit all empirical evidence either. My argument is that the use of empirical data can be an entry point to approach the real world, but it is dangerous to treat data and evidence as if they reflect the whole reality. When it comes to the relation between reality and evidence, it is essential to remember that empirical data and evidence can portray only a part of reality, accurately or not. What appears in data and evidence is 'always fallible and more or less truth-like' (Danermark et al., 2019, p.220).

Situated in my research context, critical realism allows me to ensure that the intransitive entities I investigate – i.e. the underlying realities that may be expressed in discourses – are inconspicuous but certainly present and real. Critical realism also makes me aware that these discourses structure our transitive knowing and divergent interpretations. The critical realist approach enables me to look at education aid practice differently and think otherwise. It makes me more aware that, for instance, a crucial decision about who should be prioritised in beneficiary selection for education aid is not necessarily made on the basis of how children's educational needs really are; rather, it is influenced by how their needs appear through the filter of political discourses held by the local authority and donor governments. As such, critical realism helps me to explore how and why a particular political phenomenon occurs in a given context, allowing for 'explorations of realities with inexhaustible depths' (Collier, 1994, p.236). Critical realism, in this sense, is a unique position to bridge positivism and interpretivism in the natural and social sciences.

4.3.3. The stratification of reality

Critical realism proposes its stratified ontology to better grasp the depth of reality. Bhaskar (2008a, p.56) explains that the social world can be stratified by three domains – the empirical, the actual, and the real. Table 4.1 shows the layers of reality in relation to different research models.

Table 4.1. Three domains of reality (Bhaskar, 2008a; Alderson, 2019)

Domain of reality		Interpretivism	Positivism	Critical realism
Empirical	What we can empirically observe and measure – i.e. evidence and data – is a surface of reality.	X	X	X
Actual	Events and phenomena that are actually happening, whether perceived or not, are part of reality.		X	X
Real	Generative mechanisms – i.e. discourses – operate underneath actual events and empirical knowledge.			X

First, the empirical represents a form of reality that consists of what we can empirically observe and measure, such as social constructions including statistics, data and evidence. Interpretivism, positivism and critical realism engage in this domain (Alderson, 2019). Second, the actual refers to a reality formed by actually occurring phenomena, events and materials, whether we perceive them or not. Positivism straddles the empirical and the actual (Alderson, 2019). Third, the real sits at the deeper level and serves as the 'real mechanisms that generate the actual phenomena of the world' (Bhaskar, 2008a, p.62). Generative mechanisms, structures and processes can be conceptualised as unseen causal powers (i.e. discourses) that enable or restrict our knowing, thinking and behaviour.

Importantly, these three domains are seemingly separated, but they actually partly overlap and interact with each other. 'All the levels', Alderson (2019, p.56) maintains, 'make more sense when examined in relation to one another'. This critical realist framework allows us to recognise that social reality constitutes these distinctive strata as a whole. Therefore, approaching

reality only through a singular stratum of empirical data and statistics, or seeing reality as only observable and actually occurring events, is insufficient in grasping ontological depth. This philosophical framework is of great value for my research methodology. It helps move my analytical focus from empirical surface to unseen depth. Shifting the pattern of seeing the social world from observable objects at the empirical and actual levels towards unobservable causal mechanisms at the deeper level of the real helps uncover another dimension of reality (Danermark et al., 2019). Next, I delve into each domain in relation to the aid context of Syria, where possible.

The empirical

The domain of the empirical is a surface appearance of the social world (Bhaskar, 2008a). In this domain, objects that we can observe and measure – i.e. statistics and severity rankings – represent a form of reality. For critical realists, however, these empirical statistics and rankings are merely partial or superficial reality. Nevertheless, they are often mistakenly treated as the whole reality. Bhaskar (2008a, p.16) refers to this phenomenon as the epistemic fallacy, which is associated with 'empirical realism'. Empirical realism pertains to a closed system, like a laboratory, in which the social world is considered ordered, regulated and controlled and in which, therefore, the definite prediction and measurement of reality are deemed possible (Collier, 1994; Gorski, 2013). Empirical realism has resonance with positivistic linear thinking that treats empirical evidence as if it accurately reflects what is happening and what works in the social world. This line of

thought is exemplified by the dominant evidence agenda promoted by UIS and NORRAG in education and conflict.

For critical realists, data-driven education planning and the 'what works' agenda idealised in today's aid policy and practice is not sufficient to fully understand what children's educational needs really are. In the utopian closed system or power neutrality, the complexity of real forces, such as contesting values and emotional hostilities, is denied. Critical realists believe that it is problematic to equate what is empirically observed and experienced in such closed settings to the whole reality. For them, it is important to delve deeper into the actual and the real as a whole.

The actual

In the domain of the actual, events that are actually happening in the social world, whether empirically perceived or not, are understood as part of reality (Bhaskar, 2008a). In my research context, the politicisation of evidence use and the resulting event of uneven aid delivery belong to the domain of the actual. Critical realists voice the concern that if researchers and practitioners only focus on actual events, there is a risk of overlooking the existence of unseen causal mechanisms. In Syria, for instance, a consortium of pro-opposition NGOs accused the UN agencies of taking sides with the Government of Syria and compromising impartiality (Syria campaign, 2016). Simply looking at the observable phenomenon of the UN's uneven allocation of aid to opposition-held areas, the consortium claimed that '[b]y choosing to prioritise cooperation with the Syrian government at all costs, the UN has

enabled the distribution of billions of dollars of international aid to be directed by one side in the conflict' (Syria Campaign, 2016, p.4). Their claim might sound reasonable from a one-sided ideological viewpoint based on what actually happened.

From a critical realist perspective, however, the claim by the consortium scratches only the surface and fails to grasp deeper causal mechanisms. The unseen exercise of oppressed science and naïve power relations in the existing aid architecture, as well as the presence of many other people equally in humanitarian need in government-controlled areas who the UN has reached, are all ignored. Collier (1994, p.7) posits that the problematic confinement of the social world to occurring observable events – or actualism – is 'the commonest form of realism in empiricist cultures'. The picture painted by actualism is limited to a shallow one, 'a conception of a world without depth' (Norrie, 2010, p.160).

Actualism and empirical realism that embody the epistemic fallacy, can mask deeper reality by erroneously reducing the world into what comes into existence in actual phenomena and empirical observations, respectively. Archer and colleagues (1998, p.xii) critique that those who have faith in actualism and empirical realism are 'collapsing and homogenising reality', failing to grasp the heterogeneous depth of the real. Critical realists underline that it is crucial to penetrate the surface manifestation of events and knowledge that belong to the actual and empirical domains and, further, take a deep dive into the real domain in search for generative mechanisms that make the social world what it is (Bhaskar, 2008a; Collier, 1994).

The real

Critical realism holds that real generative mechanisms exist in the deeper domain of the real. Bhaskar (2008a, p.227) contends that 'scientifically significant generality does not lie on the face of the world, but in the hidden essences of things'. Norrie (2010, p.93) echoes the significance of examining the underlying real domain, noting that a solid grasp of reality calls for the investigation of 'a depth ontology of structures, generative mechanisms and antecedent causes which operate transfactually to produce effects in the natural and social worlds'. Bhaskar (1998b, p.34) offers the following articulation of the real:

> The world consists of mechanisms not events. Such mechanisms combine to generate the flux of phenomena that constitute the actual states and happenings of the world. They may be said to be real, though it is rarely that they are actually manifest and rarer still that they are empirically identified by men – as thinkers, causal agents and perceivers. They are the intransitive objects of scientific theory.

Generative mechanisms can neither be immediately apparent nor seen in themselves, because they may be 'possessed unexercised, exercised unrealised, and realised unperceived (or undetected)' by individuals and organisations (Bhaskar, 2008a, p.184). We cannot directly see and touch generative mechanisms but can indirectly experience and perceive their effect (Alderson, 2013; Bhaskar, 2008a; Danermark et al., 2019). The deployment of critical realism is to identify the unseen causal mechanisms and explain how and why they generate particular events and particular knowledge in a specific context. In this sense, generative mechanisms are structures that affect what we know and how we act in everyday life.

Unlike empirical realism and actualism in the closed system, critical realists hold that the real or generative mechanisms function in 'an open system', where no regularity and prediction prevail (Bhaskar, 2008a, p.14). In the open system, there are multiple different causal mechanisms at play (Porpora, 2015). Where some mechanisms reinforce each other and others counter each other, the outcomes yielded from their interplay are contingent rather than predictable (Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, context matters for critical realists. Bhaskar (2008a, p.50) also suggests that 'causal laws … must be analysed as tendencies', contrary to the positivistic model searching regularity and absolute certainty. The way critical realism sees social phenomena as contextual and contingent has certain similarities with moderate interpretivism.

4.3.4. Generative mechanisms and discourses

What would be generative mechanisms that enact the politicisation of evidence in the education aid to Syria? In this thesis, I have framed the underlying 'discourses' of aid stakeholders as generative mechanisms. Foucault (1980, p.131) holds that discourse plays a key role in defining what is deemed true or false within power/knowledge, saying that:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, … the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

For Foucault, discourse is an abstract structure that governs our thinking and behaviour in ways that accept particular values and exclude others in different historical contexts. For example, the discourse that a dominant authority holds as appropriate – i.e. their deeper beliefs and ideologies – can be circulated and reproduced through education policy and curriculum, and transmitted throughout the society. The 'true' worldviews, underpinned by the particular discourse of the authority, trickle down to everyday life and are gradually taken for granted and normalised as common sense in the society, whereas other discourses which are not favoured by the authority are denounced as inappropriate and thus not reproduced (Foucault, 1972, 1980).

Foucault considers that what counts as true or real to us rests on the underlying discourses or discursive structures external to our perceptions. This is a crucial point in understanding the relation between discourse and the meaning of reality. Mills (2003, p.56) explains that:

> Objects exist and events occur in the real world but we apprehend and interpret these events within discursive structures and we are not always aware of the way that discourse structures our understanding.

That is, there exist a multitude of different discourses at play underneath social interactions and phenomena. For Foucault, these underlying discursive elements are unseen but ontologically real in ways that influence our empirical knowing, thinking and behaviour. It is in this context that the function of Foucault's discourses, I suggest, has theoretical resonance with what Bhaskar (2008a) calls the real or generative mechanisms. Discourses and generative mechanisms have a different starting point. Whilst discourses focus on how we come to know certain facts within the particular regime of

truth (epistemology), generative mechanisms place an emphasis on what is real (ontology). For Foucault, discourses attend to social structures but little to the ontological real. Nevertheless, discourses could also serve as the underlying generative mechanisms that 'make objects and events appear to us to be real, material or significant' (Mills, 2004, p.46). Further, both discourses and generative mechanisms operate independently of our perceptions and possess deeply influential forces to reproduce the prevailing structures of social phenomena, such as inequality and exclusion. In other words, discourses pertain to transitive ideas, but they also work as actual phenomena in particular statements and ways of thinking that have a temporal intransitivity. In this sense, discourses could be real and function as generative mechanisms that cause effects.

Immersing myself in these Bhaskarian and Foucauldian accounts led me to think that the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion in Syria should not be examined as the appearance of what empirical observations and data tell us. Rather, I suggest that an analytic focus should be placed on queries as to what discursive structures or generative mechanisms are played out beneath the surface of these phenomena, and how these discourses interact under what political contexts. When I locate these theoretical concepts, such as the stratification of reality and discourses, in the education context of Syria, the analytical framework looks like Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3. Politicisation of evidence use within three strata of reality

Stratification of Reality

Effect ↕ Cause	**The empirical (knowledge)**	Data that drive education planning and practice
		▼ *How?*
	The actual (events)	Politicisation of evidence ▼ Education aid exclusion in Syria (outcomes)
		▼ *Why?*
	The real (generative mechanisms)	Discourses of Government of Syria / Discourses of aid agencies / Discourses of pro-opposition donors
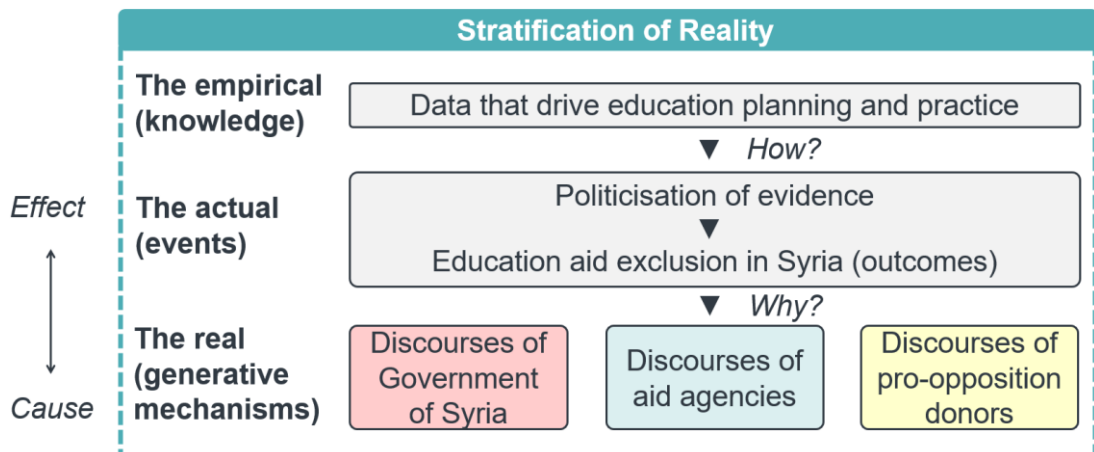
Empirical data and evidence that inform the practice of education planning, belong to the surface domain of the empirical. Data-driven aid practice seems rational and objective but, when investigated at the deeper level of the actual, it comes to be seen differently. It may be influenced by the politicisation of evidence behind the scenes, whether perceived or not. The actually occurring events, such as the practice of politicisation and the resulting aid exclusion, pertain to the domain of the actual. The unseen discourses of aid stakeholders that produce and reproduce those events, serve as causal mechanisms in the domain of the real. I present and discuss the research findings in line with this analytical flow in Chapters 6 to 8.

4.3.5. Danger of ontological monovalence

Bhaskar (2008b, 2016) suggests that we are only able to understand the nature of the real by reflecting on not simply what it is (presence) but also what it is *not* (absence). For critical realists, the notion of ontological absence is integral to the process of transforming the status quo in the social world.

Bhaskar (2016, p.115) investigates the process of transformation, explaining that it 'involves the absenting of something that was there and/or presencing of something that was not there'. For Bhaskar, transformative change in reality involves the play of both absence (non-being) and presence (being) (Danermark et al., 2019; Norrie, 2010; Scambler, 2020). In other words, there could be no presence without the existence of absence. Both presence and absence are real – which is called 'ontological bivalence' (Hartwig, 2007, p.497). Further, Bhaskar (2008b, p.83) points out that it is also crucial to accept an ontological sense of becoming in relation to both presence and absence, which includes 'the point of transition'. He argues for the philosophical position to accept 'ontological polyvalence' (200b, p.82).

In the Western philosophical tradition, however, little has been mentioned about what it is not; namely, 'absenting the absence' – which Bhaskar (2016, p.115) refers to as 'ontological monovalence'. Ontological monovalence rests on a positive account of reality (Archer et al., 1998). The danger of ontological monovalence is to lead us to 'dogmatically reinforcing the positivisation of knowledge, and eternalisation of the status quo' (Norrie, 2010, p.44). In this sense, traditional positivistic and interpretive models fail to fully grasp the whole reality. As Archer and colleagues (1998, p.xv) put it, 'nor do the conceptual [interpretivism] and the empirical [positivism] jointly exhaust the real'. It is therefore necessary to tackle these flaws from an alternative perspective. This is where critical realism comes in.

For critical realists, the notion of absence is part of the real and thus it is vital to recognise the ontological absence of which we are scarcely aware. Bhaskar (2008b, p.371) explains that absence is crucial to the ontology of

causality and that 'no purely positive world could exist'. He reiterates that absence is the necessary condition of a deeper understanding of real being:

> There are intervals, voids and pauses, desire, lack and need within being; and such absences and their tendential and actual absenting are, or so I am arguing, transcendentally and dialectically necessary for any intelligible being at all.
>
> (Bhaskar, 1998c, p.598-9)

The criticality of attending to absences is pertinent to my research. In Syria, aid practitioners are under mounting pressure to pursue observable and measurable achievements for managerial accountability to taxpayers, donors and auditors. Therefore, they tend to seek demonstrable, auditable results and showcase what it is – for instance, how many beneficiaries they have reached and how many millions of dollars they have spent in interventions. However, they often obscure and neglect unobservable and unmeasurable elements, such as their non-action, non-spending and people in need who they cannot reach and support. Policymakers and professionals shy away from reflecting on what they do not know or their inaction. This is associated with ontological monovalence. Drawing on a critical realist framework could encourage aid professionals to accept the notion of absence and reflect on what is neither known nor done. If they keep on absenting and obfuscating their non-actions, then those vulnerable who are not yet reached with previous interventions can remain unexamined and excluded from the assistance. The risk is to maintain the status quo and business as usual in aid policy and practice. I will further examine this concern in later chapters.

4.3.6. Methodological rationales

Relevance

The philosophy of critical realism helps provide causal explanations, rather than predictions, of how and why particular phenomena and outcomes occur (Wynn and Williams, 2012). I decided to employ critical realism, because it provides the most coherent methodological framework to explain why the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion occurs in Syria and what causal mechanisms operate behind it. Critical realism also provides useful analytical frameworks – i.e. stratification of reality – that offer theoretical insight into and methodological relevance to my research.

In practice, however, the application of a philosophy of critical realism to social research calls for a methodological consideration as to how the philosophy can be employed in data analysis and interpretation (Bhaskar, 2016; Fletcher, 2017). Bhaskar (2016, p.78) contends that 'if critical realism is to satisfy the criterion of seriousness, it must be applicable' in research and action. Commentators (Bhaskar, 2016; Bryman, 2016, Danermark et al., 2019; Fletcher, 2017) suggest that abductive and retroductive reasoning is integral to critical realist research. Therefore, I employed abduction and retroduction in data analysis. The process will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

Qualitative enquiry

This research necessitates an investigation of multiple causal mechanisms or discourses deployed by aid stakeholders within the evidence use process in Syria. The analysis of these discursive elements requires an

understanding of the subtle, complex meanings implicit in their practice in respective political relations. In this respect, qualitative research performs best to pursue 'a depth understanding of the subtleties and complexities of the social world' (Denscombe, 2009, p.133). The unique strength of qualitative enquiry is to allow for 'seeing through the eyes of the people studied' and 'seeking to probe beneath surface appearances' (Bryman, 2016, p.394). This qualitative approach also fits in with critical realism that seeks to explore research participants' deeper beliefs and inner struggles.

In addition, Gaventa and Cornwall (2008, p.178) note that 'empirical, quantitative forms of knowing may reduce the complexity of human experience in a way that denies its very meaning'. Critical realism does not necessarily seek out universal laws and causation; rather, it attempts to examine trends and associations with real mechanisms that are called 'demi-regularities' – which can be captured by qualitative abductive research (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998, p.13; Lawson, 1998, p.149). Thus, I have taken a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

This methodological chapter has explored the ontological and epistemological stance of positivism, interpretivism and critical realism in relation to reality and evidence. I have also clarified how critical realist frameworks are methodologically relevant to my research topic. Table 4.2 summarises key tenets and flaws of each philosophy. Noteworthy, I have presented positivism, interpretivism and critical realism in starkly distinct and monolithic terms in order to compare their ontological and epistemological positions. However, I acknowledge that there might be wide variants of each school of thought and complex interactions within and between each of the

schools (Alderson, 2012; Bryman, 2016; Elder-Vass, 2012; Robson, 2011). It must be useful to open up an analysis of the nuance and overlap of each philosophical strand. However, I leave it out in this thesis as the space is limited. The next chapter describes the methods of data collection and analysis used in the thesis.

Table 4.2. Key tenets and flaws of three philosophies

	Reality (ontological being)	Evidence (epistemological knowing)	Philosophical flaws
Positivism (associated with empiricism and scientism)	• Derived from verifiable and objective facts. • Accurately knowable with measurement and quantification.	• Grounded in observable and measurable facts. • Linear-rational progression from evidence to clarity on what works. • Facts separated from values. • Disinterest and de-politicisation.	• Reality is equated with how it appears in empirical evidence (epistemic fallacy). • What is not observed (absence or non-being) tends to be obfuscated (ontological monovalence).
Interpretivism (associated with relationalism)	• Socially constructed, leading to multiple realities. • Perceived, interpreted differently and grasped by meaning-making. • Described only in an abstract form.	• Fallible, contingent, not absolute. • Relational, contextual, subjective to politics, and malleable. • Politicised and muddling through – i.e. oppressed science. • Fuzzy between facts and values.	• Interpretivism avoids validating reality. Socially constructed beliefs, perceptions and understandings treated as real (epistemic fallacy). • Absence tends to be unexamined (ontological monovalence).
Critical realism	• Stratified into three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real • Operating as generative mechanisms in an open system • Absence and non-being is necessary part of reality	• Evidence pertains to transitive knowing, not intransitive being. • As reality is divergently interpreted, evidence can be fallible. • Facts and values (i.e. evidence) are part of reality, not the whole.	• No specific critical realist approach to research. This can be a potential strength. Critical realist analysis can be applied to a range of methods. Abduction and retroduction are recommended.

Chapter 5. Research Design

This chapter explains the methods of data collection, ethical considerations and limitations presented in this study. It then discusses the data analysis strategy, especially clarifying the steps I took for abduction and retroduction. In data collection and analysis, I recognised that my preconceived positions might influence the interpretation of data. Thus, I kept open to supportive and contrary perspectives and reflected on them for new insights and awareness.

5.1. Data Collection Methods

5.1.1. Purposive sampling

To assure that the data I gathered are credible, I needed to collect data from those who were able to talk about the process of evidence-informed aid planning in Syria based on their first-hand experience (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). To that end, I used purposive sampling which enabled me to select relevant informants in reference to my research questions (Bryman, 2016; Robson, 2011). Accordingly, I selected informants from three units; namely, aid agencies, the donor group and the Government of Syria. These groups comprised key stakeholders that have engaged in data-driven education aid in Syria. Their different mandates and positions illuminate the dynamics within which they produce and use education data.

The sample size is a total of 31 research participants that consist of 21 UN officials, 6 NGO staff and 4 donor diplomats (see Appendix 1). They used to be or are currently engaged in the Syrian crisis response from inside and

outside Syria in 2020. They are senior-level or middle-career decision makers responsible for strategic planning, data analysis, beneficiary selection, programme management or financial resource allocation. Most of the Damascus-based participants are knowledgeable about the political and bureaucratic aspects of humanitarian aid in government-controlled areas. Some of them worked or currently work in close coordination with the Syrian Ministry officials for aid planning and delivery. Although there is no interviewed participant from the Government of Syria, I managed to obtain essential insights into the government discourses and perspectives from the participants who directly worked with the government officials.

Similarly, those who have engaged in cross-border operations for opposition-held areas from Amman (Jordan) and Gaziantep (Turkey) have an intimate familiarity with the context of humanitarian and stabilisation assistance for opposition groups, including the Syrian interim government. The donor government officials, including Western pro-opposition donors, are based in Lebanon (Beirut) responsible for financing the education sector in Syria. They represented pro-opposition perspectives based on their direct and indirect engagement with aid agencies and entities for the opposition. Analysing data gathered from informants who held pro-government and pro-opposition standpoints allowed me to show their complementary and contradictory participant accounts.

5.1.2. Research instruments

Referring to the guidance of research methods (Bazeley, 2013; Bryman, 2016; Robson, 2011), I developed data collection tools, such as the information sheet (Appendix 2), consent form (Appendix 3) and interview schedule (Appendix 4). These tools were reviewed and approved by the UCL's ethics committee[2]. The development of the interview schedule required the clarification of the central research aim. Following Bazeley's suggestion (2013), I kept my research aim in focus in order to create theoretical linkages between my research questions and specific interview questions. I selected several key theoretical concepts derived from my literature review, such as policy-based evidence and obscuring the unmeasurable, and used them as 'points of departure' to formulate interview questions (Charmaz, 2015, p.60).

Between October 2017 and February 2020, I planned and conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 31 participants, including eight Skype interviews. Each interview lasted for 30-100 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English except one in Japanese. All participants, except two, allowed me to audio record the entire conversation. For the two cases where no recording was made, I jotted down key phrases for later analysis. During the interviews, I also took note of any thoughts that emerged, such as new insights and theoretical connections across themes. These were also part of my memos in the diary.

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[2] The ethics form was approved in January 2018. The UCL data protection registration number for this thesis is Z6364106/2017/10/43.

Prior to interview, I wrote several theoretical concepts in the margins of my interview schedule sheet. This guided me during the interviews by indicating what sort of information I should seek out. It also facilitated me in focusing on specific features of the responses in the fluid conversation. However, the use of such a priori propositions required caution as well. Saldaña (2013, p.146) warns that 'your preconceptions of what to expect in the field may distort your objective and even interpretive observations of what is "really" happening there'. Bearing this risk in mind, I stayed open to both supportive and contrary views from participants during interviews.

On reflection, however, it was not always straightforward to glean critical data from the research participants in interviews. Whilst trying to be open to them, I sometimes found it a bit difficult to challenge their replies and prompt them to further question their own perspectives in a self-critical manner. Especially when I was interviewing a few senior officers from UNICEF, I managed to raise the point of humanitarian data being politicised by the parties to the conflict, but I was not necessarily able to ask them whether UNICEF could also be complicit in the politics and how they believed they were really serving the most vulnerable children in the Syrian crisis. Perhaps my position as an insider of UNICEF and my professional relationship with the senior officers more or less influenced the extent to which I could challenge their claims. That being said, some of the participants and colleagues who had worked closely with me in Damascus provided more candid views. They engaged in critical reflection and shared self-critiques of their own organisations and ongoing aid practice. Their insider accounts and self-critical insights are invaluable for the data analysis of this research.

5.1.3. Reflective research diary and document review

My reflective research diary also played an integral part of data collection. When I was working in Damascus between 2013 and 2017, I had regular technical discussions with counterparts of the MOE, the donor group, UN agencies and NGOs. As noted in my reflective statement on page 15 of this thesis, I often came across contradictions and dissonance when interacting with these counterparts. I have reflected since 2015 on how and why different stakeholders interpret singular events very differently, and kept record of such an reflection on my experiences, new propositions, questions, random and fleeting ideas stimulated by my direct and indirect interface with aid stakeholders (see Appendix 5 for sample pages of my diary). The diary helped me to organise my thoughts, connect them with theoretical concepts, and translate them into visual charts and diagrams. In this sense, the diary helped lift me into reframing concrete personal experiences and feelings at a theoretical level (Bazeley, 2013; Bryman, 2016).

In addition, I examined relevant documentary sources to triangulate data for the credibility of the research (Bryman, 2016). The reviewed materials included the government and UN publications, such as MOE-UNICEF Syria's education sector analysis (2016), OCHA humanitarian response plans and humanitarian needs overview (2018, 2019a, 2019b), as well as UNICEF's public documents and its non-published documents. I also reviewed the donor governments' operational planning documents in response to the Syrian crisis (for example, DFID, 2014, 2017, 2018; EU, 2019).

5.2.   Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Central to ethical considerations for this research is to be mindful of political sensitivity in Syria. The lack of political awareness carries the potential danger of threatening safety for research participants and myself. In Damascus, aid workers, particularly the Syrian national colleagues, are very sensitive to expressing their opinions about the Government and opposition groups. The public statements against the Government may put them under the risk of being detained by the government intelligence. To avoid such risks, I excluded Syrian people from the sample group. However, I utilised a quote of the Syrian MOE official who I had interviewed in Damascus, Syria for the Institution Focused Study (IFS) in August 2016 (see page 139 of this thesis). I admit that the absence of Syrian people's voices is the limitation of my research. Nevertheless, the limitation is minimal, because the research focus is not necessarily on how Syrians see the politicisation of evidence.

Making statements about the Government can also place international staff in Syria at the risk of being deported as 'persona non grata'. Therefore, I explained to all participants about the purpose of my research according to the ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011, 2018). I obtained informed consent from them prior to interviews. All the interview data were treated as confidential and were used only for analysis. Anonymity of the participants was maintained throughout the research process.

In addition, this research involved professional counterparts for my organisation; therefore, I needed to pay extra attention to political sensitivity. Most of the participants are UNICEF's official counterparts, such as donor

diplomats and UN officers. Some of them see UNICEF as a good technical partner, whereas others might view it differently. The Western donors that are sympathetic to opposition groups sometimes critique UNICEF for working too closely with the Government of Syria. In such a politically charged environment, my professional position as a member of UNICEF could be misconstrued as taking sides with the Government. Therefore, my direct contact with participants, especially those from Western donor agencies, required prudent communication. In order to mitigate their suspiciousness, I explained that my research project is independent. In addition, the interview schedule and information sheet were designed assiduously with appropriate wording that is not to jeopardise the professional partnership between UNICEF and the participants.

5.3. Data Analysis Strategy

5.3.1. Transcription and coding

I transcribed the interview data but outsourced some of the transcription. Outsourcing was approved by the ethics review committee[3]. To assure that transcription was accurate, I listened carefully to each audio-recorded interview at least three times or more. This exercise, albeit time-consuming, allowed me to capture a sense of the whole and build a comprehensive picture of what the data are dealing with (Bazeley, 2013). It brought me closer to the data. I then moved on to a coding exercise using NVivo.

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[3] The correspondence of approval for transcription was made in July 2018.

Following the research guide (Bazeley, 2013; Charmaz 2014; Saldaña, 2013), I went through the three phases of coding analysis – initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical categorisation. When engaging in initial coding line by line with NVivo, I chose a method of 'process coding' using gerunds to examine social interactions (Saldaña, 2013, p.96). The total number of initial codes I created accounts for 445 items (see Appendix 6). Some of the codes were frequently referred by participants – i.e. 70 times for 'measuring severity' and 56 times for 'politics driving us'. Therefore, I marked them as dominant codes or potential demi-regularities for the later abductive data analysis.

In the second phase of focused coding, I elevated the initial codes from a specific stratum up to a more abstract stratum (Bazeley, 2013). Whilst developing focused codes, I deliberately did not refer to any theoretical propositions and critical realism concepts. At this stage, I instead tried to purely look at what these initial codes imply and reveal (Charmaz, 2014). Coding this way helped me to retain the unique context of the data and to capture the meanings presented by participants.

The third phase of theoretical categorisation is integral to my abductive approach to data interpretation. It is at this stage that I related focused codes with theoretical concepts and describe them drawing on Bhaskarian and Foucauldian theories. Initially, I was expecting new awareness to automatically emerge by theoretically categorising focused codes. However, it did not come that easily. Rather, I realised that key theoretical concepts, such as 'discourses' and 'political technology', are too abstract to capture the nuanced meanings implicit in focused codes. Thus, I needed to refine these

abstract concepts and reorganise them for each unit of analysis in the particular context of Syria. For that end, I put these propositions and focused codes into a diagram to seek the theoretical connections. I will explain more about the exercise of diagramming as part of abduction below.

5.3.2. Abductive and retroductive data analysis

Critical realist thinking process

Bhaskar (2016) maintains that abductive and retroductive inferences are integral to critical realist research, beside deduction and induction. Deduction takes a positivistic approach to moving from general theories to a particular case in order to test absolute certainty and regularity amongst repeated empirical observations. Induction, associated with interpretivism, starts with a number of particular observations and generalises them for theories. Both approaches rest on the repeated empirical observations or patterns of actual events; therefore, they 'can only provide inadequate information about the real causes of social events' (Hu, 2018, p.122).

Abduction and retroduction is an inferential process that helps us to move from empirically observable experiences and unexplained actual phenomena towards a deeper level of causal mechanisms that make those phenomena possible in the real domain (Bhaskar, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019). In other words, whilst critical realists seek to both derive ideas from empirical observations (positivistic model) *and* provide plausible explanations by interpreting meanings (interpretive model), they also strive to bring about transformative change by offering insights into what must be in place in order

for a particular phenomenon to occur in the social world. Critical realists use knowledge of empirical events to inferentially examine what the world must be like and what mechanisms must exist in order for particular phenomena and outcomes under study to have happened (Wynn and Williams, 2012). This is where critical realism differs from positivism and interpretivism.

Abduction is defined as inference through which a particular phenomenon is interpreted with a set of concepts (Danermark et al., 2019). Abduction allows researchers to increase their theoretical engagement and gives already known social phenomena new 'meanings and connections that are not given in our habitual way of perceiving the world' (Danermark et al., 2019, p.115). Retroduction, which seamlessly related to abduction, is a mode of inference about what constitutes a particular phenomenon. Figure 5.1 shows the analytical steps I took for abduction and retroduction.

Figure 5.1. Analytical process of abduction and retroduction

Abduction			Retroduction	
Identification of key focused codes	**Theoretical redescription**	**Contextualisation**	**Exploration of necessary conditions**	**Inference to the best explanation**
Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Identified key focused codes relevant to my research themes, including dominant codes or demi-regularities.	Redescribed key focused codes within critical realism concepts as part of theoretical categorisation (third phase of coding).	Put these plausible mechanisms in a context of possible explanations.	Examined necessary conditions for phenomena in question.	Whilst exploring competing explanations, I also specified the most plausible mechanisms in specific contexts.
No theoretical engagement at this stage.	Produced several plausible causal mechanisms.	Compared and integrated them for further explanations in the exercise of diagramming.	Explored what elements constitutes mechanisms or what makes them possible.	

The process of abduction and diagramming (Steps 1-3)

Step 1 is part of the focused coding phase. I tried to identify key focused codes including demi-regularities that had been frequently repeated by participants. However, instead of relying heavily on dominant codes, I paid heed to the codes that depict particular experiences and events that epitomise the politicisation of evidence and education aid exclusion in Syria.

Next, I engaged in theoretical redescription or categorisation as part of abductive inference (Steps 2 and 3). This overlaps the third phase of coding (theoretical categorisation). It is at this stage that I interpret the selected focused codes within theoretical concepts and seek out the implicit connections and meanings within and between codes and theories (Bhaskar, 2016). Indeed, I drew a diagram to display the theoretical connections of key propositions and focused codes. I employed Bhaskar's framework of the stratification of reality here. I structured the preconceived theoretical ideas and codes according to three domains of reality in row: I) the empirical (data that drive aid planning and practice), II) the actual (politicisation of evidence) and III) the real (discourses). Further, I grouped discourses into three units of analysis in column (see Figure 5.2).

Let me describe the coding exercise more concretely. In Step 1, for instance, I created the focused codes of Western donors' account against the Government of Syria, such as 'carrying political motives' and 'playing a political game'. In Step 2, I redescribed these codes as the 'political discourse' of pro-opposition donors in the real domain. I framed the political discourse as a generative mechanism that drives pro-opposition donors to

discontinue humanitarian aid to the crisis-affected communities retaken by the Government. In Step 3, I contextualised the plausible mechanisms within the political conflict context of Syria. I then developed a diagram by playing with these theories, concepts and codes. In fact, I moved these concepts and codes back and forth, up and down, comparing, merging, replacing and removing some of them on the paper. I kept revising the diagram again and again until I made sense of theoretical connections and logics. The process of abduction helped me to reassure that particular mechanisms produce specific events and phenomena in the social world.

Figure 5.2. The politicisation of evidence in the stratified reality

Stratification of Reality (Critical Realism)

Data that drive aid planning and practice

The empirical (knowledge)
- The evidence base widely embraced, with official population estimates and EMIS available
- Severity measurement perceived as portraying real needs on the ground (epistemic fallacy)
- National initiative to support children from high-severity opposition areas (i.e. exam support)

Politicisation of evidence use

The actual (events)

Oppressed science	*Selective use/non-use of evidence*	*Political interpretation of evidence*
- Regulated access to data - Control of access to opposition areas *Evidence fabrication (post-truth)* - Multiple perceived realities in Daraya - Inflation in EMIS enrolment	- Strategically neither using nor reflecting on inconvenient and unobservable information (cherry picking)	- Severity rankings politically adjusted for justification - Making decisions seem neutral (political technology)

▼

Education aid exclusion in Syria (outcomes)

- Marginalisation of opposition areas from humanitarian assistance	- Leaving vulnerable children excluded from education aid	- Aid discontinuation in Gov't areas (i.e. East Ghouta)

The real (generative mechanisms)

Government of Syria		**Aid agencies**		**Pro-opposition donors**	
Political discourse	*Emotional discourse*	*Political discourse*	*Managerial discourse*	*Political discourse*	*Managerial discourse*
- Rebuilding legitimacy - Showing normalisation - Not wanting to look bad	- Hostility against opposition groups	- Willing to be present and operate in Syria	- Under pressure of aid spending - Showcasing only observable results (ontological monovalence)	- Denied Gov't legitimacy - Stabilisation - Capital-driven sanctions	- Care for tax payers - Not wanting money to be diverted to terrorists

Context

- Imposing top-down approval procedures on aid agencies	- Squeezed into the middle - Avoid defiance and being complicit	- Imposing strict funding conditionality - Reassessing the political landscape

The process of retroduction (Steps 4-5)

Lastly, I moved on to retroduction (Steps 4-5). My retroductive focus was on generative mechanisms in the real domain. Following advice by Danermark and colleagues (2019, p.118), I sought to specify the most plausible causal mechanisms by asking the question 'what makes X [the phenomenon of interest] possible'. In my research context, I asked myself what must be in place in order for the politicisation of evidence to occur in the Syrian crisis. I took this approach for each unit of analysis. However, when trying to identify the most plausible causal explanations for the politicisation of evidence, I found data interpretation a bit susceptible to my personal judgement in the retroductive process. Other researchers may make sense of the same data differently and may consider other elements to be more plausible causal forces. In this sense, data analysis is inevitably prone to some subjectivity. Reflecting on this, I acknowledge that qualitative interpretations are informed by my experiences and insights and involve the co-construction of meanings.

The mixed analytical exercise of abduction, diagramming and retroduction stimulated my analytical thinking and helped me to organise and map out the unseen complex causal relations and connections within and between the theoretical accounts and the coded data. This enabled me to gain new insights. For example, previously I tended to view the term 'discourse' as a single entity, but the analytical exercise allowed me to identify different discursive elements as generative mechanisms at the level of the real – namely, 'political', 'emotional' and 'managerial' discourses (see Appendix 5). They were not previously apparent to me. Further, diagramming helped me

to assure that different stakeholders engage in the politicisation of evidence in different forms at the level of the actual.

Applying the stratification of reality framed by critical realism, the next three chapters will present the findings of my research interviews (see Figure 5.3). Chapter 6 is to analyse how data-driven education planning is embraced by research participants in the empirical domain (knowing). Chapter 7 is to examine the politicisation of evidence and the resulting education aid exclusion in the actual domain (events). Chapter 8 is to unravel competing discourses at play in the real domain (generative mechanisms). Whilst isolating the differences between the empirical, the actual and the real in the following analysis chapters, I will also reflect on how these different domains relate to each other and how research participants position themselves across and between those domains.

Figure 5.3. Flow of analysis in line with the stratified reality

Chapter 6

> ***The empirical***
> Data that drive aid planning and practice in Syria (knowing)

Chapter 7

> ***The actual***
> Politicisation of evidence use (events)
> ↓
> **Outcome**
> Exclusion of particular groups from education aid

Chapter 8

> ***The real***
> Discourses (generative mechanisms)
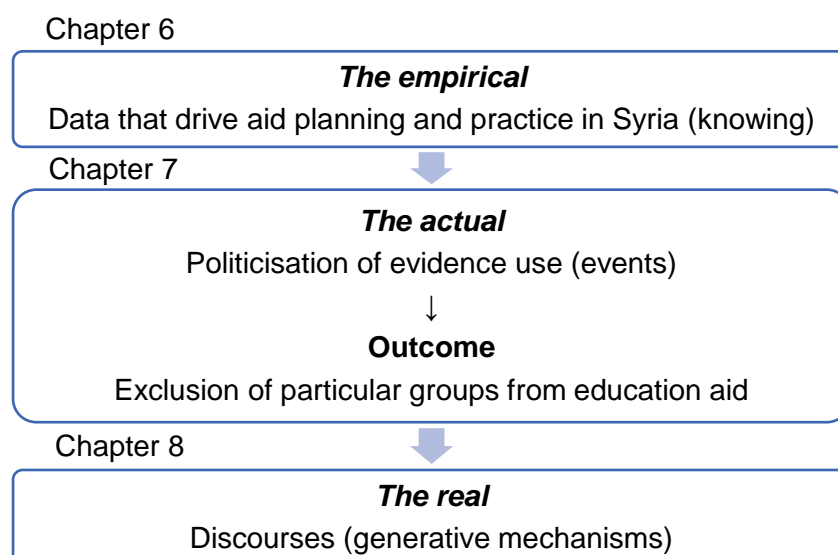
Overall, the findings suggest that the national population data and metrics –
i.e. severity scales and rankings – are widely used for education resource
allocation and beneficiary selection in Syria. These empirical constructs are
considered technically legitimate and seemingly reflecting real needs on the
ground, however they are actually negotiated behind the scenes. The
politicisation of evidence production and use implicitly results in different
forms of educational aid exclusion in government-controlled and opposition-
held areas. Further, the analysis takes a deep dive into the causal
mechanisms at play underneath the politicisation of evidence. I demonstrate
that the Government of Syria, pro-opposition donors and aid agencies read
humanitarian situations and shape evidence based on their own political,
emotional and managerial discourses. Multiple contradicting perceptions
about who is the most vulnerable are politically and socially constructed. My
argument is that the interaction of conflicting discourses and the lack of a
shared sense of reality amongst the stakeholders plays a part in perpetuating
the exclusion of vulnerable children in siege, hard-to-reach opposition areas
and government-retaken areas from education assistance, maintaining
educational aid disparity. I will begin with the domain of the empirical.

Chapter 6. Analysis of the Empirical:

Data that Inform Education Planning and Practice in Syria

This chapter examines what critical realist analysis terms the empirical domain of data-driven education planning and practice in Syria. First, I examine how the idea of an evidence base is perceived by research participants. Whilst introducing their reflective statements about the nature of data in conflict, I question whether empirical evidence and severity measures can really depict children's needs on the ground. Lastly, I discuss the findings in relation to critical realist concepts.

6.1.   The Highly Embraced Evidence Base

The interviews revealed that data-driven decision making is highly embraced by aid stakeholders in Syria – be they the donor group and aid agencies. When asked how they grasp the notion of an evidence base, participants from the UN, NGOs and the donor group maintained that grounding professional judgements in empirical data (i.e. population statistics, EMIS, research etc) is considered normative for rational decision making. They stressed that the evidence base is an integral part of clarifying what the humanitarian needs are and what works effectively and efficiently.

> When you have evidence about the things that go well or do not go well, you'll be able to make the best possible decisions in efficient allocation of funds or programmatic interventions. You will be able to be most effective in development and humanitarian assistance for the best results for children and families in Syria. (UN-01)

The evidence base as a concept is around having some data in order to form a particular position to rationalise a decision that you make. … If you want to actually do good programming and deliver to those most in need, then you need the information to inform what you do and how you do it. (NGO-01)

We largely rest on the reports and statistical data published by the UN in order to understand humanitarian needs on the ground in Syria. (Donor-02)

Many of the participants seem to have espoused the practice of an evidence base in line with the 'what works' agenda. They presume that evidence production and use would unidirectionally help them to identify the most effective and efficient course of action to take in the given situation.

The participants also expressed their trust in numbers as the evidence base to inform their aid policies and programming. Some of them noted that decisions should be grounded in empirical 'facts' that are underpinned by numerical data. They appeared to have gained confidence from 'a sense of objectivity' that resides in statistical science.

Numbers have a sense of objectivity, reliability and scientific-ness. People feel that numbers are objective and scientific. … We are still on that bandwagon of rationalists. … UNICEF has to validate every statement much more objectively than any other way. This aligns to a more scientific approach than any subjective or constructivist approaches. (UN-21)

Decisions should be made based on facts and also the relationship between these facts. In terms of statistics, how many children exist, it's a fact. Providing some scholarships to households that's going to increase children's enrolment in schools, that's also a fact about the relationship between two variables – financial resources available in households and the behaviour of parents. … Decisions should be based on facts or the relationship between different variables. (UN-02)

For these participants, decision making should be based, at least in part, on scientifically grounded knowledge and evidence. Their perspective is associated with the positivist and empiricist accounts of scientism and rational choice. They maintained a view of a separation between facts and values, science and politics. This suggests that, where the evidence base is promoted for objectivity and rationality, evidence tends to be treated as if it were detached from the political context of its production and application.

In order to better understand the meanings of evidence production and use held by research participants, I closely looked at some of the statements. This reveals that they seem to have held the belief that empirical evidence can capture exactly what the educational needs of children are in Syria.

> *Evidence generation helps us identify needs.* We can say that X number of children are out of school in these areas, so we can know that our response has to be targeted to these areas. … It will then *inform resources* you need. It also enables us in advocacy *to say exactly what the situation is for children.* (UN-04, emphasis added)

> You must generate evidence of what is going on in the education system. *Evidence could tell what is the magnitude of the children who are accessing school and how many are out of school.* Evidence is there [saying] that 30 per cent are out of school. That's evidence [that informs] what policy you can put in place to make sure that those 30 per cent are back to school or why they are out of school. (UN-05, emphasis added)

In these accounts, the evidence base, underpinned by specific numerical data and percentage, is treated as a precise depiction of how many children are excluded from the education system and what their educational 'needs' really are. Evidence is also presented as if it tells exactly how much 'resource' is required to solve the problems, what aid professionals ought to

advocate for, and what policy options and actions they should adopt. Data are seen to 'inform what you do and how you do it' for aid effectiveness and efficiency (NGO-01). However, this linear-rational thinking mode is deemed naïve from a critical realist perspective. Linear thinking only scratches the empirical surface of children's experiences of educational exclusion and also fails to grasp the depth of reality where multiple 'causal powers that can generate real events' operate (Alderson, 2012, p.192). It is thus essential for critical realists to call into question the predominant empiricist ways of thinking. The questions are, then, whether a data-driven approach can really seize children's educational needs and allow professionals to address them, and what methodological flaws may exist in evidence production and use?

Before examining these questions from a critical realist perspective, let me articulate more about the prevalence of empiricism in Syria. One of the most dominant techniques that epitomise positivistic linear thinking, scientism or a knowledge-driven model is the severity scales approach. Next, I present the accounts given by participants as to how they actually take the approach to aid planning.

6.2.   Predominant Severity Scales Approach

The severity scales approach pertains to evidence-informed aid planning in Syria (see OCHA, 2019a, 2019b). It is a predominant technique employed by aid stakeholders, especially when the donor group and aid agencies try to gauge the humanitarian needs and determine the prioritisation and selection of beneficiaries. As explained in Chapter 3, the severity scales render

populations in humanitarian need comparable and analysable. This enables

donor diplomats and programme managers to select priority beneficiary

groups on the basis of rankings and to account for their judgements. As

such, severity measures have been appreciated by the decision makers as

instruments for programme planning and accountability. Participants in the

education sector shared the following views:

> [The severity scales help] map out the needs on the ground for programming and advocacy purposes. These zero to six scales have been instrumental in raising funds and guiding our response. It's a very good way of working, and we have used it extensively. (NGO-04)

> When we need to have a needs-based intervention, we're looking at the severity scale, which is evidence based. It is very scientific, not only looking at security but also taking into consideration the three pillars of education which are access, quality, and system. (UN-20)

> At the Whole of Syria level, we have to have a needs-based approach. The severity scale is the main tool that we use to assess to what extent assistance is needed at the community level. (UN-09)

Interviewed practitioners widely use severity measures in the hope of

identifying who is in humanitarian and educational needs, where they are,

and the extent to which their situations are severe. Their reliance on severity

scales and rankings is derived from a positivistic sense of disinterest implicit

in the numerical calculation and quantification of humanitarian needs.

> When we do this kind of severity analysis, we think we have captured the reality on the ground, because we have been framed into pretty categories, colours, and we can be confident with them. … When we see numbers, there's a human emotion to believe that it's more real, whereas narrative, then you get into the issues of subjectivity and discourse, like the floor is not so hard. (UN-10)

This is a crucial account suggesting that some aid professionals put a value on empirical data rather than anecdotal evidence, because they think that numbers and severity rankings can tell humanitarian situations and needs in a 'more real' and objective fashion. They can feel more confident in 'capturing the reality' on the ground. Given the rhetoric of objectivity implicit in numerical data, the donor group has also appreciated severity measures as an effective evidence-informed approach to rational decision making and financial accountability. Donor officials commend it for wider use.

> Data can be a starting point. Analysis of vulnerability and severity is to be a basis for decision making. (Donor-01)

> The data from the Government of Syria are not necessarily reliable. Therefore, we refer to the [UN-published] severity scales in the process of prioritisation. (Donor-02)

> DFID wants all of us to use a severity scale, which we do. They always want to know where we're going to put the money. (UN-19)

Indeed, the donor group relies on severity scales in identifying which locations are severely conflict affected and deserve their financial assistance. Pro-opposition donors favourably utilise those scales and allocate financial resources to particularly high-severity opposition areas.

> The humanitarian aid will still be provided without the restrictions, and most likely the focus is on the severity scale. The focus would be on north-west [Idleb governorate controlled by the opposition], north-east and the other pockets where severity scales are worse. (Donor-03)

As seen in these testimonies from the donor group, aid stakeholders in Syria have rested on severity measures in humanitarian planning and decision

making. Once some communities are identified and ranked as higher severity, aid agencies and the donor group use the information as evidence and seek to allocate financial resources and deliver relevant interventions to those communities. As such, artefacts – i.e. severity ratings and rankings – are treated as a reliable representation of the real needs and experiences of crisis-affected families and children. Severity measures also prevail in the education sector. The UN colleague responsible for a large donor fund explains that the severity rakings are routinely used as key determinants in the process of priority setting and beneficiary selection.

> For the Education Cannot Wait funding, we always require that our partners, when they put forward proposals, target children in severity scale four, five and six as a way to prioritise locations. That is the way to identify children with greatest need, the most marginalised. All ECW funding is targeted that way. (UN-17)

Education stakeholders tend to take severity rankings at face value, equating the highly ranked communities with the areas where 'the most marginalised' exist. They apply the severity data in the process of making decisions around who should get assisted as priority groups with education interventions. This reaffirms how aid professionals have deep reliance on empiricism and statistical science.

However, the interviews also reveal that some participants, including the same individuals who mention the reliance on severity measures, cast doubt on predominant faith in numerical data in Syria. They question the way in which aid stakeholders take data analytics at face value and tend to treat them as true.

We have good UN initiatives like the HNO [Humanitarian Needs Overview] and the HRP [Humanitarian Response Plan]. All of these very big numbers are based on factual evidence. But where are these people [in humanitarian need]? Is this the right number? (Donor-04)

How accurate are these severity scales? ... There's an inherent bias. Not that good statistics are even incredibly powerful to capture the world. There is a bias towards recognising the truth in numbers rather than recognising the truth in a less quantifiable narrative. (UN-10)

A lot of statistics are seen as fact. … But there's lies, there's damned lies, and there's statistics. A lot of people don't even think about that. In UNICEF, there wasn't much critical thinking in my view in Syria. … It can be manipulation of data, it can be twisting, it can be ideological, it can be how data can support one party over another, or how the Government can use data to attack the UN. But there just wasn't often any real critical thinking or analysis. Actually, a lot of people hide behind data to justify their interventions. (UN-04)

These critical and self-critical comments are important in my research, because they point to the ambiguity of an evidence base. Some participants are sceptical about the nature of evidence itself in Syria as they are aware that the parties to the conflict manipulate data in order to 'attack' or discredit rival claims and 'justify' their own standpoints. This suggests that empirical evidence does not always gauge precisely what humanitarian situations and needs really are. However, as pointed out by UN-04, many aid professionals do not necessarily critically reflect on possible risks of data manipulation and ideological forces behind evidence. Many of the participants still appear to have held faith in the rhetoric of disinterest implicit in statistics and metrics. From a critical realist perspective, I have reservations about predominant empiricism in which many aid professionals uncritically perceive numerical data as a mirror of reality in the empirical domain.

6.3. Discussion

I have demonstrated that the way interviewed aid stakeholders make decisions about who should and should not get prioritised with humanitarian assistance is largely guided by empirical data and severity measures. It revealed that many of the participants understand the notion of an evidence base in positivistic terms, even if some of them are wary of the political nature of data in conflict settings. They consider that the use of empirical evidence would tell 'exactly what the situation is for children' (UN-04) and inform 'the best course of action' to take (UN-21). Examining the belief held by those participants showed that they tend to regard empirical data and information as exactly reflecting how things really are on the ground. The prime example of treating evidence in that way is the dominant practice of a severity scales approach.

The interviews have also illustrated that aid agencies and the donor group in Syria rest heavily on measurement techniques when they select priority beneficiary groups and allocate financial resources. Many tend to believe that artefacts, such as severity rankings and ratings, are produced and informed by the formula that are free from politics. This is why they see severity measures as apolitical and rely on it. As such, the use of empirical evidence is equated with the ability to pin down who deserve humanitarian assistance, where they are, and to what extent their needs are severe.

In addition, I have presented some scepticism towards empirical evidence. The questioning of the taken-for-granted routine is pivotal to a reality check, because the empirical knowing of humanitarian and

educational needs through severity measures carries a risk of reducing children's heterogeneous real experiences into only observable and measurable data. Bhaskar (2008a) refers to the reduction of ontological being into epistemological knowing as the epistemic fallacy. From a critical realist perspective, I problematise the dominant belief that empirical data enable aid professionals to capture the whole reality. Shallow empirical realism can fail to detect the underlying mechanisms or discourses that leave particular groups of children excluded from education assistance.

At the empirical level, the idea of an evidence base is embraced by many of the interviewed aid professionals for presumably impartial decision making. Yet, some participants also point out that the evidence base process can be politicised in conflict contexts. Next, I will analyse what critical realists refer to as the domain of the actual. I examine how empirical evidence, albeit ostensibly objective, is actually politicised. I investigate different forms of education exclusion that are partly derived from the politicisation of evidence.

Chapter 7. Analysis of the Actual:

Politicisation of Evidence and Exclusionary Education Aid

This chapter investigates the politicisation of evidence and the associated outcome of education aid exclusion in Syria. It looks at the domain of the actual, one layer deeper than that of the empirical. It aims to explain how the practice of evidence production and use, albeit seemingly rational at the empirical level, is actually politicised in different forms. I examine each form of politicisation exercised by the Government of Syria, the donor group and aid agencies. I also analyse how the politicisation of evidence results in exclusionary aid practice in Syria.

7.1.   The Government of Syria: Marginalising Opposition Groups

This section demonstrates that the Government of Syria exerts authoritarian control over humanitarian access and also engages in data fabrication in the process of evidence collection and use. First, I present how the Government has regulated Damascus-based aid agencies' access to opposition-held areas and oppressed their autonomy of knowledge making and situation analysis. I also touch on the government control over education certificates for children in opposition-held areas. Second, I show how the Government fabricates the population statistics and EMIS data, making humanitarian aid to opposition areas seem unnecessary. Lastly, I discuss how the politicisation of evidence by the Government contributes to filtering out crisis-affected people in opposition areas from the priority of humanitarian aid.

7.1.1. Oppressed science in the aid sector

Control of access and oppressed knowledge making

The interviews reveal that, despite the adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions (2139, 2336) calling on all parties to permit free and unhindered humanitarian access, Damascus-based aid agencies have suffered from the government denial of humanitarian access to opposition-held areas.

> If we think that access is [defined as] free access to a location and unfettered physical access to populations in need, then almost no one has genuine humanitarian access. (UN-13)

> We are not operating in a political vacuum. We are operating in a highly politicised context. Who we get access to, when we get it and what we deliver is all dependent on [the government] approvals, and these are all political. (UN-04)

> We were told not to actually even think about going [to opposition areas]. You have a lot of stumbling blocks because of the government approval system. (UN-16)

These participant testimonies illustrate that the top-down government approval procedures restrict humanitarian space and allow the Government to freely exert control to benefit only population groups in government areas. In short, authoritarian bureaucracy undermines humanitarian impartiality.

In education, the government favouritism towards its own territory is evident and it has profound implications for the national school exams and education certificates for children in Syria. The Government never accredits and certifies any forms of education provided to children in opposition areas. A Damascus-based practitioner shared the story of Syrian children and youth

in East Ghouta of Rural Damascus whose authority had shifted from the opposition to the Government in April 2018:

> [When the authority was shifted in East Ghouta,] young people there was thinking that, if someone was in the twelfth grade [and already had a ninth-grade certificate issued by the interim government], he or she was eligible to sit for the twelfth-grade graduation exam. However, this is not the case, because their certificate from the interim government is never acknowledged by the Syrian Ministry of Education. … They had to take the ninth-grade exam again [when their residential area came under the government control]. … Only if they pass the ninth-grade exam, they are allowed to take the twelfth-grade exam. … . They will still lose one or two years of their lives for extra school education.

The Government differentiates children in opposition areas from those in its own territory in the education system. When the areas of control change or if children are displaced from an opposition area to a government area, they are likely to be disadvantaged due to the loss of accredited education years and lack of certification of their learning. In this way, conflict-affected children fall into political factions and have to pay a heavy price.

The government favouritism and its control of geographical access also regulates and undermines the autonomy afforded to humanitarian agencies in conducting research and assessment. The regulated access to data and information limits the parameter of aid practitioners' knowledge about the situations on the ground. In other words, the scientific acts of knowledge making, evidence generation and verification are significantly disrupted. This constraint in the field denies a positivistic account of scientism. As explained in Chapter 4, I portray the phenomenon as 'oppressed science'. Participants shared a sense of fear and frustration related to oppressed knowing:

[Research and assessment] are not carried out, because the Syrian government says any data collection activity outside of their barriers is almost a treason to them. We cannot go forward in that. … UNICEF has the imperative to be there for children, [we] cannot risk being ousted because of data collection. We can still make a difference by staying and delivering with whatever data we have. (UN-21)

Donors constantly request needs assessments. And yet we're in an environment where … collecting that sort of information is almost equal to spying. … [The Government] wants to be in control of what is being collected. … I remember having a [Syrian] staff member sit opposite me in Damascus, literally shaking when I suggested that she could take a survey to go and ask [community members] questions. She was like, 'No, I'm putting my life at risk', and really being afraid. … There's still a lot of fear around what will happen to staff member as an individual, not only as an organisation. (NGO-06)

These regulations, such as geographical access control and restrictions of knowledge making, diminish aid practitioners' capability of investigating humanitarian needs in a rigorous manner. Given the blockade of evidence generation, field practitioners try to overcome this challenge by seeking out the best evidence available amongst multiple sources and anecdotes, even though some information may neither be quality assured nor trustworthy.

What we choose to do is based not so much on [official] data but more on people on the ground, whether they're our teams directly implementing projects, local authorities or the community people that we deal with. (NGO-06)

We relied on multiple sources of information [on populations in need]. When we had numbers that are close to each other, we averaged the numbers, or we looked into a way of reconciling them. Where the numbers really were farther from each other, this is where we had to rely on context-specific analysis and rely on colleagues that have expertise in the area and try to update those numbers. (UN-03)

> We rely on what is called grey knowledge. It's basically anecdotal. It's stuff that just comes through experience and isn't necessarily documented in a way that can then be used or referred to. (NGO-01)

Under the condition of oppressed science, individual expert knowledge, informal data and anecdotal information might be useful to some extent. However, this also poses another ethical question as to whether and to what extent professional humanitarian judgements can depend on the information and evidence that is neither necessarily verified nor documented. One participant mentioned that scientific measures are not always available but triangulation is necessary even in such a context.

> We have to come up with a methodology to understand these [hard-to-reach] locations. This is a complex endeavour. … There is no scientific way of doing it since we don't have access to some of these locations. … We talk to local councils, we talk to SARC [Syria Arab Red Crescent], national NGOs, and we talk to our colleagues who are working with cross-border NGOs. We compile all available information together and we come up with estimates and numbers that are triangulated. It's never an accurate number. (UN-03)

The fact that data accuracy is hard to come by and statistical data are not necessarily verified in crisis situations allows room for manoeuvre by those who have a stake in the data. Indeed, the Government of Syria has taken advantage of such a situation and committed data fabrication for their advantage. Next, I will demonstrate instances based on the interview data.

7.1.2. Data fabrication: Raising and lowering numbers

Government estimate of populations under siege

Data fabrication entails the inflation and deflation of numbers without factual underpinnings; that is, 'cooked-up numbers' (UN-21). In Syria, this occurs in estimating populations in humanitarian need. The UN respondents who had regularly worked with government technocrats revealed that numbers could be raised and lowered, depending on the political objectives.

> Whenever an area is not under the control of the Government, the rule is basically the same – there are less people. If it's under the control of the Government or groups that are affiliated with the Government, the rule is actually to inflate the number. … [The government data] tend to be completely far away from the reality or what we observe when we ask our colleagues there. … We sometimes receive a list from the Government saying 'you should go to these areas [to deliver assistance] and this is the number of people there'. Once we dig a little bit further, the numbers tend to be always inflated if it's a government-controlled area. (UN-03)

> Recently the Russians came out with an example of how many people would return to Syria. There was a huge number. That's their way of forcing the international community [to divert resources to them] ... I mean, I don't know how they came up with this number. Maybe it's grounded in truth or not, but I think it's exaggerated. That's their way of saying, 'Okay, look, all of these people are coming back. Where is the money for reconstruction?' (UN-10)

The case of estimating people under siege epitomises evidence fabrication by the Government. A participant shared his first-hand experience. When estimating the population of Daraya, he found himself between the contrary realities presented by the contesting parties. Daraya is located in Rural Damascus besieged by the Government since the beginning of the uprising.

Prior to the crisis, over 100,000 people were estimated to reside in Daraya. When the crisis happened, many fled the area. The siege came to be lifted only after August 2016. Estimating Daraya's populations was critical for aid planning, but the UN could not pin down how many were there by that time.

> The UN estimation for Daraya was 4,000 people. … When we had that estimation, a lot of activists and opposition groups said, 'This is outrageous. Daraya has at least 8,000 to 12,000 civilians living in it and they are being bombed by the Government'. The Government was saying, 'This number is outrageous. Daraya has only 200 terrorists'. We found ourselves between these two. There was no way to go and verify. … because we didn't have access. When Daraya was evacuated, it had around 2,500 people, including families and fighters. … The point is not about the accuracy of the number, but the fact that you find yourself always between multiple realities. (UN-03)

This suggests that both the Government and opposition groups invented population figures that are amenable to what they believe to be true. The contesting parties shape evidence based on their perceptions and emotions for their desirable ends. This is bound up with today's post-truth politics. I will delve into this point in later sections. When Daraya was under control of the opposition, the Government underestimated population figures and presented them to the UN in an attempt to make humanitarian aid to Daraya seem less acute and less critical. In so doing, the Government sought to prevent aid agencies and the donor group from grasping the real situations and organising sufficient assistance to those in opposition-held Daraya. In addition, the government forces and its allies tried to legitimise their siege strategy by labelling the opposition as the militant target 'terrorists'. Analysing the domain of the actual reveals how political values and desires are played out behind the government data and the numbers deployed by aid agencies.

Overinflation in MOE EMIS enrolment figures

The manufacturing of the official government data was also evident in the education sector. A respondent pointed out that the MOE overinflated the school enrolment figures of IS-controlled areas for the political purpose.

> [With EMIS data,] we were told by the MOE that there was very high enrolment in schools [in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates controlled by IS]. The question number one was how you collected this information even though you didn't have access. At that time [2015/16], they were under the IS control. Number two, we knew from the media and partners that IS closed schools. … How is it possible that you have all these children enrolled? … This is information that was manipulated and it was clear that it was not portraying the reality. (UN-08)

Indeed, the aggregated EMIS dataset received from the MOE showed that more than 4.1 million school-aged children (6-17 years) were enrolled countrywide in the 2015-16 academic year (MOE, 2016). It accounted for as high as 394,000 children enrolled in Deir-ez-Zor governorate and 227,000 in Raqqa governorate, even though these governorates were largely controlled by IS at that time. These high enrolment figures were brought to the attention of the UN colleagues (including myself) who engaged in the education sector analysis. These were deemed highly suspicious. The UN findings of the sector analysis, drawing on the EMIS raw datasets and other sources, revealed afterwards that only 3.7 million children (6-17 years) were registered in the same academic year, with very low enrolment in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor (UNICEF, 2017c). But why were those numbers inflated?

I managed to organise a semi-structured interview with an MOE official responsible for EMIS in Damascus in August 2016 when I was working on

the IFS assignment. Asked about what made enrolment so inflated in those IS-controlled areas, the MOE official confessed that:

> The Minister of Education, he was pushing towards like, 'Everything is okay, and there are students enrolling in schools and there are no dropout students in Deir-ez-Zor'. The Ministry wanted to show that the Government has some control there. It was a political decision. … The number of actual students was around 3.8 million. But the Minister wanted to show a bright image and did not want people to see that students were dropping out of school. He published the number which was 4.1 million students. The manipulated number was for Deir-ez-Zor, because you cannot access that governorate.

The government data, such as the official demographic statistics and EMIS enrolment figures, are usually deemed technically legitimate and authentic. However, these data can be negotiated and distorted by those in authority behind the scenes in ways that favour their underlying ideological values and desires. This is a crucial point in relation to the government discourses, which I will examine in the next chapter. In particular, the politicisation of evidence becomes heightened in a conflict-stricken situation like Syria. As explored above, the Government has engaged in a range of politicisation exercises in the evidence use process (i.e. control of geographical access, regulations of knowledge making, and data fabrication) in an attempt to divert more humanitarian assistance to their own territory rather than opposition-held areas. The next section turns to the actual exclusionary outcome from the politicisation of evidence by the Government.

7.1.3. Outcome: Marginalising opposition areas

A mix of government politicisation exercises diminishes aid agencies' access to opposition-held areas and the parameter of their robust evidence generation and use. Participants from Damascus, Gaziantep and Amman pointed out that, even when allowed to conduct research and assessment, they are still struggling with the methodological flaw peculiar to the Syrian crisis. They have to grapple with the limited sampling and gather evidence only from accessible locations and informants. Consequently, they are unable to seize the whole picture of humanitarian needs in the country.

> If the methodology is flawed or politicised, or your reach is only limited [to accessible locations], that's going to destroy your data. (UN-04)

> Your sampling is just a snowball way. You only reach the people that are not scared of being reached by you. (UN-14)

A participant in Gaziantep working for opposition areas also pointed to the similar methodological limitation of evidence collection she confronted:

> All these assessments we do are in areas that we have access to. We perpetuate going to those areas, whereas there is very little presence and very little information historically in areas like Raqqa [that used to be controlled by IS]. Because there was very little information, there was very little response. Because there was very little response, there was very little information. We perpetuate the critical gaps. … Particularly in IS areas, you would interview like two people and you would use that data as if it's legitimate and comparable to interviewing 100 people. It's hugely flawed. (UN-13)

These accounts suggest that evidence production and its use are susceptible to a methodological flaw that can distort the selection of research sites and sample populations. This results in producing and reproducing a biased

picture of the educational scenario in the conflict context. Furthermore, the above participant remarks sharply point to one of the causal dimensions of why children in hard-to-reach opposition areas remain unobservable and kept out of the equation of humanitarian aid. Indeed, frontline practitioners in Syria are allowed to go to only safe and accessible areas. They make sense of humanitarian situations based on what they observe there. In other words, they know less about the areas they cannot access. Consequently, the humanitarian needs of children in government-controlled accessible areas tend to be more observed, measured and organised into the process of beneficiary selection and resource allocation. By contrast, the needs of children in insecure areas controlled by opposition groups and extremists are less observable and less measurable and tend to be organised out of beneficiary selection and resource allocation. This practical dilemma reflects a danger of overlooking the unmeasurable. In the context of development and education, Unterhalter (2017, p.2) refers to this phenomenon as 'a tension between what is easily measurable, but may not be significant, and what is of major importance, but cannot be measured'. In the Syrian context, the UN colleague (UN-08) pointed out that aid agencies tend to support the areas where data are more available and richer:

> It's easier to go where we have information. This is the situation on the ground. The conflict dynamics influences what [evidence] comes out and becomes available from particular areas. Do we make a right decision and do we target the most vulnerable? It's a big question.

It is reported that humanitarian services and financial resources have often ended up reaching more families and children in government-controlled areas than those in hard-to-reach opposition-held areas (Hartberg et al.,

2015; Syria Campaign, 2016). In this way, the lack of reliable data on particular vulnerable groups, derived from oppressed science and data fabrication by the Government, has far-reaching implications. It makes aid practitioners (including myself) feel apprehensive and ethically uncomfortable in justifying the allocation of programme budgets for those data-poor areas, because accountability to donors, auditors and taxpayers becomes compromised without demonstrable evidence. As a result, less assistance is planned and delivered to areas where evidence is less available – i.e. areas controlled by the opposition and IS. A participant sees this dilemma as an inherent flaw of evidence-driven aid planning and suggests that:

> Deir-ez-Zor governorate was under IS. Even before the war, it was under-invested, so it started out worse. It was flattened by the coalition [during the war]. We know how little responses there have been. To me, that should be enough to say we need to go. This is why I think the data becomes the enemy. We shouldn't have to quantify X numbers of boys and girls [in need before determining whether we invest resources]. We should just say that common sense would prevail and just allow us to go there. (UN-13)

Where the evidence base is uncritically exercised for managerial decision making, data can be 'the enemy'. In other words, crisis-affected children in evidence-poor areas, no matter how severe their situations are, tend to be less visible to the eye of policymakers and practitioners and thus more excluded from humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, professionals' habitual pattern of managerial thinking and acting simply based on what is observable and measurable, can possibly accelerate the exclusion of particular groups from aid. I do not suggest that all policy professionals and practitioners are preoccupied with managerial thinking. Indeed, as demonstrated above, some

research participants worry about the effect of such thinking at the empirical level. I will return to the managerial discourse of aid practitioners later. However, arguably, the effect of managerial force can fuel the trend of marginalising those in evidence-poor areas from important assistance.

In summary, I have demonstrated how the Government has exerted its authoritarian control and political influence over the practice of evidence generation and use for their advantage beneath the surface of aid planning. Investigating the politicisation of evidence in the domain of the actual helps us to better understand the deeper dimensions of aid practice. The practice of aid is susceptible to politicisation in Syria, where equitable aid delivery and resource allocation are never simple to actualise. The UN operation in Syria is often criticised by the Western donors for assisting government-controlled areas alone. Yet, rather than seeing the apparent surface as the real, it is vital to attend to what unseen values and discourses associated with the realm of the actual play out in the process of aid planning and practice. Next, I turn to the politicisation of evidence by pro-opposition donors and the resulting phenomenon of aid discontinuation.

7.2.   The Donor Group: Politicisation of Severity Measurement

This section examines the politicisation of evidence by the donor group, paying attention to the political interpretation of severity measurement. First, I demonstrate that pro-opposition donors make implicit adjustment in the methodology of severity analysis for their political ends. Next, I illustrate how they interpret the severity of humanitarian needs as politically convenient.

7.2.1. Methodological bias of severity calculation

The interview with a diplomat from the major Western pro-opposition donor agency affirmed that humanitarian financing and resource allocation is largely driven by the donor government's foreign policy and political aspiration. If the donor government has its political discourse against the Government of Syria, the modality of humanitarian aid follows the policy.

> We've continued working both with the UN and with NGOs, but particularly regime areas are becoming less palatable. (Donor-03)

This implies that pro-opposition donors require empirical evidence that helps them to justify their targeted investment in opposition areas. This is where severity measures can be politicised. The previous chapter shows that the severity approach is appreciated for greater financial accountability at the empirical level, but investigating the domain of the actual paints a different picture. The interviews reveal that the process of calculating severity is prone to political interpretations. A UN colleague in the education sector pointed out that the formula of severity measures places greater weight on opposition areas, which could be derived from pro-opposition donors' political interests.

> There's been a lot of work adjusting the way of severity scale calculation to make it more in favour of opposition areas. Scientifically speaking, those adjustments are not really reasonable, because from a statistical point of view, some of the adjustment is increasing the risk of double counting. A lower enrolment or overcrowded classroom is already [counted as] an implication of the severity of the conflict for education and the amount of displacement from other areas. But you want us to add another criterion of intensity of conflict, or percentage of displaced people. You're adding two similar indicators and double counting for one area. This is always suggested by OCHA, but of course OCHA is also under pressure from donors. (UN-14)

In addition, another participant regionally responsible for severity measures in the Syrian crisis confirmed that they had guided the sectors to add extra severity indicators and prioritise hard-to-reach and besieged areas:

> We tried to understand the situation in Syria by adding the access factors like hard-to-reach and besieged areas in order to say, if location A is besieged, then most of the population, not 100 per cent of the population there, are in need. They should receive the high severity of need. … The calculation of the severity of need is based on accessibility, besiegement and hostility. (UN-18)

Consequently, opposition-held communities are marked out as the higher severity scales four to six, and children in those areas are automatically grouped into the most vulnerable that require priority assistance. Those living under siege and in hard-to-reach opposition areas deserve priority humanitarian aid. However, such an area-based approach could be the methodological bias with which double weight was put on humanitarian assistance to opposition-held areas. It also seems that ambiguous value judgements and political assumptions seep into the calculation process, especially when it comes to quantifying the extent to which people living in those opposition areas are severely conflict affected, compared with those equally conflict affected in government areas. Some other participants pointed out that the methodological process of severity measures was susceptible to the political negotiation:

> The severity approach is politicised because it's how you define severity. What's important to remember is that behind every single statistics is a methodology and a definition and that in itself becomes a political process. The methodology is negotiated with the Government and the donors. (UN-04)

> Numbers are not a given. [The calculation of severity scales] is a mathematical process, but the way formula is created is not a given. (UN-02)

The interviews present the contestation of severity measures. The severity approach may be seemingly apolitical at the empirical level, yet the in-depth analysis reveals that it is also methodologically biased by aid stakeholders at the actual level. Noteworthy, some participants embrace an evidence base as rational in the empirical domain, whilst the same individuals are also aware that evidence could be prone to politicisation in the actual domain. This implies that donor diplomats and aid practitioners may expediently oscillate their standpoints across different domains in order to defend their own positions and counter rival claims. I will revisit this in Section 8.4.2.

7.2.2. Political interpretation of severity

Another strand of politicisation by pro-opposition donors is political data interpretation. Some donors interpret only opposition areas as severely affected and politically ignore equally severe situations in government areas.

> Donors always misunderstand that the severity scales are related to areas where there is no possibility to be reached regularly [like opposition-held areas], which is not true, because the severity can be found in Damascus city. In Damascus, classrooms are overcrowded and water per person is not enough. But when you tell donors that the high severity can be in Rural Damascus, then they say, 'No. Rural Damascus is actually under the government control area, so I'm really sorry [I cannot help it]'. The question is, then, what severity do you mean? … The severity scales shouldn't necessarily reflect the donor's desires. (UN-16)

The politically biased data interpretation has the danger of excluding people in need from necessary humanitarian assistance. As long as pro-opposition donor agencies operate based on the ideological value and aid policy set by the headquarters, their aid planning may not necessarily be fact-based. Rather than judiciously weighing up field data and information, the donors seem to have bound themselves into the political discourse and interpreted humanitarian needs merely based on their pre-set foreign policy. As a result, these pro-opposition donors allocate funding to only implementing partners sympathetic to the opposition even in the face of robust evidence showing that there are massive numbers of equally vulnerable people living in government areas. Several participants in Damascus problematise such a politically driven donor thinking. They contended that it is equally crucial to attend to millions of people in severe need in government-controlled areas.

> The donors will have to decide whether to fund the areas controlled by the Government. … You have 16 million people in Syria, mostly in government control. If you don't give the money, you will have a huge number of people underserved. (UN-16)

> The major Western powers will have to make a decision whether they stop funding or they come to terms with the fact that the majority of the territory is under the control of the Government. Even under the government control, [people in need] still can fall under [severity scales] four, five and six. You should not assume that because the Government is in control, things are going okay. Things are under severe needs as well. (NGO-04)

> A lot of government-controlled areas were so-called liberated [from opposition groups] after a massive and bloody war waged on those areas, where people's homes were totally destroyed. It was about siege, destruction, and then lifting of the siege. People's needs may have been even more than they were under siege. (UN-04)

In response to these critical comments, a participant from the donor agency admitted that their financial allocation decisions are embedded in the headquarter-driven political diplomacy. For them, priority is risk management to avoid aid diversion to the Assad administration and extremist groups.

> There is a higher risk aversion [request] from all politicians in Europe. [We should avoid] falling into the risk of a diversion by an extremist group like HTS in north-west, IS in north-east, or legitimising a regime. Politically, the politicians do not consider them legitimate. For this reason, most donors have their machine in the capital. All the apparatus is usually more capital-driven. In our case, we do have to consult with Brussels on most of the decisions we take. (Donor-03)

This remark illustrates that political interests and risk management come to the fore on the donor side. Given this, humanitarian aid to children in government areas is automatically sidelined in the planning process, no matter how evidence shows that their learning needs are as severe as those of children in opposition areas. The political interpretation of severity is neither fair nor impartial. Politically motivated inequality in humanitarian treatment has occurred in the domain of the actual in Syria. Critical realism encourages us to take a deeper look at what mechanisms play out in the domain of the real that causes this event of inequality. I will address it in Chapter 8. Before doing that, let me analyse the actual inequality generated by pro-opposition donors, drawing on a case of the discontinuation of education aid to the government-retaken areas.

7.2.3. Outcome: Discontinuation of education aid

Some of the pro-opposition donors persistently keep pushing forward their discourse and engage in the political judgement of severity measurement. In fact, once the control of high severity areas shifts from opposition groups to the Government, pro-opposition donors interpret those areas as non-priority. They discontinued humanitarian assistance there. This has adverse impact on the lifeline of those residing there. However, for the donors, the political decision not to support the Government outweighs humanitarian imperatives:

> Assistance has been discontinued because we haven't been able to find partners that could take it over from Damascus. … But it is true that it has been affected by the change of control. Even if there was no willingness to interrupt it, it's affected. … It's true that, for the non-humanitarian assistance, there was a motivation of not wanting to legitimise the regime methods of besiegement and starvation and then the fake reconciliation processes. There was absolutely the rationale of not continuing the assistance there. (Donor-03)

This candid statement represents pro-opposition donors' political diplomacy and aid policy towards the Syrian crisis. It depicts their political will to deny the legitimacy of the Assad administration, their unwillingness to be seen as subsidising the Syrian government services, and their inner hostility against Assad. The donor discourse is associated with the real mechanisms that cause aid discontinuation. This discourse will be examined in Chapter 8.

The donors' political interpretation of evidence and decision to discontinue aid delivery has deprived children of learning opportunities. UNICEF and one major European donor in the education sector negotiated the funding modality and programme coordination with the Government. However, UNICEF and the donor agency were not able to reach a consensus and

ended up to call off the joint nationwide education assistance. The diplomat

from the donor agency stressed that channelling money to the Government

was 'not politically acceptable':

> We scaled down and closed support to UNICEF for education
> because of their choice of working through the Ministry of Education.
> For us, at this stage, it's not politically acceptable. [Support to formal
> education system] would be development practice in order to
> strengthen the state apparatus for such an important service. In this
> case, it goes beyond our control, so we're not able to channel funds
> on education. … Our redline is that we cannot recruit any financial
> benefit to the regime. It has become impossible if agencies that
> officially end as a strategic choice, decide to channel their assistance
> through the Ministry as the case for UNICEF. We had to discontinue
> our support to UNICEF in education. (Donor-03)

East Ghouta exemplifies the case of aid discontinuation, where pro-

opposition donors have interpreted the severity of humanitarian needs as

convenient and displaced the idea of rigorously weighing up evidence for fair

and impartial judgement. East Ghouta, located in Rural Damascus

governorate, used to be controlled by opposition groups. It had been

besieged by the government forces between 2013 and 2018, where

humanitarian aid was almost cut off. There were reports of severe acute

malnutrition and lack of water (OHCHR, 2018). When the siege was lifted,

many were found in acute need of humanitarian assistance. Right after the

Government recaptured East Ghouta, pro-opposition donors decided to

discontinue the allocation of funding to this area. That is, politics trumped an

evidence base and even humanitarian imperatives. Participants from aid

agencies are very frustrated with the donor attitude:

The difficulty with donors is that they're quite happy to pay for all of that in non-government areas. We found this with East Ghouta. But, once people crossed from East Ghouta into Adra [controlled by the Government], money was f------ stopped from some donors. [They are] the same people, same communities. …. Donors put lots and lots of pressure, keep putting the money [to support the besieged areas]. But when people changed to the other locations [controlled by the Government], not all donors but some [stopped funding]. (NGO-06)

There was a constant pressure [from donors and media] that you're not doing enough [for opposition areas]. … Then people started coming out of East Ghouta. [Nevertheless,] it was a struggle to get donors to look at the people. The donors said, 'Okay, now people are under government control areas' as if they were no longer people in need. … However, these people are more vulnerable at this point, because they have nothing to fall back on. … For us, it makes sense [to support those evacuated], but for the donors, it doesn't make sense, because they're now under the Government of Syria. (UN-12)

The phenomenon of aid discontinuation was shocking to many of the interviewed aid practitioners. Other participants also critiqued pro-opposition donors for their political judgement and aid policy.

This is where it's silly of the donors. When more radical opposition groups started taking over Idleb governorate, these donors basically held the population accountable to that. They said, 'Well, we're not going to provide [aid] in those areas, because we don't like those who are in control'. Populations in humanitarian need are not responsible for the Government or armed groups that hold over them. (UN-13)

Donors are politicising children's access to education. Unfortunately, children weren't allowed to have access to formal education under armed groups, or maybe their access was prevented due to conflict. They couldn't sit accredited exams. Then these children are now in government-controlled areas and the donors say, 'We don't want our money to be used for them'. These children are just in the middle of different political factions. (UN-04).

What is noticeable from these testimonies is that major donor governments appear to have justified the educational exclusion of children in government areas by placing the responsibility on crisis-affected people themselves. In other words, Syrian children's learning opportunities and educational future largely depend on which parties politically and geographically control them. This represents the political dimension of education aid to Syria. The case of East Ghouta proves that pro-opposition donors employ an area-based approach to resource allocation, rather than a needs-based approach. The politically motivated donors tend to explicitly use empirical evidence – i.e. severity scales and rankings – only when they would like to substantiate their position and make assistance to opposition areas seem technically legitimate. However, when their political desires clash with the empirical data, the former can prevail over the latter. One participant described the political nature of humanitarian aid in Syria as 'bad faith from all sides' (UN-03). Another expressed her frustration in harsh terms:

> All aid is political. It's the tale of a foreign policy. Syria is where you see the dirtiest actions of that. The Gulf is a fabulous example and even the West. … Everybody is playing a dirty game and the victims are the Syrians. (UN-13)

The case of East Ghouta demonstrates how the political values of the donor group are at play behind aid practice decisions. The discontinuation of aid by pro-opposition donors affirms that discourses (values) could outweigh evidence (facts). Even though empirical data demonstrate that humanitarian needs are so acute in the government-retaken areas, such as East Ghouta, East Aleppo and many other locations, the donors have discontinued resource allocation there. Pro-opposition donors label people as the

vulnerable who deserve assistance only if they live in opposition areas.
However, we cannot accuse the Government and the donors alone. Aid
agencies are also complicit in the politics of aid exclusion in Syria.

7.3. Aid Agencies: Selective Use and Non-Use of Evidence

7.3.1. Cherry picking convenient evidence

Many of the interviewed aid practitioners re-stressed the importance of
evidence use for impartial planning and decision making.

> Usually we have limited funds. We're talking about 6.1 million school
> age children in need of education assistance, but we cannot reach all
> the children. So we need a needs-based evidence approach in order
> to see how we properly use money we have, and make sure that
> we're reaching the most vulnerable children. (UN-09)

> [The evidence base] is always something that we should work
> towards. No matter what it is, it's not like we should just throw it away
> and go – 'Oh, it's skewed so leave it'. I think that what it becomes is a
> responsibility for us to show the Government, for example, how using
> data in a good way can tell a story that can change the perceptions of
> those who currently see things differently. (NGO-06)

However, the use of empirical evidence is not straightforward in international
aid, let alone humanitarian assistance in conflict contexts. Like the
Government and the donor group, aid agencies also covertly engage in the
politicisation of evidence. The UN and NGOs tend to select particular data
and information convenient for their aid operations and resource
mobilisation. The UN colleagues admitted that the selective use of particular
data is happening in professional aid in Syria.

> We know that we pick and choose numbers based on our interests. (UN-10)

> Everything could be politicised. Evidence is politicised. … The problem is picking and choosing what evidence to show. The problem is concentrating on one number and completely ignoring other numbers. (UN-03)

> You have to go through a process of clearance through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [in government-controlled areas]. … There's somebody who actually holds the keys to your money and to your overall existence. … Data is used on both sides, because you also have the [contradicting] data that's being used in the north-west [controlled by opposition groups]. And you know what kind of data is being used and what kind of data is not being used. (UN12)

Similarly, another respondent shared her experience in which her

organisation was looking for specific information as per its pre-determined

advocacy message related to the Syrian crisis.

> Save the Children needed a data point to make an argument that they had. … I was told by our advocacy team that they were going to be producing an advocacy report on how poor the state of well-being for children was in Syria. … They were basically saying, 'Go find data to back up an argument' rather than collecting and using data to inform an argument. (NGO-05)

That is, evidence is being used to promote preconceived values and beliefs.

> Whether it's authorities or lobby groups that try to skew the data available, it happens a lot in a political decision-making process. Certain parties have a preconceived idea of what they want to achieve, and data is being used to argue that indeed their suggestions are the best. (UN-01)

The post demonstration of reasoning for the pre-determined policy is associated with policy-based evidence. It is clear that aid agencies engage in the strategic evidence use, where they cherry pick convenient data in order to promulgate their position and argument.

When it comes to the selective use of evidence, it is equally important to attend to the selective non-use of inconvenient data. Aid stakeholders tend to deliberately withhold inconvenient information in order to protect their institutional position and reputation. Participants from aid agencies critically reflected on their own practice, drawing on a case of the MOE-UNICEF annual exam support initiative in Syria. This national initiative aims to increase equitable access to the national school exams for the ninth and twelfth graders who live in high-severity opposition-held areas, such as Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and rural Aleppo. In Syria, there are multiple education certifications existing amongst different authorities (Integrity, 2019). As noted earlier, any forms of education provided outside government areas are neither accredited nor certified by the Government of Syria. Children living in opposition areas and willing to obtain the official certificates have to travel to government areas for the MOE-administered exams. UNICEF and its partners, with support from the Western donors, have facilitated children's safe travel to/from government areas in coordination with the local security department and provided them with learning materials, bursaries to cover the cost of transportation, remedial classes for exam preparation, and accommodations (UNICEF, 2019).

In 2019, UNICEF and its partners succeeded in facilitating the safe journey of around 20,000 children crossing the conflict lines from opposition

areas to government areas to sit for the exams every year (UNICEF, 2019).

However, informants claimed that aid agencies tend to selectively present

only positive results for advocacy and fund raising, and deliberately do not

disclose inconvenient information or things they have failed to accomplish.

> You achieved many with this, but how many you did not reach? …
> Children were brought [to government areas], but there were some
> children who got detained. They got separated. … That happened, but
> again we don't talk about it. Too sensitive and we keep a lid on that.
> … We just do a very self-service, things that we want to do, which
> looks glossy on the reports. … We have to become more accountable.
> … Where we do not look at our failures, then we don't learn and that's
> why we're in a perpetual cycle. (NGO-04)

> If we talked about how many children [in opposition areas] came out
> to sit the national exams, we counted it and we said, 'These many
> children over the years have come out to sit the national exams'. But
> we don't mention ever the children that didn't come out, and the
> children that still have no formal certificate. Then it's a manipulation.
> We are not painting the [entire] picture. (UN-04)

> We supported children to do these exams, but we also had cases of
> detention and children that did not come back. Did we put on the table
> all the risks? We should continue the initiative, but what are the
> safeguards and the risk mitigations that we take? We usually transfer
> this risk to our partners. … How much have we reflected? I don't think
> we have. That's a shame. What are we doing for those who cannot
> cross [the lines for exams]? We're stuck. (UN-08)

These self-critical statements reveal that, whilst aid agencies achieve

improvement in education access for vulnerable children, their work also

entails a dimension of 'self-service' (NGO-04) to secure their financial

resources and manage organisational reputation risks.

7.3.2. Outcome: Excluding the unobservable

Aid practitioners are often under mounting pressure to demonstrate auditable achievements to donors and taxpayers. Therefore, they come to be preoccupied with observable and measurable results, excluding the 'unobservable' vulnerable groups of children. The exam support initiative exemplifies the exclusion of the most vulnerable. The initiative has a blind spot. The thing is that, only when children make it to travel and reach government areas, aid agencies are able to keep record of the headcount, allocate resources and cater for them with provision of educational services during the exam period. Only those who succeeded in travelling to government areas become observable to aid agencies, so that they can be transformed as target groups entitled for learning services and supplies. In contrast, many more vulnerable children who could not make it to come out from opposition areas, who could not afford the cost of transportation and who got captured and detained for conscription and security reasons on the way, tend to remain unseen and non-documented by aid agencies. These children are the most vulnerable, but they are filtered out from the initiative.

> Are we delivering [exam assistance] for the most vulnerable and the most needy? … I don't know. (UN-21)

> You talk about reaching X number of children, but are they children who we were supposed to reach? Are they the ones who're actually in areas that are most in need, or are they children who are the easiest to reach? Are they the children who we are allowed to reach? … Who are the kids that we have not been able to reach? (UN-12)

These remarks suggest that empirical data do not necessarily depict the entire reality of children in greatest need and that humanitarian interventions do not always address their needs. Furthermore, aid agencies often proudly document and publish the success stories with tangible and measurable results, but they do not always reflect on the unobservable and unmeasurable. A participant shared her reflective thought:

> All we do is we talk about our success. We are manipulating data to say how great we are. … [Children in opposition areas] want to have accredited formal education. They are taking this journey [to government areas to take exams], a dangerous one sometimes. … But we don't show anything about all the other children that didn't get in, why they couldn't come out, their parents didn't want them to come out, they couldn't afford to take the journey, maybe they have to pay bribes. … We got information saying that armed groups stopped the children at the checkpoint. [But we never addressed them.] (UN-04)

What appears in observable and measurable data has been well reported by aid agencies and appreciated by the donor group. This is a dimension of the current aid system in Syria. Under the system, the unseen but substantial facts that many more children were not able to make it to the exams and some faced protection issues on the way (i.e. detention), remain unspoken and rarely reflected upon. Consequently, those most in need who are not observed by aid agencies could remain invisible, unexamined and even excluded again and again in the following years. Some participants reflected on their aid practice and pointed to the importance of critical reflection:

> Our success is based on numbers. The UN system is all about numbers at all levels of the system – the money, the reach, the donor reporting, all of these things. It's the whole architecture. … It's really crude and really superficial. (UN-04)

> My concern is the things that we don't see and the things that we don't touch. Also remember that people have been in a worst situation for like eight years. ... You even become desensitised to certain issues, and that's quite dangerous. (UN-12)

> We might not be targeting right [category of] children. Unless you do that kind of reflection or a more in-depth evaluation, the natural tendency of most people would just be to continue business as usual. … People should always also be open to accept that certain things that might be difficult to accept. Critical self-reflection based on evidence … can make people realise that what next time we really need to focus more on … and what we can do better. (UN-01)

These accounts demonstrate that it is critical for aid professionals to reflect on not only measurable achievements (presence) but also the things that they do not observe and the actions that they do not take (absence), as explained in Chapter 4. Reflexivity on both presence and absence would help them to avoid Bhaskar's account of ontological monovalence and to rethink about how better actions could be taken next. Without reflexivity, professionals may operate in a business-as-usual mode and sustain the status quo, failing to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

7.4.   Discussion: Theoretical Reflection and Lessons Learned

This chapter has focused on the domain of the actual, investigating the politicisation of evidence by different actors. It has also examined the outcomes of exclusionary humanitarian and education aid. The analysis offers insights and lessons in relation to evidence generation and use in conflict contexts. This section reflects on the findings, drawing on selected concepts – i.e. post-truth, political technology and ontological monovalence.

7.4.1. Evidence fabrication and post-truth

'Feelings' displacing 'reasons'

The phenomenon of evidence fabrication does not merely distort data-driven humanitarian planning and education interventions in conflict settings, but it also has a risk of perpetuating the conflict per se. Data fabrication is bound up in an account of post-truth. Evidence, in forms of statistics and numbers, is susceptible to people's desires and emotions. That is, feelings can be elevated over reasons in the process of decision making (Kakutani, 2018; Mcintyre, 2018). One participant pointed out that the idea of an evidence base is integral to professional ethics, but she also stressed that it could be biased in conflict settings and that, therefore, the authenticity of information would become compromised.

> One of the biggest challenges that we struggle with [in Syria] is informant bias. [It is not straightforward] to get authentic information out of our informants [who engage in the NGO-led needs assessment and research]. (NGO-05)

In a similar vein, another participant problematised the way in which the evidence base is increasingly prone to one's feelings in the aid context.

> The way decisions are being made is more on an instinct basis. It seems that decisions are much more influenced by what people just think is true or what they think is important, rather than looking at all the evidence available, looking at different options and then going with what's the most sensible option in terms of interventions or support. That is very unfortunate. (UN-01)

The post-truth politics is not only deployed by someone in a certain authority. 'Everybody has their own motives' to initiate it (UN-12).

Lack of a shared meaning of reality

Why does data fabrication or post-truth matter in conflict? Reflecting on the

interview data, I suggest that evidence fabrication and emotionally driven aid

practice could maintain conflict. Several participants maintained that any

stakeholders in conflict contexts could invent or mould evidence to ensure

that the data and information reflect their own beliefs and visions.

> People believe what they believe to be true and they find the
> information they want to legitimise their point. … Each party to the
> conflict is trying to illustrate a vision and they will use data to illustrate
> that in a context where there's no wide freedom. … They want data
> that reflect certain things [they believe], which is why there's always
> negotiation. (UN-13)

> Whatever data people have in hand, it can be used for any purpose to
> drive their own agenda. Either the Government or non-government
> entities in a country can start piggybacking on that. (UN-21)

These accounts suggest that the contesting parties in conflict tend to reflect

their own values and emotions in empirical evidence, so that they can

discredit rival claims and advance their political interests. However, where

people negotiate and manufacture data as convenient, they cannot build

mutual understandings of what is and is not real. That is, when feelings

prevail over evidence in decision making, they replace the real or truth. The

post-truth politics allows the competing parties to interpret reality based on

what they believe is happening there. As a result, a myriad of contradicting

realities could be constructed by different actors, as confronted by the UN in

the case of Daraya. In other words, the contesting groups live in windowless

ideological siloes and only operate with their own facts (Kakutani, 2018).

The danger of being locked in these siloed communities is that they blind themselves of what the real is. A Damascus-based respondent warned that human emotions can make people ignorant about what is not empirically observable and measurable. It is therefore crucial to be mindful of such a risk of their internalisation of partial or false reality as the whole truth in the process of priority setting and beneficiary selection.

> My biggest fear is that we select village A, but we don't select village B. Why didn't we select village B? In Damascus, I might not even know that village B exists or there are needs there. … This kind of bias comes from inherent human emotions or just being. It's one of the most dangerous things for us in the coming phase. There's a need to truly address it and to be very aware of it. (UN-12)

When people stay in their windowless partisan silos, the boundaries between what they believe to be true and how things really are on the ground come to be overlapping and blurry (Kakutani, 2018). In Syria, this could lead the contesting parties and aid professionals to the lack of a shared meaning of reality. It prevents mutual understandings, amplifies social divisions and ultimately perpetuates the conflict. It is thus crucial to acknowledge that, in Syria, access control and data fabrication by the Government do not simply work to divert humanitarian aid to its own controlled areas, but they also have far-reaching implications for the sustained conflict and polarisation.

7.4.2. Political technology: Disguising value judgements as neutral

The donor group has employed severity measures as a means of justifying their judgement of resource allocation. Basing decisions on such data

analytics and metrics is ostensibly rational, yet the interviews found out that the methodology of measuring severity is also politically adjusted by pro-opposition donors in ways that favour assistance to opposition areas. This is associated with the politicisation of evidence and is relevant to Foucault's account of power/knowledge. That is, particular value judgements can creep into the methodological process of severity measurement and interpretation, and ultimately shape the outcomes of aid policy and practice decisions. As Alonso and Starr (1987, p.3) put it, 'political judgements are implicit in the choice of what to measure, how to measure it, how often to measure it, and how to present and interpret the results'. At the level of the actual, the line between facts and values becomes fuzzy in the evidence use process.

When it comes to the use of severity measurement by the donor group, it is also crucial to attend to the rhetoric of objectivity implicit in numerical data. Measurement and quantification can mask the underlying ideological values of pro-opposition donors and even disguise them as natural, which is called political technology in the Foucauldian term. Through the political technology, pro-opposition donors' values could be camouflaged with numerical data and seen as 'more real' (UN-10). Therefore, in political conflict, it is vital for aid professionals to not only identify what may work for whom but also critically question the existing data analytics and examine the dimension of political technology that may run deep in the methodology. Some participants pointed out that, when interpreting empirical evidence, data literacy is crucial to clarify how those numbers are calculated and what methodological assumptions are inscribed.

> People just believe data or statistics as a given, but that's wrong. …
> You have to be properly able to identify the key parameters of the
> creation of data, the importance of data, and the margin of errors.
> Data literacy is quite important to use data. You don't want data to
> drive you. You use data to make decisions. (UN-02)

> It's not necessarily the bad intent of others to make some estimates
> and calculations, but it needs to be very clear as to how they arrive at
> such figures, based on which assumptions, and based on which data.
> (UN-01)

These comments suggest that it may not be sufficient to discover what aid
interventions work for whom under what contexts in Syria. The data literacy
and methodological ability to critically question existing data and evidence is
also paramount in Syria, given that politically biased data interpretation is
intensified in an ideologically divided conflict-affected context.

7.4.3. Selective use/non-use and ontological monovalence

Ontological monovalence

Aid agencies often choose what information to disclose and withhold as
convenient when making policy and programme decisions. Drawing on the
exam support initiative, I have illustrated that UNICEF and its partners
document and showcase observable achievements to the donors for
advocacy and fund raising. They pick up demonstrable evidence and present
it as if it reflects the whole reality of Syrian children who courageously
passed through countless checkpoints and managed to reach the exam
centres. However, inconvenient information on those who have failed to
come out of opposition areas and who are detained in crossing the line of

conflict, has rarely been documented and known. Aid practitioners focus on what is observable and pay scant attention to the reality of those unobservable. Bhaskar refers to this as ontological monovalence.

Reflecting on ontological monovalence, a participant admitted that people in the UN system are under pressure of managerial accountability and have habitual patterns to gather only observable and measurable evidence and to ignore the unobservable and unmeasurable.

> We're always talking about people we reach, but what about the ones we don't reach? … I think it's a flawed system, because our data gathering is based on our intervention. We will say to our implementing partners, 'Give us the numbers of who you assisted and where, what, where, when and how'. We then look at our budget, and we say we have ten million dollars and we spent this money and it benefited ten thousand beneficiaries. Our system is about money, donors, what we spent, how and where. … The system is only designed to highlight what we did. It wouldn't pick up information that we didn't do. (UN-04)

This reflection suggests that aid practitioners are often driven by the regime of empirical realism and managerial accountability. They are expected to demonstrate auditable results and financial accountability – i.e. how much money is spent for what impact. Auditing drives them to focus on tangible success, disregard the unmeasurable and shy away from reflecting on their inactions. From a critical realist perspective, the key lesson learned is for professionals to pay heed to non-being as well as being.

Chapter 8. Analysis of the Real:

Discourses as Generative Mechanisms

This chapter examines what is termed the domain of the real in the critical realist framework. It explains what mechanisms cause the politicisation of evidence and the associated educational exclusion by unpacking discourses deployed by stakeholders in humanitarian aid planning and practice in Syria.

8.1.   The Real: The Discourses of the Government of Syria

This section unpacks what deeper discourses the Government of Syria deploys at the level of the real associated with generative mechanisms. The interviews revealed that the government officials implicitly demonstrated two discourses related to causal mechanisms. One is a discourse associated with government willingness to rebuild its legitimacy, and the other is a discourse associated with a sense of hostility by the Government against opposition groups. These discourses are not directly articulated and thus may be termed invisible, but they become perceivable in close analysis of government strategic thinking and behaviour in aid planning and beneficiary selection. Investigating the unseen real is crucial to grasp why the Government has politicised evidence in educational aid planning.

8.1.1. Political discourse: Rebuilding the legitimacy

Since retaking a considerable portion of the territories, the Government of Syria currently reinforces its legitimate authority by painting the picture of stability in the government-controlled areas (Brown, 2018). A pro-opposition donor participant provided his observation of the government willingness to rebuild the image of a capable administration, saying that 'the regime wants to give an impression of normalisation' (Donor-03). In education, other participants pointed out that the Government strives to strengthen its state-centric legitimacy by showing that education systems are functioning.

> The Government says that many children are in school. They're returning to government-controlled areas. It's to sell a success. We see it with suspicion, though. (Donor-01)

> You want to show a level of success. You don't want to say all the kids in schools are failing, because it makes you look bad as an administration. … You're trying to show your legitimacy as an authority. (UN-13)

In order for the state to display stability and normalisation, the government officials including those working for MOE appear to have been willing to present their good image to the public. Several informants who directly worked with the government officials and observed their political aspiration in Damascus, mentioned that:

> [The government officials] dispute every number merely on the basis that this doesn't look good. … That's not a scientific argument or even a logical argument. … They don't want their country to be jeopardised in any possible way through any of these aid documents. (UN-03)

> For the Ministry of Education, they are hesitant to publish the estimate of 2.1 million out-of-school children, because they feel like it doesn't give a good image of the country. (UN-09)

Further, the UN colleague who closely worked with the government officials for humanitarian planning, elaborated how the officials make humanitarian decisions from political and military viewpoints:

> Our interlocutors in MOFA are bureaucrats that are reading all decisions strategically in a way that's making a political gain or a political loss. The security is always in the background. They don't look at the document only from a humanitarian perspective. They look at the possible military interventions in the future. (UN-03)

These accounts suggest that the government officials are willing to portray their administration as a legitimate state capable of governing the whole country. They have a motive to use humanitarian data as political instrument to enhance their legitimacy. I frame the underlying motive as a political form of government discourse that structures their thinking and behaviour.

The political discourse is manifested as power/knowledge in the domain of the actual. The government aspiration to present themselves as legitimate and capable reflects the current aid architecture of Syria. The MOFA and line ministries seek to reinforce their legitimacy by making Damascus-based aid agencies abide by the state rules and procedures. Aid agencies require the government permission on any operations and data collection being carried out on its territory. The Government would like to regulate what information aid agencies are gathering. The legitimacy of the authoritarian state allows the government officials to exert influence on what aid practitioners know and do not know as evidence. Any findings of situation analysis and needs

assessments that do not accord with the government discourse would neither be published nor kept in circulation:

> In Damascus, the Government is not allowing you to release things that are not in favour of them. (UN-14)

> We use the data to make a point, but is the data accurate in Syria? Most of the data is being negotiated with the Government. (UN-12)

In so doing, the Government can publicly show that the country is under its control and that it is a legitimate capable state in Syria. Arguably, this is one of the causal mechanisms that generates the politicisation of evidence by the Government. The government discourse to reinforce the legitimacy creeps into the process of data production and use. Indeed, it was at play behind the aforementioned cases of EMIS inflation and the government rejection of publishing the estimate of 2.1 million out-of-school children (see Section 1.1). This suggests that numbers and statistics are tied up with legitimacy:

> The more population you have, the more you win in convincing and providing securities for the population. Someone could argue that the opposition would have more legitimacy if they had more populations under their control, and similarly to the Government. This brought a lot of controversy in terms of the population estimate in the North [controlled by the opposition]. (UN-03)

This formula is also relevant to the education sector. The higher enrolment rate of children in school the Government presents, the better it can display that it has a functioning education system under its control. As such, the Government tries to reinforce its legitimacy by fabricating the statistics.

8.1.2. Emotional discourse: Hostility against the opposition

The interviews revealed that the emotions of government officials and their allies – i.e. hostility against the opposition – could to some extent shape the Government's thinking and approach to humanitarian assistance.

> The severity of insecurity depends on whether the government militants are bombarding the place or not ... There are cases where the militants are hostile to the population [in opposition-held areas]. (UN-05)

> The government rhetoric is always like, 'this assistance [to opposition areas] is used by terrorists'. ... This is how the Government and the Russians criticise one party to the conflict. [Both government and opposition areas have] a large intensity of needs, so it makes sense to have all these needs on the agenda, but they turn a purely humanitarian discussion into a politicised discussion. … [When we proposed] to have an assessment in Ghouta [previously controlled by the opposition], they said, 'No, they are terrorists'. (UN-03)

Labelling people in opposition areas as 'terrorists' is a manifestation of the government hostility against opposition groups. The labelling per se helps the Government to be juxtaposed with the terrorists and re-branded as the legitimate state. The political and emotional discourses reinforce each other.

The underlying emotions are unseeable but influential over beneficiary selection. An INGO participant expressed how difficult it was to work in partnership with a local institute called the Syria Trust, founded by Syria's first lady, that has hostility against opposition groups. For surveillance and censorship of NGO activities, the Government requires all INGOs to operate under the umbrella of the government-backed institutes like the Syria Trust.

> We have the pressure constantly by the Syria Trust on where they feel
> we should be. … The Trust is so pro-regime. They don't even want to
> see those who are potentially opposition and now coming [from
> opposition areas]. The Trust is making a very political decision about
> where they help and where they don't help. … They'd quite happily
> steer us to certain population groups but not to others. (NGO-01)

Clearly, some of the Assad loyalist government officials and their affiliates
have hostility against opposition groups and even civilians in opposition-held
areas. The emotional discourse informs decisions as to who should and
should not get helped with humanitarian assistance. Where such emotions
prevail, humanitarian neutrality and impartiality can come under assault. The
case of Daraya, explored in Section 7.1.2, exemplifies the deployment of
political and emotional discourses against opposition groups. These
discourses could drive the Government into the fabrication of population
figures in Daraya, where the number of populations in need was
underestimated. The politically motivated figures, claimed as true by the
Government, were intended to make assistance to those seen as hostile in
Daraya seem less urgent. The politicisation of evidence can keep people in
opposition areas out of the equation of humanitarian aid. These discourses
operate as generative mechanisms that drive the Government to politicise
the evidence base in favour of aid flows towards its own territories.

8.2. The Real: The Discourses of Pro-Opposition Donors

The interviews suggested that Western pro-opposition donors, when
engaging in humanitarian and stabilisation assistance, have mainly two
discourses – political and managerial ones. I explain how these discourses

govern their strategic thinking and behaviour and how these influence the application of severity measurement for beneficiary selection and resource allocation. Noteworthy, I do not deny other possible discourses deployed by pro-opposition donors. For instance, their deeper emotional forces, such as distrust and hostility against the Government of Syria, might play out underneath the foreign policies and financial allocation decisions. However, my interview data reveal that the political and managerial elements of donor governments explicitly stand out as part of structural causes for their politically motivated interpretation of humanitarian needs and the associated educational exclusion. Therefore, this research focuses on the political and managerial dimensions of donor discourse in the real domain.

8.2.1. Political discourse: Regime change and sanctions

Denial of the Syrian government legitimacy

The major Western donor governments, sympathetic towards opposition groups, explicitly deny the state legitimacy of the Government of Syria. The EU has consistently affirmed that 'the EU will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition, in the framework of UNSCR 2254 and the Geneva process, is firmly under way' (EU, 2019, p.1). The EU remains committed to this stance as of April 2020. Pro-opposition donors have responded to the Syrian crisis through stabilisation assistance for post-Assad Syria. For these donors, political discourse goes mainstream, and adherence to humanitarian principles may be secondary. A donor participant admitted the political

position. He said that his institution views the Assad government as 'the root cause of the conflict', seeking a political transition (Donor-03):

> The approach that we've followed so far … is dealing with rights protection [of the Syrian people] with all the condition that could preserve the prospect of a political transition. Accountability, transitional justice … are the areas in which we are most active. … [We] basically provide some rules and legitimacy on the ground for the representation structure of the Syrian opposition. (Donor-03)

Similarly, the UN participants responsible for cross-border operations from Gaziantep (Turkey) and Amman (Jordan) confirmed that the pro-opposition donors carry their political and diplomatic agenda in the hope that opposition groups prevail, including the Syrian interim government:

> Donor governments like the Brits and the Americans who are supporting the education directorates [in opposition areas], want the moderate opposition to succeed. The narrative is that the schools [in those areas] are functioning, that the [interim] Ministry is doing their job, that children are passing their exams. … [Opposition groups] want to show themselves as a functioning [interim] government, just as Damascus government wants to show they're functioning. (UN-13)

> You have Russia that supports the Syrian government – Russia, Iran, Lebanon and Hezbollah. But you also have the West – UK, U.S., France, Germany who are supporting the opposition areas. They have a political agenda. They want to overthrow the Government in Damascus by supporting military in the opposition. They have the stabilisation agenda by building the capacity of local structures in opposition areas. (UN-08)

This Western discourse around political motives permeates the methodology of severity measures, diverting assistance to opposition areas. In this way, the unseen real discourse surges at the actual level and implicitly causes the politicisation of evidence. In education, the effect of the donor discourse that

favours opposition groups is evident. Pro-opposition donors have supported

the payment of teacher salaries in opposition areas as 'a political weapon':

> Education has one of the highest public employers – teachers. The
> donors want to ensure that teachers who are getting paid [through
> stabilisation assistance] do not get support from Damascus [the
> Government], so that their loyalties will shift towards the opposition.
> The donors … can tell the teachers, 'You can survive without
> Damascus, you don't need it'. That's a way to influence their political
> thinking. (NGO-04)

> Teacher salaries are always utilised as a political weapon. If you're
> supporting the other side of the war [the Government], you don't get a
> salary. If you're a teacher and continue to teach under the control of
> an opposition group, then the Government in Damascus will stop
> giving you a salary [but the pro-opposition donors can pay]. This is
> using the resources as a political weapon for teachers. (UN-14)

These accounts made it clearer that pro-opposition donors, when engaging

in humanitarian and stabilisation assistance in Syria, deploy their political

discourse – i.e. the desire for the departure of Assad. The pre-existing donor

discourse permeates education planning. What matters is that such a donor

discourse favouring opposition groups covertly shapes and adjusts severity

rankings, thereby placing greater weight on assistance to opposition groups.

Discourse forms what severity measures tell as evidence. The political

nature is even masked with a sense of objectivity implicit in data analytics.

This embodies an account of political technology.

 Let me look deeper into the political donor discourse and its implication

for undermining humanitarian impartiality. The fact that the Western pro-

opposition donors promote foreign policies in favour of moderate opposition

groups, does not necessarily mean that their aid strategies and priorities are

rightful approaches to supporting the most vulnerable people in Syria. I argue that their political discourse to support vulnerable people in opposition areas is made possible by excluding alternative ways of knowing about vulnerable 'others' in government-controlled areas. That is, pro-opposition donors' stabilisation assistance is a political act of exclusion. I do not suggest that humanitarian needs in opposition-held areas are very minimal; rather, there is little recognition that equally vulnerable people in government-controlled areas tend to be marginalised by the politically motivated aid policies of the Western donors. This runs counter to the evidence base and humanitarian impartiality and neutrality.

Economic sanctions and implications

The political donor discourse is also manifested in support for the economic sanctions. The enforcement of the sanctions come with strict funding conditionality imposed on the Government of Syria and aid agencies. These restrictive measures have implications for education practice in Syria. From the donor perspective, it is important to closely monitor and control the flow of their aid funding and ensure that the Government has no benefit from it.

> [The sanctions] are actually quite effective and they are really limiting the capabilities of the Government of Syria to engage the private sector in the reconstruction, which is exactly what we want. This is not because we don't want the reconstruction of Syria, but because we believe that, under the current political situation, social and economic equality and reconstruction would just worsen the situation that leads to the conflict. (Donor-03)

The participant believes that the sanctions are necessary to marginalise the

Assad administration and pursue genuine reconstruction in Syria. However,

several participants from aid agencies expressed serious concerns about the

side effects from the sanctions. Aid agencies suffer from the conditionality

imposed on the UN. The UN is not allowed to spend the funding for formal

education system, and the money is to be spent only for opposition areas.

> We're driven by humanitarian imperatives for ensuring that we reach children, regardless of who their parents are and which locations they are in et cetera. [However], the donors invest resources in the activities that do not involve the Government. … We actually do require the funds, such as capacity building of teachers, strengthening access to formal education or anything that has to do with formal education, but we can't use the funds. (UN-12)

> Donors want to support Idleb [controlled by the opposition]. … They said they have red lines, not wanting to engage with anything related to the Bashar regime. (UN-20)

> It's very difficult to target vulnerable groups as they are mostly in opposition terrorist-held areas. At the same time, there are many other areas [controlled by the Government] that need to be attended to. However, it's impossible to separate those who are in opposition-held and those in government-controlled areas, because there is such a fluidity of movement. That's not how education should function. It's a right for all, regardless of where they are. (UN-06)

These remarks not only indicate the challenges aid agencies confront but

also raise an important question as to how pro-opposition donors strike a

balance between political discourse and empirical evidence. The above

testimonies suggest that politically motivated donors often elevate political

interests over the value of an evidence base in conflict contexts. Their

assistance to opposition-held areas is not necessarily based on the findings

of empirical research and assessment; rather, it is bound up in political interests. The political donor discourse comes to the fore and outweighs the evidence base available with regard to education aid to Syria.

8.2.2. Managerial discourse: Aid accountability to taxpayers

The donor group is also preoccupied with managerial accountability to stakeholders in their home countries, such as members of the parliament in capital cities, auditors and taxpayers. The demands for cost effectiveness in humanitarian financing have risen (Obrecht, 2017). The donor diplomats are under increasing pressure to account for how much money is spent for what and where in Syria. Against this backdrop, pro-opposition donors seem to have had fear of their funding being diverted to the Assad administration and radical opposition groups including IS and HTS. Therefore, these diplomats are conscious about the political responsibility to keep distance from them.

> We don't want to be seen as sort of subsidising the service that the state should be providing. (Donor-03)

Pro-opposition donors would not like to spend taxpayers' money to reconstruct the education services and schools the Government and its allies have destroyed. I frame the accountability motive as a managerial donor discourse. Some UN respondents are sympathetic towards the discourse and consider it understandable.

> Russia flattened some things [i.e. schools]. Now why should the UK and the U.S. come and pay for it to be rebuilt? If this money is going to be used for the reconstruction of buildings, then another money in the [Syrian] government hands is being used for something else, like

war. I understand all of that, but it doesn't take away from the fact that the needs of people are still there. … I also really feel like, the donors have the right to say how their money is going to be used. (UN-04)

[Donors] are very concerned that they could be indirectly seen as supporting the Government through supporting UNICEF, which we constantly explain that we are neutral. We don't support the Government. … We work with the technical directorates. … Donors don't want to be associated in any form with the regime. … The Syrian government has been on the winning side for a while. There's been a lot more reserve from donors in terms of their fears, their worries, their concerns – 'Why would we go in and reconstruct the place the Syrian government has already destructed?' (UN-12)

The donor group is sensitive about what parties are being supported by their taxpayers' money. They are also concerned with potential fraud and corruption, where money is siphoned to wrong stakeholders. They would like to support only moderate opposition groups in north-western and north-eastern Syria. A donor participant affirmed that education aid used to entail capacity development for opposition local councils in view of post-Assad Syria, but it was taken out of the programme as HTS prevails over the opposition areas in the north-west.

The overall objectives of our projects are improving access to education, quality education and retainment [in the opposition areas of north-west]. There used to be components of supporting local councils and education directorates in order to enable them to do some capacity building and empower them as an opposition authority. [However,] HTS has taken over more control in the north-west. … Then the projects have removed such components. (Donor-04)

Similarly, other respondents point out that the donors are shifting the funding from non-state armed groups to NGOs in order to avoid possible fund diversion in the opposition-held Idleb governorate in the north-west.

When HTS became stronger in Idleb, the German government completely put that out of project. … When we talk about HTS, donors don't want to work in areas where HTS rules, because of the fear of diversion of funds, which is indicated by a lot of donors. (UN-12)

In Idleb, a couple of years back, it was under the [moderate] opposition control, and the education directorates were being controlled by these non-state armed groups. One of the donors was heavily funding those education directorates. … The stabilisation donor politically wanted to strengthen that opposition group. … However, like this year [2018], … the new non-state armed groups [HTS] started controlling, so the donor pulled its whole support. … They are no longer supporting the Idleb directorate. … They are working through the humanitarian NGOs [in Idleb]. (NGO-04)

The interviews revealed that the donors, when making decisions about educational resource allocation, deployed political and managerial discourses. Rather than determining financial allocation based on evidence and impartiality, they are set to place greater value on delivering managerial accountability to taxpayers. They try to avoid any public perceptions of subsidising the Government of Syria and to manage the potential risks of aid diversion in line with the counter-terrorism policy of donor governments.

Noteworthy, given the prevalence of the Syrian government forces, the donor group is required to reassess the political landscape and reposition themselves in response to the Syrian crisis. One donor official expressed reservations about the headquarters' persistence in denying the legitimacy of the Government, given that it is increasingly difficult to continuously support the moderate opposition groups that are gradually being diminished.

> Transition can mean many things. It can be more open participation and processes. I don't think that anyone is expecting any more change in the regime departure Assad. … [The EU member states] reassess the situation, judging on the [Syrian] authority's willingness to engage in a political process. … The member states might change their interpretation of what they mean by political transition. … It would be really important to align the interpretation, because some might be more willing to engage with Damascus [the Government] sooner rather than later. But, being the absence of a political transition, there will not be more opening from our side. The political leaders [in the EU] probably have to swallow something, I mean, put pride aside. (Donor-03)

The donor group has political and managerial discourses when selecting target beneficiary groups and making allocation decisions. These underlying discourses steer their thinking and drive them to make sense of empirical evidence for their advantage. Whilst the Government seeks to advance its discourse to reinforce the state legitimacy, pro-opposition donors pursue the discourse to deny legitimacy to the Government. The clash of conflicting discourses manifests itself as the politicisation of evidence, where the Government fabricates data to divert aid flows to its own territories, and the donors politically adjust and interpret severity scales in favour of opposition areas. Next, I look into the discourses with regard to aid agencies.

8.3. The Real: Discourses of Aid Agencies

This section shows that UN agencies and NGOs, whilst committed to humanitarian principles, are also driven by political and managerial discourses to preserve their presence and mobilise resources in Syria. Like the case of donors, aid agencies may also deploy unseen emotional and other discourses when selecting and ignoring particular data for their

advantage. Indeed, several interviewed practitioners expressed a sense of anxiety, anger and frustration associated with their complicit engagement in the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion for some vulnerable groups of Syrian children. However, such an emotional aspect is also enmeshed with their political and managerial dimensions. Therefore, I will look at those inner struggles and emotions of interviewed aid practitioners, but focus attention on their political and managerial discourses at play in the real domain.

8.3.1. Political discourse: Willingness to be present in Syria

The interviews reveal that aid agencies place value on their organisational presence and continued operation in Syria. Securing their presence and humanitarian space requires them to maintain an amicable relationship with the Government and avoid any political fallout.

> The INGOs and UN want to ensure that they're able to work in government areas. … It's a business decision. They don't want to anger the Government. … Everyone sort of stays quiet because they want to maintain their presence [in the country]. (UN-13)

> We try not to have tension [with the Ministries and other government institutes] because tension is very dangerous for us. ... You want to avoid direct confrontation as much as possible. … They will shut us down if we do something that is very out of line. (NGO-02)

> In East Ghouta where people are malnourished, they are starving, they have no access to services and they are under siege, our access to them is purely dependent on the government approvals. That's how it happens. We can't speak out about these things. Our voices are

muted, because, if we speak out, we endanger our operations. We won't get visas, our [humanitarian] access will be blocked. (UN-04)

Aid agencies carry their institutional agenda and present themselves as humanitarians who are impartial and neutral to the political conflict, whilst having to deal with the naïve relations with the Government. In Damascus, they need to abide by the government procedures for access permission, face up to oppressed science, and avoid any defiance against the Government. This is where impartiality can be compromised. Given the asymmetrical relations with the authority, many of the Damascus-based aid practitioners feel implicitly subordinated to it. In other words, aid practitioners have to make trade-offs, where they ensure their presence in the country by following the rules of the ruler, but they are not necessarily able to reach the most vulnerable with humanitarian assistance.

> In Syria, we can't open our mouths. It doesn't mean you trust what the Government tells you. It means you need to question everything. We question how we go through the processes [i.e. access control and sanctions] being requested to us [by the Government and donors] and how we make them fit within our mandate. (UN-12)

> You're constantly deciding how much you should be prepared to risk in order to reach the most vulnerable, versus how much you should stay within a certain comfort zone. You're not to deliver the best kind of programming but at the same time you preserve your ability to implement programme. How much you push that depends on how much you're willing to risk. (NGO-02)

The political aspiration to secure organisational presence and avoid any fallout with the authority structures aid agencies' strategic thinking and behaviour. The political discourse may make aid agencies refrain from taking

a risk of publishing the facts and figures inconvenient to the authority. In the exam support initiative, for instance, UNICEF and its partners have never reflected with the authority on the meaning of plights faced by those children who are stuck in opposition areas and detained by the security forces on their journey to government areas. The discourse does not appear on the surface but runs deep as a driving force to frame what issues should be flagged as agenda.

8.3.2. Managerial discourse: Obscuring the unobservable

The interviews revealed that, like the donor group, aid agencies are also driven by a managerial discourse to deliver accountability to those who finance their aid operations. Under the circumstance, the UN and other aid agencies come to be responsible for cost-effective spending and managerial accountability. I frame this inner force as a managerial discourse of aid agencies. It is interwoven with that of the donor group. Pro-opposition donors have imposed funding conditionality on aid agencies as an audit trail of humanitarian financing, and increasingly scrutinised how much money is spent for what interventions, and where. Aid practitioners are thus under mounting pressure to spend millions of dollars within the limited timeframe and geographical earmarking, and showcase the tangible and auditable results to the donors and the general public for further fund raising.

> We are interested in resource mobilisation and just doing response. We're not critically questioning if we're targeting the right people or not, because we are also in a hurry to just get money and spend the money. … We are being driven by the resources. (NGO-04)

> Programme managers [have to] get some numbers to fit into their rhetoric, because of pressure where they have money. You're getting millions [of dollars] and you're working in an environment where you have to spend them. (UN-21)

The implication of a managerial discourse is that education practitioners become preoccupied with only observable and auditable evidence in order to demonstrate to the donors that they meet predetermined targets and milestones. The exam support initiative epitomises this case (see Section 7.3.1). Empirical data are presented as reflecting the whole reality of conflict-affected children in need of exam assistance. However, practitioners tend to obscure the existence of unobservable vulnerable children, leaving them excluded from aid. It is crucial to pay more attention to those unobservable.

8.4. A Critical Realist Approach to Reality and Evidence

8.4.1. Discourses behind the 'what works' agenda

I have examined data-driven education planning and practice in Syria at the level of the real, unpacking what forms of discourse are deployed by stakeholders beneath the surface of the evidence base. This reveals that the 'what works' agenda, underpinned by seemingly objective data analytics, is not simply a rational enterprise; rather, it is negotiated in the constellation of institutional values, hostilities and financial accountability. That is, evidence is filtered through the prisms of political, emotional and managerial discourses in Syria. These discourses of each stakeholder can seep into the methodology of evidence generation and use, shaping what evidence tells

(i.e. data fabrication), how it is to be interpreted (i.e. political reinterpretation), and which evidence should and should not be used (i.e. selective use and non-use of evidence). Reflecting on education aid to Syria, I have reformulated a diagram to summarise the relationship between the politicisation of evidence and the underlying discourses of each unit of analysis (See Figure 8.1). The nuanced interplay between evidence and discourse is framed within the critical realist stratification of reality.

Figure 8.1. Politicisation and discourse in education aid to Syria
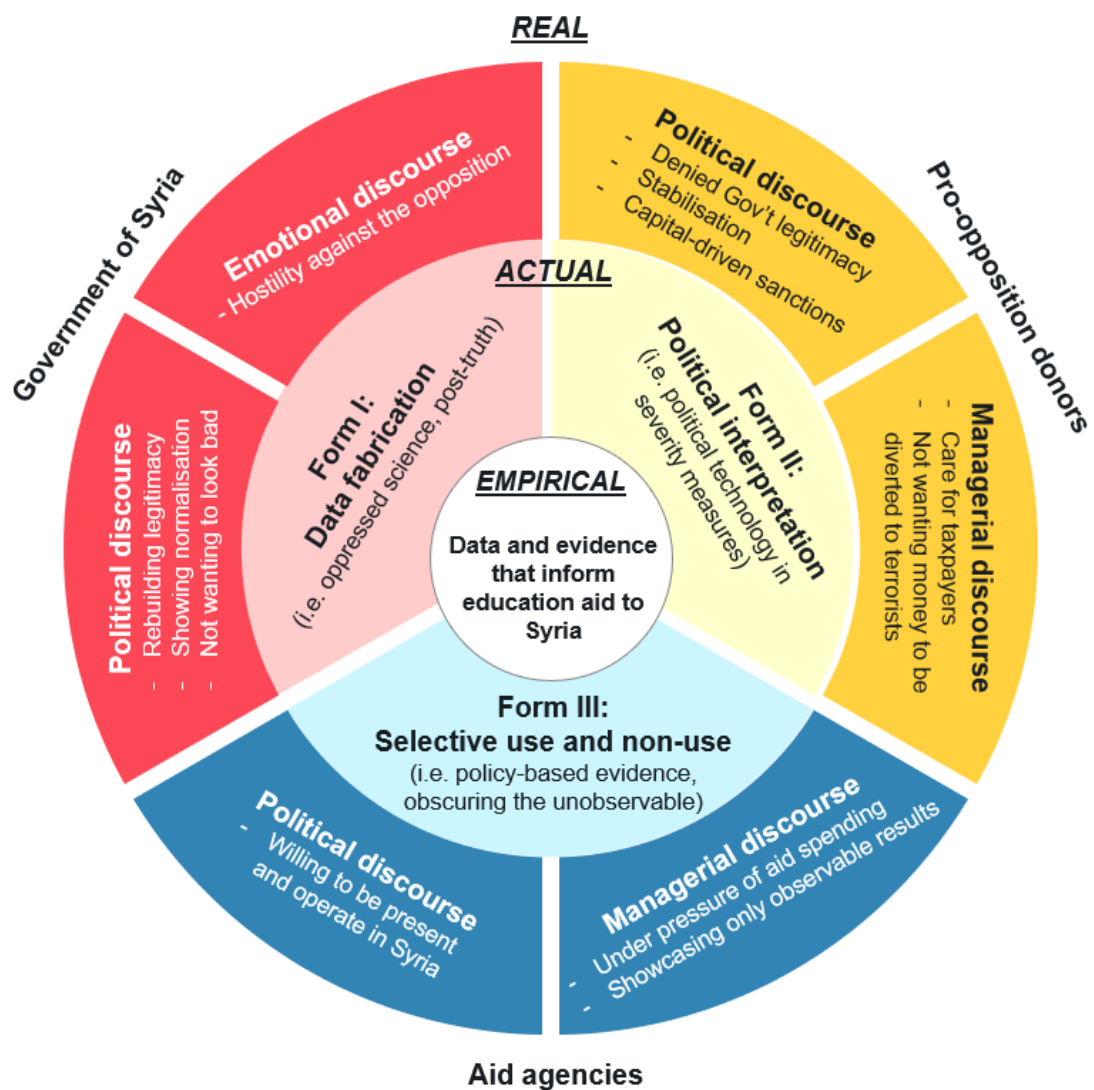
The diagram illustrates the layers of reality underneath evidence-informed education aid to Syria. Education planning and decision making about beneficiary selection and resource allocation is guided by ostensibly objective data and information at the level of the empirical. However, the analysis reveals that the three forms of politicisation of evidence are enacted at the level of the actual. The politicisation of evidence is driven by political, emotional and managerial discourses deployed by multiple stakeholders at the level of the real. As such, the stratification of reality allows us to understand how educational situations in Syria are framed by different stakeholders and how programmatic decisions are shaped not just through empirical constructs (i.e. data analytics, severity measures) and actual events (i.e. access denial by the Government, discontinuation of education aid by pro-opposition donors), but it also enables us to investigate what real generative mechanisms or discourses interact and cause the multidimensional education exclusion of children in siege, hard-to-reach opposition areas and government-retaken areas.

Reflecting on the effects of discourses in the evidence base, critical realism suggests that we should question predominant empiricism or the 'what works' agenda in the field of education and conflict. Where the evidence agenda is uncritically commended in education planning and practice, data analytics and metrics are often treated as if they dispassionately depict what children's realities and educational needs really are. However, as demonstrated in the interviews, numerical data and evidence are often formed and shaped by different discursive elements. As Danermark and colleagues (2019, p.9) put it, 'we cannot rise above

ourselves and look at reality such as it really is; all observation is made from a certain point'. In Syria, the contesting parties tend to construct different bodies of knowledge about reality as convenient; therefore, the data and information they present as evidence are inconsistent, contradictory and fallible. They bring such empirical constructs to the planning stage of beneficiary selection and resource allocation in order to substantiate their own claims as technically legitimate. Such forms of empirical evidence are by no means free from institutional values. A Damascus-based participant articulates this point:

> We are operating in a political site where … humanitarians and donors try to act like they are holier than thou, and they are above the politics of it all. But actually they are not. They are even creating more politics in education statistics [and the results of the exam support initiative]. … Forget about the numbers. … How are those numbers even developed? What is the politics behind that? Who decides? Why was one place supported and not another? [UN-04]

This reflective account stands in contrast to that of positivistic linear thinkers who have faith in evidence on what works. This reminds us that the artefacts (i.e. education statistics and severity rakings) that aid professionals often use as evidence, derived from observable and measurable facts, may be useful as the initial approach to grasping some part of children's educational status and reality. However, professionals should not take those statistics and metrics at face value especially in conflict contexts. Professionals are encouraged to differentiate the whole reality (being) from how it appears in empirical claims (knowing). In so doing, they can attend to both what does and does not appear in empirical data and bring their situation analysis closer to the reality, instead of totally committing the epistemic fallacy. It is

crucial for them to recognise that education data can be politicised by different discourses in conflict and that data do not necessarily depict what educational problems really exist and how things really work. Therefore, constantly reflecting on what evidence tells and does not tell, how it is produced by whom and for what, is pivotal to aid professionalism in education and conflict. Otherwise, professionals may lead to wrongly inferred education policy advice, programme design and resource utilisation planning.

8.4.2. Dilemma, complicity and evidence malleability

Another emerging finding through analysing data-driven education planning within the stratification of reality is that aid stakeholders oscillate between different domains. When they would like to make their claims compelling, donor diplomats, aid practitioners and government officials expediently position themselves in the empirical domain and display education statistics and severity measures underpinned by the positivistic rhetoric of objectivity. Linear thinking is deployed in this domain. However, when challenging rival claims, they shift their positioning to the actual and real domains whereby they point out that statistics and metrics are politicised and flawed in conflict. In other words, a critical realist approach helps us to capture the nuance of evidence in which the same individuals deploy different discourses in order to both defend the evidence base *and* critique its politicisation. Several UN participants reflected on the oscillation of positioning:

> You're using information to support your political position, but you're also using it to discredit the other political side. … The UN is mirroring it in many ways, and it's about self-preservation. (UN-04)

> [In humanitarian work,] we tend to quantify human beings. … It is quite disturbing. It doesn't paint the picture. A million kids are out of school, but what does that really mean? … When we look at the number of school attacks, they're just statistics – X number of schools attacked; Y number of people dead. … This is a tension, because we need to find a balance, where we create a human story, but then we also have to satisfy this incredible appetite for just numbers. (UN-13)

Positioning oneself within different domains of reality can be strategic and also a form of 'self-preservation'. In so doing, individuals and organisations can possibly advance their agenda in conflict and political dynamics like Syria. The above remarks also illuminate aid professionals' inner struggles and dilemmas. As managerialism and auditing thrive in aid organisations, professionals are increasingly obliged to work towards the evidence base. However, some of them also question whether numbers and statistics reflect reality and what those artefacts really mean. The nuance of evidence presented by some participants alludes to the fact that the evidence base is rarely derived simply from dispassionate science. Rather, it is shaped by competing discourses underlying actual events and empirical appearances.

Another point revealed through the interviews is a sense of complicity. In Syria, UN agencies and NGOs are often squeezed into the middle between two major power holders – i.e. the Government of Syria and Western pro-opposition donors. Participants shared their observations:

> We're torn between the Government which has certain priorities and the donors who want to support the other side. (NGO-02)

> UNICEF is right in the middle. Our difficult job is actually to strike a balance between the power of the Government, the donors and the opposition sometimes, which is linked to some donors. (UN-16)

Under the complicit power relations, aid agencies have to accept hegemonic and exclusionary discourses of the Government and donor diplomats. In other words, aid practitioners do not always sufficiently challenge the manipulative practice of government authorities and donors, because they would also like to secure their presence in Syria and advance their own discourses for the goal of providing aid, raising organisational portfolios and mobilising financial resources. Pielke (2007, p.131) points out that, when the politicisation of science continues occurring, there should be 'mutually reinforcing benefits' amongst the interest groups. That is, stakeholders have incentives to both adhere to and negate an evidence base. In this sense, some aid practitioners feel complicit in advancing the exclusion of particular groups of children from education aid, a pragmatic dilemma in the frontlines.

> We're working in such a highly political environment, so I think already we're touching it and we're already a little bit complicit. (NGO-01)

> The education sector identified particular areas as high severity, however, our operations were conducted in X area alone, because that's what we receive resources for. I think we have to be honest in a way that we ourselves are political. We don't want to compromise our relationships with our donors. (UN-04)

> If we were actually adhering to the humanitarian principles, we would be working everywhere in Syria, but we have no interest in that. Referencing the opposition-supporting donors, they're not adhering to the principles either. We already have this kind of new world order of humanitarian response where we're taking sides. (NGO-05)

The asymmetrical power relations and competing discourses amongst different stakeholders (the real) are influential over how aid agencies can engage in the evidence base (the empirical) and operate in education planning and practice (the actual). The three domains of reality are mutually dependent and interconnected.

Furthermore, as explored in Chapter 3, the malleability of evidence is manifested in the conflict context.

> Data is easily used by different people for different purposes even to paint a picture according to what they want to believe. (NGO-06)

> Sometimes the Government wants to say everything is under control, so they can overestimate school enrolment. Sometimes they want to say how bad the IS is, so the out-of-school estimate becomes overestimated. (UN-14)

> Big numbers don't really mean much. … because the Ministry clearly wants [the estimate of out-of-school children] to be lower to show that they're doing their work, whereas the humanitarian actors want it to be higher to get more funds. (NGO-03)

The stratification of reality allows me to understand that different people construct and make sense of evidence in ways that are amenable to their own discourses or the reality they believe to be true (the real). Their perceptions of what is real (the empirical) vary, the result being that one form of evidence can cancel out another. Danermark and colleagues (2019, p.10) rightly point out that 'truth can only be truth to "us", never to "them"'. Given the malleability of evidence, it is crucial for aid professionals to question and reflect on what evidence tells and whether it mirrors the real situations.

It's very easy for numbers to say anything you want. [It is thus important] to see what really evidence says. Does it really say what it says, or is it just our preconceptions, beliefs, politics, or whatever else has been pushed around? (UN-21)

[Evidence is] depending on where you sit. You'll see things from your perspective. … Critical thinking [is essential, but] you don't always find it, because people tend to have an affinity towards their own people or they tend to have, let's call them blind spots. … [Therefore] you need to have somebody to tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, you know what, have you considered this?' We have a lot of those [blind spots] in here [Syria]. (UN-12)

In Syria, evidence and the reality it claims are constructed and fragmented by political, emotional and managerial discourses. In the bureaucratic aid architecture, the discourse path tends to be open for those in more ruling power (i.e. the Government and Western pro-opposition donors) to dictate what is to be believed as the real. For aid professionals, it is therefore important to critically reflect on the evidence they have and to pay heed to what discourses run deep. This is a step forward to be wary about the politics behind data and even transform power asymmetries that can distort evidence and limit our ability to portray reality.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

The thesis set out to investigate the growing global momentum for evidence on 'what works' in education and conflict. The research has analysed the theory of how reality and evidence claims about it are understood differently by positivists, interpretivists and critical realists. I challenge both positivism that reduces reality into what is empirically observable *and* interpretivism that views reality as socially constructed. Bridging these two strands, critical realism sees reality as stratified and accepts both objective reality (ontological realism) and subjective constructs of it (epistemological relativism) (Alderson, 2012; Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2008a; see also Chapter 4). Applying the critical realist model, I have examined what forms of discourse play out as real mechanisms that cause the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion within data-driven aid planning in Syria. The research has revealed that what we believe is real (i.e. political, emotional, managerial discourses) has profound implications for the production and use of empirical data that we rely on in educational resource allocation and beneficiary selection. In other words, the underlying discourses shape decisions as to who should be included and excluded from the benefit of education aid, influencing the learning opportunities and even daily lives of crisis-affected children in Syria.

In this chapter, I reflect on reality and evidence within critical realism and provide insights into how aid professionals should engage in the evidence base for more just education planning and practice. I clarify the contribution to knowledge this research made. Lastly, I discuss areas for future research.

9.1. Critical Realist Insights into Aid Professionalism

In Syria, data-driven education planning and the search for what works have become standard practice for the supposedly impartial beneficiary selection and resource allocation. However, this research demonstrates that the production and use of education data is influenced by the unseen political, managerial and emotional discourses held by the Government of Syria, Western pro-opposition donors and aid agencies. Rather than judiciously weighing up varying evidence and empirical rigor, these stakeholders, albeit not always, fabricate, politically interpret or selectively neglect particular data and information in ways that favour education assistance to their partisan groups and exclude others. In Syria, the political economy of the 'new world order' (NGO05) appears to have prevailed over humanitarian imperatives and even the founding principles of children's rights – 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' in the preamble of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Indeed, the Government of Syria has limited humanitarian and educational assistance to children living in opposition-controlled areas, whether their needs are acute or not. The Western donor governments take sides against the Assad administration by default in humanitarian policy and financial resource allocation. Some of the UN and NGOs, financed by those donors, are to some extent complicit in the politicisation of humanitarian educational aid practice. In other words, children's learning opportunities and their future depend largely on who exerts political and economic control over their residential areas and affiliations. Given this politicised phenomenon, the

question is how aid professionals should engage in the 'what works' agenda for more just education planning and practice in Syria.

When children's educational needs are simply understood in terms of quantifiable input-output entities (i.e. how many are out of school and how much money should be invested in them), positivistic linear thinking may be appreciated by government and donor technocrats. However, in this approach, children's homogeneous experiences and needs (being) tend to be deemed monolithic and equated to only observable entities and numerical data (knowing). Thinking this way traps aid professionals into the epistemic fallacy, where they mistakenly reduce reality into empirical constructions. Indeed, many of the aid professionals and education practitioners, including myself, often presume that their data-driven judgements accord with the actual humanitarian needs and priorities of people who they serve. However, as demonstrated in examples from East Ghouta and the national exam support initiative in Syria, what professionals can empirically know is not always congruent with the entire reality and needs of crisis-affected children.

To avoid or minimise the epistemic fallacy, critical realism encourages us to differentiate real being from what we can empirically think about it (Alderson, 2016; Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2008a). That is, we must recognise that there exists absolutely an unseen deeper real (intransitive) in the social world, but our subjective account of it 'in the mind' (transitive) is fallible, limited and thus not necessarily the same thing as the real itself (Price and Martin, 2018, p.90). Furthermore, it is important to remember that ontological and epistemological discussions are inherently contested as to what we believe exists, what comprises evidence, and whose evidence

counts. No matter how neutral and impartial it appears to be, the evidence base in education and conflict has a political influence on inclusion and exclusion in terms of beneficiary selection and aid spending. Given the deployment of discourses behind empirical data, I argue that policy professionals and aid practitioners need to be mindful that the politicisation of evidence is integral to education planning and practice, especially in political conflict like Syria. Although data analytics and severity measures are often presented as if they reflect what is real and inform what interventions work, they are not a representation of the whole real. Therefore, professionals should critically reflect on their taken-for-granted and unspoken assumptions around the evidence base (Porpora, 2019).

Critical realism also suggests that it is important to attend to non-being or the existence of unobservables. Aid professionals should be sensible and aware that reality is not simply derived from observable and measurable entities (presence) but also constituted by unobservable and unmeasurable mechanisms (absence). However, this account is often overlooked when they define what evidence means and what it consists of. Professionals, when engaging in data production and use, must seek to explore and understand both presence and absence. The ontological sensibility allows professionals to make their situation analyses and evidence claims closer to the real needs and priorities of unobservable vulnerable children. Whilst critical realist practitioners and researchers endeavour to identify and examine the unseen and unmeasurable real, positivists and interpretivists would confuse the real with empirical observations and social constructions

in their mind, respectively, or even they would have the unobservable reality simply neglected and unexamined (Porpora, 2019).

To understand the real causal mechanisms of educational exclusion and bring about transformation in Syria, the entry point would be to question predominant empiricism and theory by numbers in data-driven aid planning. By saying this, I do not suggest that aid professionals immediately have to dismiss scientific measurement and empirical analysis. Rather, I suggest that it is of particular significance for individual professionals, organisations and institutes to critically reflect on what data and statistics really tell and do not tell, how they are methodologically generated, who calculates and interprets them for what purposes, and what values and presuppositions are inscribed in the acts of measurement and quantification. Proactively asking such a meta-question of methodology around evidence generation and use enables aid professionals and stakeholders to factor in the underlying discourses that shape data-driven education planning and decision making. I argue that this reflective exercise helps us to be more attentive to the unobserved vulnerable children so that we can make education planning and aid practice more just and inclusive. This would also allow us to move beyond the current aid professionalism preoccupied with empirical realism and actualism. Reflexivity provides a way for professionals to bring their understanding of children's realities and educational needs nearer to what they really are.

That being said, I also recognise that the personal practice of reflexivity on an evidence base alone may not be able to fully convince government institutes, policy professionals and practitioners to think and act differently. The self-critical epistemological awareness is crucial, but it remains in the

empirical domain. Reflection at the empirical level does not mean entirely replacing the real causal mechanisms and transforming the institutional discourses deeply embedded in the political economy of financial aid systems and exclusive beneficiary selection for managerial accountability, which drive the ideologically motivated worldviews and aid decisions. How can critical reflection alone motivate high-ranking officials loyal to the Assad government to take a high risk of challenging the political ideologies implicit in the government statistics and statements, to cease hostilities against opposition groups, and accept aid spending to opposition areas in a more equitable manner? How can reflection ever encourage senior diplomats of Western pro-opposition donor governments to admit that they politically interpret humanitarian data and to reallocate more funding to government-controlled areas, even if that may undermine their accountability to auditors and taxpayers? How can reflection help convince the frontline UN/NGO workers to disclose some information inconvenient to their organisations, when that may prevent fund raising and threaten their own job security?

Altering structural causes and discourses requires government officials, donor diplomats and aid professionals to constantly exercise reflexivity on their actual practice and empirical knowledge on 'what works'. However, it also requires them at the real level to redress the unchallenged power asymmetries, problematise the prevailing international financial aid systems, be honest about part of their own complicit and expedient aid decision making, and question their self-serving mentality. In addition to discourses, these deeper structural political economy value systems and unseen human mindsets within international aid financing should be addressed for real

change, because they could be part of generative mechanisms that reproduce the prevailing structures of educational exclusion in Syria. Real transformation for more just social structures calls for the leaders and experts who are willing to change their state of being and who hold 'courage to take the risk of showing a childlike humility' that results from challenging the status quo and breaking out of their comfort zone (Alderson, 2016, p.154). The alternative way of understanding the political phenomenon of data-driven aid planning, informed by critical realism, is a step forward for policy professionals and frontline practitioners to avoid 'evidence being the enemy' (UN-13) and to make a real difference for more inclusive and equitable education aid decision and practice. Investigating how we can make such authentic transformative change at the deeper real level is integral to critical realism. However, the in-depth analysis on the process of transformation goes beyond the scope of this thesis. It is one of the essential areas that necessitates further empirical research and investigation.

9.2.   Contribution to Knowledge

The research has made several contributions to knowledge in the field of education and conflict from a critical realist perspective. First, it uncovers the causal processes of how and why educational exclusion for conflict-affected children occurs in Syria. To redress the exclusionary practice in education aid, it is crucial to understand what structural causes are at play beneath the surface of the political phenomenon, instead of focusing on how children's educational needs are measured and depicted in empirical statistics.

Informed by critical realism, I took a retroductive approach to analysing what causal mechanisms must be in place for the politicisation of evidence and the resulting educational exclusion to have occurred in the aid sector of Syria. This approach helped me to explain why different education stakeholders politicise empirical data in education planning and practice, what discourses they deploy in the process of the evidence base, and how these discourses reproduce the educational exclusion of vulnerable Syrian children in siege, hard-to-reach opposition-held areas and government-retaking areas. An understanding of these structural causes and mechanisms helps shed light on the pitfall of the dominant 'what works' agenda in development and humanitarian aid. This thesis is envisaged to stimulate debates on how policymakers, practitioners and researchers can critically rethink about the unchallenged rhetoric and practice of an evidence base and act differently for real transformation in education and conflict.

Second, related to the above, the thesis adds an empirical case study to the literature on applied critical realism. I take a unique position from a critical realist perspective, calling into question the mainstream debates promoting the 'what works' agenda in education and conflict. The retroduction process has allowed me to infer what conditions and mechanisms must be in place in order for the politicisation of evidence and educational exclusion to occur. The politicisation of data may well be happening in our everyday life and professional work in both conflict and non-conflict stable contexts. However, it may be practised in more insidious and hidden manners in a conflict environment, where competing discourses, political economy of humanitarian financing, and human hostilities are at play amongst and between the parties

to the conflict. In this sense, critical realism would serve as a more relevant methodology to reveal the hidden real mechanisms, discourses and human emotional struggles in conflict contexts, as opposed to non-conflict settings where critical realism could equally be pertinent. In addition, the research demonstrates that counting the unobservable and unmeasurable would be indispensable to surmounting business-as-usual mentality and bringing about real transformation in professional thinking and behaviour. Further, the framework of a stratified reality enables me to explain that, when policy professionals and frontline practitioners engage in the evidence base, they oscillate between empirical, actual and real domains and expediently shift their positioning in order to make their claims compelling. As such, the thesis offers empirical cases to the scholarship of applied critical realism within the context of education and conflict.

Third, the thesis addresses a knowledge gap in the scholarship on education and conflict. There is a dearth of empirical research on the political dimension of evidence in this field. To fill the research gap, the thesis draws on the case of political process around data generation and use in Syria, demonstrating that the national demographic statistics, school census and severity measures, albeit ostensibly legitimate and apolitical, are often methodologically politicised to exclude vulnerable children from humanitarian and education aid. I have shown concrete examples, such as the fabrication of population data on Daraya under siege, overinflation of EMIS data on IS-controlled Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, and discontinuity of humanitarian aid to East Ghouta. These examples illustrate that the politicisation of evidence distorts needs-based aid planning and resource allocation, the result being

that conflict-affected children have to pay a heavy price. In other words, the thesis challenges the supposed superiority of scientific measures of what works in the literature on education in emergencies. In so doing, I alert evidence advocates and aid professionals to the potential danger of the overreliance on data-driven decision making and the associated multidimensional educational exclusion in conflict-affected contexts. In this sense, the thesis contributes to adding knowledge on the political dimension of data to the existing literature in this field.

Lastly, the thesis contributes to providing policy professionals and decision makers with a practical recommendation of exercising critical reflection. Some of the evidence advocates, practitioners and researchers who have faith in scientific measures tend to seek linear-rational knowledge in an attempt to clarify what works in education in emergencies (see Burde et al., 2015, 2017, 2019; Montoya, 2019a, 2019b; NORRAG, 2019; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). However, the thesis shows that the Government of Syria, pro-opposition donors and aid agencies carry their own preconceived *idées fixes* and deploy competing discourses under the guise of an objective evidence base. This affirms that the 'what works' agenda is by no means an apolitical enterprise; rather, it is a more complicated contested domain involving human emotions and power struggles. If professionals would really like to serve the most vulnerable children in conflict-affected contexts who are deliberately excluded from educational assistance for political reasons and who are not even recognised in official statistics, it is crucial to attend to the beneath-the-surface discourses that are inconspicuous but structure their thinking and behaviour. Professionals should be critically aware of what

presuppositions they hold in respective political situations and critically reflect on how these unseen forces influence their engagement in evidence-informed education planning. This proposition is a practical contribution to knowledge on data literacy, reflexivity on bias implicit in the evidence base, and equity-focused education planning in conflict-affected contexts.

9.3. Areas for Future Research

This research examines the political dimensions of reality and evidence in the education sector of Syria. It offers external validity with implications for data-driven education aid in other settings. That being said, my data sample was not able to directly include key informants from the Government of Syria, the interim government and opposition groups. Participation of crisis-affected Syrian children is also lacking. This is a research area for further refinement, because there are almost always alternative explanations and compelling truth claims from different stakeholders and informants. It is also essential to provide reflective space for conflict-affected children themselves to present their own viewpoints, which may require psychosocial care and other special techniques to deal with children in conflict. However, integrating children's viewpoints into empirical research would be useful to make aid professionals nearer to the children's reality and move away from the professionals-know-best mentality in the scholarship of education and conflict.

The thesis offers practical recommendations for aid professionals, policymakers and researchers to more critically reflect on the rhetoric of an evidence base and be more attentive to the underlying real mechanisms and

discourses that reproduce the prevailing structures of educational exclusion but are not always observable and quantifiable. Such self-critical reflective awareness itself is a crucial step forward for transformation in professional practice, but exists primarily at the epistemic and empirical level. Therefore, it may not be enough to fully convince these stakeholders to act differently and make authentic change at the real level. To go beyond the status quo, they also have to alter their grounding state of being by accepting part of their unchallenged complicity and expedience in the politicisation of evidence and educational exclusion, redressing their inner self-interest, and problematising the present political economy of aid financing that reproduces the structures of exclusion. These deeper levels of causal mechanisms and processes are partly examined in the thesis. However, further investigations are needed in the scholarship of education, conflict and applied critical realism. Future research on those deeper mechanisms would help policy professionals and practitioners to challenge the political economy of international aid systems and make real change in aid professionalism. This would serve the most vulnerable children in Syria and beyond in more just and fairer manners.

9.4.   Concluding Remarks

This doctoral research is a reflective opportunity to spark consciousness about my ignorance and power. The more I learn about the depth of knowledge around reality and evidence, the more I know of what I do not know about the subject. As a researcher, I have confronted such a puzzling paradox and come to be more aware of both what I do and do not know. As

an education aid practitioner, I also become increasingly conscious about the power I hold to uncritically construct my own reality and others' realities through empirical realism in my everyday professional life. However, critical realism helps reconfigure my epistemological position and shift my analytic focus from surface to depth. I come to be more attentive to unseen real mechanisms and discourses underneath apparent social events and political phenomena. In this sense, the doctoral research applying a philosophy of critical realism enables me to see what I was not able to see previously.

My journey of doctoral research comes to an end, but my professional engagement in education aid will carry on with a critical realist perspective. As demonstrated, unjust politics trumps humanitarian imperatives in Syria. I am sure that such unreasonable phenomena and power imbalances are played out in any context of international aid. However, looking at the world and evidence claims about it from a critical realist lens helps me to remain cautious about the epistemic fallacy and ontological monovalence and to reflect on what lies behind actually occurring phenomena. This critical realist approach does and will make my professional decision making more just and fairer within education aid to vulnerable children in conflict and beyond.

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Appendix 1. List of Research Participants

Unit of analysis	Interview code	Profile	Interview date	Place/Skype
UN	UN-01	Programme monitoring and evaluation, Damascus	06 October 2017	Damascus, Syria
	UN-02	Lead consultant for education sector analysis and statistics	17 November 2017	Damascus, Syria
	UN-03	Humanitarian planning and population task force, Damascus	16 December 2017	Damascus, Syria
	UN-04	Advocacy for human rights and child protection, Damascus	23 December 2017 17 January 2020	Damascus, Syria Skype call
	UN-05	Technical assistance to Syria's EMIS from Beirut	07 July 2018	Beirut, Lebanon
	UN-06	Technical assistance to Syria's education planning from Beirut	07 July 2018	Beirut, Lebanon
	UN-07	Humanitarian affairs and access, Damascus	08 July 2018	Beirut, Lebanon
	UN-08	WOS: Cross-border education operation from Amman	17 July 2018	Amman, Jordan
	UN-09	WOS: Education sector information management from Amman	16 October 2018	Amman, Jordan
	UN-10	Education programme coordination, Damascus	03 November 2018	Amman, Jordan
	UN-11	Overall education programme management, Damascus	11 January 2019	Skype call
	UN-12	Resource mobilisation, donor relations and results reporting, Damascus	11 February 2019 21 February 2020	Beirut, Lebanon Skype call
	UN-13	WOS: Cross-border education operation from Gaziantep	28 February 2019 10 February 2020	Skype call Skype call

	UN-14	WOS: Education sector analysis and statistics, Amman	01 March 2019	Amman, Jordan
	UN-15	WOS: Education sector coordination, Damascus and Gaziantep	02 March 2019	Skype call
	UN-16	Humanitarian response and field operations, Damascus	03 March 2019	Skype call
	UN-17	ECW coordination for Syria, Amman	14 March 2019	Amman, Jordan
	UN-18	Syria's population data and statistics, Amman	23 March 2019	Skype call
	UN-19	WOS: Humanitarian response and operations, Amman	26 March 2019	Amman, Jordan
	UN-20	WOS: Education sector coordination, Damascus	02 May 2019	Skype call
	UN-21	Humanitarian monitoring, evaluation and data, Amman	07 May 2019	Amman, Jordan
NGO	NGO-01	Education programme management, Damascus	26 November 2017	Beirut, Lebanon
	NGO-02	Education programme management, Damascus	10 December 2017	Damascus, Syria
	NGO-03	Education programme management, Damascus	15 December 2017	Damascus, Syria
	NGO-04	WOS: Education sector coordination from Amman	21 June 2018	Amman, Jordan
	NGO-05	Research on education access and learning, Amman	27 July 2018	Amman, Jordan
	NGO-06	Education programme coordination from Amman	10 January 2019	Amman, Jordan
Donor group	Donor-01	Political and humanitarian affairs in response to the Syrian crisis, Beirut	19 February 2018	Amman, Jordan
	Donor-02	Political and humanitarian affairs in response to the Syrian crisis, Beirut	13 February 2019	Beirut, Lebanon
	Donor-03	Political and humanitarian affairs in response to the Syrian crisis, Beirut	10 April 2019	Skype call
	Donor-04	Political and humanitarian affairs in response to the Syrian crisis, Beirut	10 April 2019	Skype call

Appendix 2. Information Sheet

For Participants in Tomoya Sonoda's Doctoral Thesis Project

I am currently undertaking doctoral research on international aid and education under the supervision of Professor Elaine Unterhalter and Dr. Tejendra Pherali at University College London, Institute of Education, UK. As part of this study, I am interviewing a range of officials working in multilateral and bilateral organisations and NGOs concerned with decision-making around education aid in relation to the Syrian crisis.

I would like to invite you to an interview to discuss your experiences and perspectives on how data and evidence have been used in decisions about education aid programming. The interview will focus primarily on how your organisation takes decisions in terms of priority setting, target selection and resource allocation during the period of the Syrian crisis.

The interview will last approximately one hour, but you would be free to end the interview at any point if you chose. I would like to audio record your response if you grant me permission to do so. The audio files will be stored on a secured server immediately after our discussion. Thereafter, the interview will be transcribed and fully anonymized. I will send you the full transcript of the interview to check or change any point if need be. In any presentation of this data, you would only be referred to by a numerical code, and only very general details about your organisation will be provided, so that you cannot be identified.

This research is being carried out as an independent doctoral thesis project and is not a UNICEF-sponsored initiative. Participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. This will not present a problem for my project. If you agree to participate in the interview, you will sign an informed consent form (attached).

Please feel free to contact me if you need further information or wish to discuss further any aspect of the project. Thank you in advance.

Regards,

Tomoya Sonoda

Appendix 3. Informed Consent Form

Type of research: Doctoral thesis

Research focus: Education aid in response to the Syrian crisis

Name of researcher: Tomoya Sonoda

Purpose: To understand how aid agencies (i.e. NGOs, UN agencies) and bilateral donors construct evidence and use it for education planning and programming for the most marginalised in a highly political and conflict-affected environment in Syria.

1. I have read and understood the information sheet giving details of the nature and purpose of research.
2. I have had an opportunity to ask the researcher any questions that I had about the research procedures and my engagement in the interview.
3. My decision to consent is entirely voluntary.
4. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
5. I understand that my response during the interview will be audio recorded, transcribed and stored for the research purpose.
6. I understand that the interview data may be quoted in the thesis and other forms of publication.
7. I understand that my personal name will not be specified in any report, publication or presentation, and that every effort will be made to protect my confidentiality.
8. I understand that I can request a copy of report or publication if it refers to my individual experience and perspective.
9. I can ask for a copy of the signed consent form.

Participant's signature: Date (d.m.y):

Participant's name:

Researcher's signature:

Attachment: Information Sheet for Participants in Doctoral Research

Appendix 4. Interview Schedule

Topic Guide for the Donor Group

Thank you for participating in this interview. Before we start, let me assure that your name will remain anonymous in my research paper, and the information you provide during the interview will be treated as confidential. For data analysis, would you allow me to audio record the interview conversation? [If allowed, the interview will be audio recorded and, if not, I will jot down key phrases for analysis.]

1) Introduction

Purpose: To ask about interviewee's profile and professional principles

My research interest is in how aid agencies and donors use empirical evidence in education planning and decision-making in a politically contested and conflict-affected environment. I would like to explore your own perspectives and experiences of evidence generation and application in aid practice in the Syrian crisis.

First of all, let me ask about your work and organization.

Interview questions
1. Would you tell me briefly about your background? [Ask follow-up questions]   i.   May I ask about your nationality, educational background and work experiences? What is your current job title? How long in current post? How long have you worked on the Syrian crisis for?
2. Would you tell me about your roles and responsibilities in your organization?
3. What mission statement does your organization have in humanitarian aid and conflict settings? How long has it been supporting the education sector and planning in Syria?
4. What professional principles and processes does your organization follow when making decisions about priority setting, target selection, funding allocation? What values or vision guide its work? Any gaps between ideal and reality?
5. Which aid agencies (or oganisations in the field) does your organization support? What education interventions does it finance? Who is involved in decision-making processes? Any special focus around decisions given in the Syrian crisis context?

2) Evidence generation and application

Purpose: To clarify how interviewees collect, analyse and use data

Let me ask about the process of data collection and analysis in education planning and programming associated with the work of your organization?

Interview questions
6. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, what data do you need to collect for education planning? What have you actually been able to collect?

7. Could you describe how you have gathered data for education planning (i.e. priority setting, target selection, budget allocation) over the last two years?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
   i.   What methods have you used in data gathering? Why were these selected?
   ii.   What kind of data is available and do you use – i.e. Quan and Qual? Why?

iii.   Who are key stakeholders/gatekeepers in data collection process at national and local levels? iv.   What rules and procedures do you need to go through in order to obtain data – i.e. government statistics and school data? v.   Do you have any procedures for checking the quality of data?
8. How do you see the quality of data you have used in your period in post? Any changes year to year? Could you describe a timeline of improvements or worsening? [Ask follow-up questions] i.   What do you think about data availability in terms of different demographics (i.e. location, gender, wealth quintiles)? ii.   What are the sources of data? Is there any source of verification? Any triangulation?
9. What challenges, if any, have you experienced in gathering evidence that is needed to inform your organizational policy and strategy? [Ask follow-up questions] i.   Do you have to get official permission to collect data? From whom? ii.   What happens if permission is not forthcoming? iii.   Have you had any problems with the data you have had access to? If so, of what kind (i.e. over-inflation, manipulation)? How did you become aware of these problems? iv.   How do you overcome difficulties in data accessibility and quality – i.e. missing data, poor quality data, delay of reporting?
10. Could you describe two instances of using data in decision-making process? Can you tell how data were used in each instance? [Ask follow-up questions] i.   What data and analysis (i.e. EMIS, measurable and non-measurable, severity scale, and anecdotal data) are useful/influential when you decide funding allocation? ii.   Could you describe a decision about funding allocation? What data was used in the decision? Were some data more influential than others? iii.   What advantages and disadvantages do you experience when you use statistics and measurable data in education aid funding?

3) The nexus between data, policy and practice

Purpose: To explore how interviewees balance empirical data and political decisions

In conflict settings, some programmatic decisions might be informed not just based on empirical data analysis but also by political viability (related to bilateral donors) in the contested environment.

Interview questions
11. Do the foreign affairs and policies of your country influence your organizational decision-making with regard to data collection and/or aid delivery? Why? Any negotiations or discussions on this? What effects? [Ask follow-up questions] i.   What agencies and programmes are financed by your organization? ii.   What rationales and policies lie behind your funding decisions? iii.   How do you see the relationship between aid agencies and your organization? iv.   How do you exert accountability to taxpayers in your country? v.   Do you use any data in these discussions? vi.   How do you hold accountable to beneficiaries?
12. Does international/national/local politics have a bearing on aid decisions? Any political decisions were made, even if evidence told you different? Can you give me some examples?

[Ask follow-up questions]
    i.   Any examples of politically influenced decisions being made with regard to beneficiary selection and funding allocation? What data were used? Why?
    ii.   Any inclusion and exclusion of particular locations and beneficiary groups – i.e. Government-controlled areas versus opposition-held areas?
    iii. What rationality is behind the political decisions? What data are used?
    iv. How are these negotiated with aid agencies on the ground? Do you ever collect or use data in response to these decisions?
    v.   Have you seen any clash between political interests and issues emerging from empirical data analysis? How do you feel about this?

13. Any biases/dilemmas have you encountered in evidence use and decision-making processes? Can you describe a recent example?

Topic Guide for <u>the UN and NGOs</u>

Thank you for participating in this interview. Before we start, let me assure that your name will remain anonymous in my research paper, and the information you provide during the interview will be treated as confidential. For data analysis, would you allow me to audio record the interview conversation? [If allowed, the interview will be audio recorded and, if not, I will jot down key phrases for analysis.]

1) Introduction

Purpose: To ask about interviewee's profile and professional principles

My research interest is in how aid agencies and donors use empirical evidence in education planning and decision-making in a politically contested and conflict-affected environment. I would like to explore your own perspectives and experiences of evidence generation and application in aid practice in the Syrian crisis.

First of all, let me ask about your work and organization.

Interview questions
1. Would you tell me briefly about your background? [Ask follow-up questions]   i.   May I ask about your nationality, educational background and work experiences? What is your current job title? How long in current post? How long have you worked on the Syrian crisis for?
2. Would you tell me about your roles and responsibilities in your organization?
3. What mission statement does your organization have in humanitarian aid and conflict settings? How long has it been supporting the education sector and programming in Syria?
4. What professional principles and processes does your organization follow when making decisions about priority setting, target selection, funding allocation? What values or vision guide its work? Any gaps between ideal and reality?
5. What education interventions does your organization conduct? Which donors are funding these interventions? Who is involved in decision-making processes? Any special focus around decisions given in the Syrian crisis context?

2) Evidence generation and application

Purpose: To clarify how interviewees collect, analyze and use data

Let me ask about the process of data collection and analysis in education planning and programming associated with the work of your organization?

Interview questions
6. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, what data do you need to collect for education planning and programming? What have you actually been able to collect?

7. Could you describe how you have gathered data for education programming (i.e. priority setting, target selection, budget allocation) over the last two years?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
   i. What methods have you used in data gathering? Why were these selected?
   ii. What kind of data is available and do you use – i.e. Quan and Qual? Why?
   iii. Who are key stakeholders/gatekeepers in data collection process at national and local levels?
   iv. What rules and procedures do you need to go through in order to obtain data – i.e. government statistics and school data?
   v. Do you have any procedures for checking the quality of data?

8. How do you see the quality of data you have used in your period in post? Any changes year to year? Could you describe a timeline of improvements or worsening?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
   i. What do you think about data availability in terms of different demographics (i.e. location, gender, wealth quintiles)?
   ii. What are the sources of data? Is there any source of verification? Any triangulation?

9. What challenges, if any, have you experienced in gathering evidence that is needed to inform your organizational policy and strategy?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
   i. Do you have to get official permission to collect data? From whom?
   ii. What happens if permission is not forthcoming?
   iii. Have you had any problems with the data you have had access to? If so, of what kind (i.e. over-inflation, manipulation)? How did you become aware of these problems?
   iv. How do you overcome difficulties in data accessibility and quality – i.e. missing data, poor quality data, delay of reporting?

10. Could you describe two instances of using data in decision-making process? Can you tell how data were used in each instance?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
   i. What data and analysis (i.e. EMIS, measurable and non-measurable, severity scale, and anecdotal data) are useful/influential when you plan education programmes?
   ii. Could you describe a decision about resource allocation and target selection? What data was used in the decision? Were some data more influential than others?
   iii. What advantages and disadvantages do you experience when you use statistics and measurable data in education aid funding?

3) The nexus between data, policy and practice

Purpose: To explore how interviewees balance empirical data and political decisions

In conflict settings, some programmatic decisions might be informed not just based on empirical data analysis but also by political viability (related to bilateral donors) in the contested environment.

Interview questions

11. Do the foreign affairs and policies of donor countries influence your organizational decision-making with regard to data collection and/or aid delivery? Do the donors impose any conditions? Why? Any negotiations or discussions on this? What effects?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
    i.   Who is the donor?
    ii.   What rationales and policies lie behind the conditions?
    iii. How do you see the relationship between the donor and your organization?
    iv. How do you exert accountability to the donors?
    v.   Do you use any data in these discussions?
    vi. How do you hold accountable to beneficiaries?

12. Does international/national/local politics have a bearing on aid decisions? Any political decisions were made, even if evidence told you different? Can you give me some examples?
 	
[Ask follow-up questions]
    i.   Any examples of politically influenced decisions being made with regard to beneficiary selection and resource allocation? What data were used? Why?
    ii.   Any inclusion and exclusion of particular locations and beneficiary groups – i.e. Government-controlled areas versus opposition-held areas?
    iii. What rationality is behind the political decisions? What data are used?
    iv. How are these negotiated with the donors? Do you ever collect or use data in response to these decisions?
    v.   Have you seen any clash between political interests and issues emerging from empirical data analysis? How do you feel about this?

13. Any biases/dilemmas have you encountered in evidence use and decision-making processes? Can you describe a recent example?

Appendix 5. Sample Pages of Reflective Research Diary

Sample 1. A meeting with the EU in Beirut, Lebanon (23 June 2017)

I took note of contradictions I found in interaction with the donor group and an emerging question as to 'who is the most vulnerable' in Syria.

Sample 2(a). Framing the stratification of reality (7 March 2017)

This was my initial attempt on 7 March 2017 to frame my research interest within critical realism. I tried to locate key words (i.e. data, evidence, conflict, politicisation, exclusion) in the stratification of reality – the empirical, the actual, and the real. I was thinking that asymmetrical power relations serve as unwritten rules or discourse that produce politicisation and inequality. However, I was not very sure of the conceptual linkage between 'discourse' and 'the real' at that time. For my future reference, I put these terms closer to each other on the note.
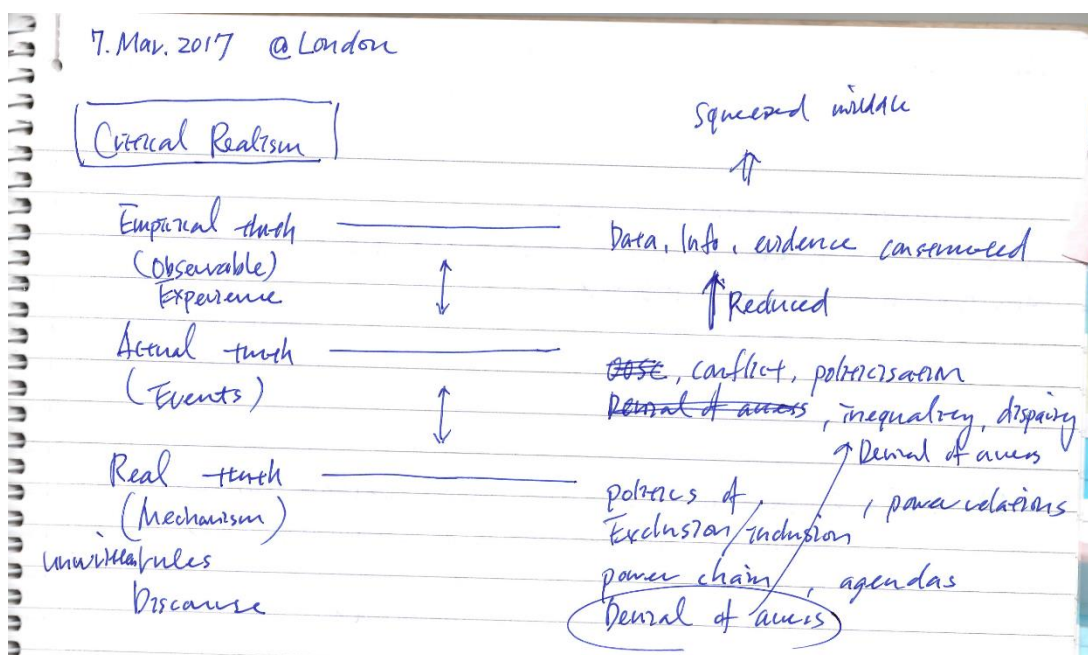
Sample 2(b). Framing the stratification of reality (18 July 2019)

When writing the thesis in July 2019, I developed the following conceptual map that was similar to the one I had framed in March 2017. As my literature review and reflection on critical realism progressed, I was increasingly confident in framing data as the empirical, exclusion/politicisation as the actual, and discourse as the real. This memo became a basis of creating the diagram (Figure 5.2 on page 127) in the thesis.
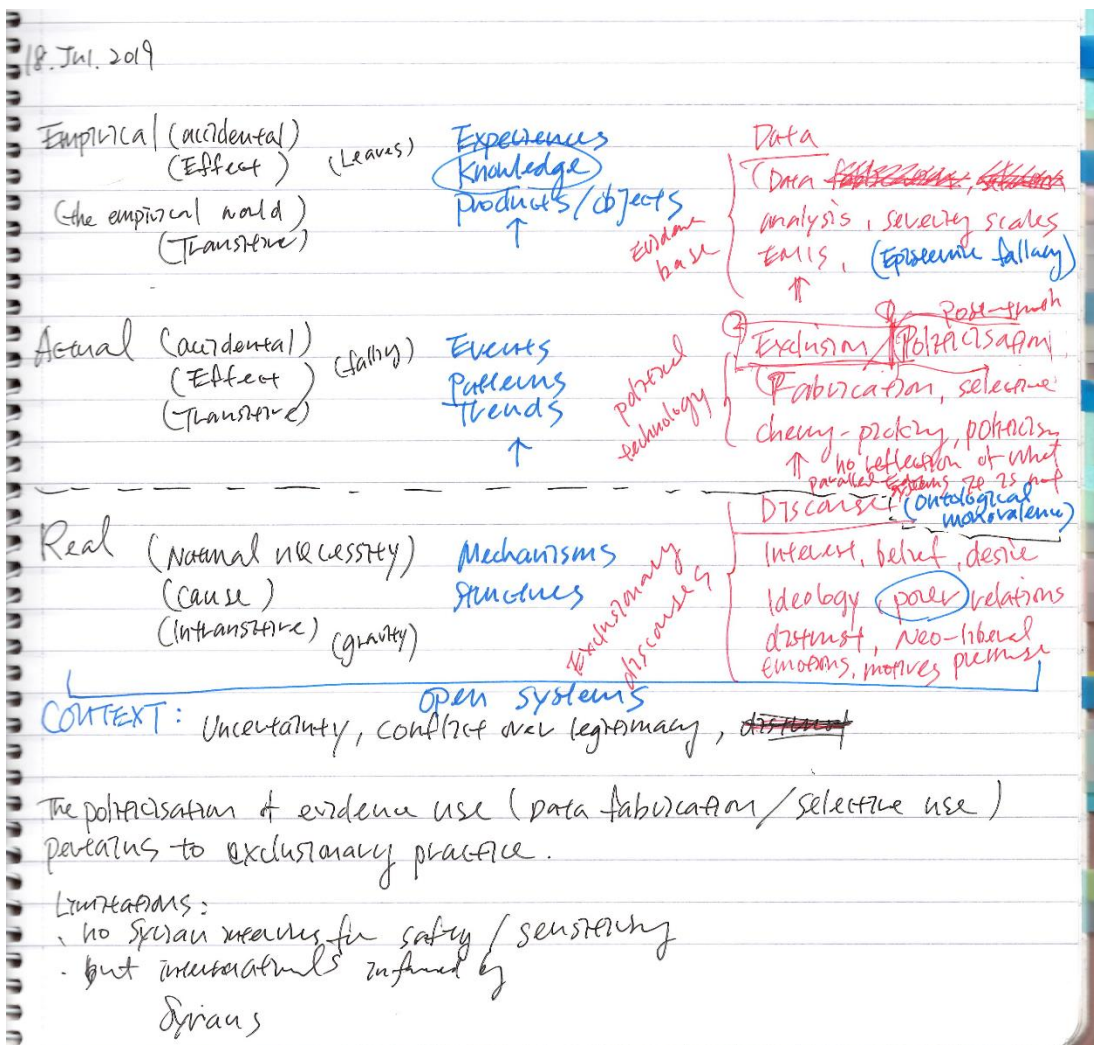
Sample 3. Process of interpreting interview data (2 August 2019)

Initially, I had eight discourses that could generate the politicisation of evidence in Syria. Whilst aggregating them into 'political', 'emotional', and 'managerial' discourses, I felt that the process was prone to subjectivity.
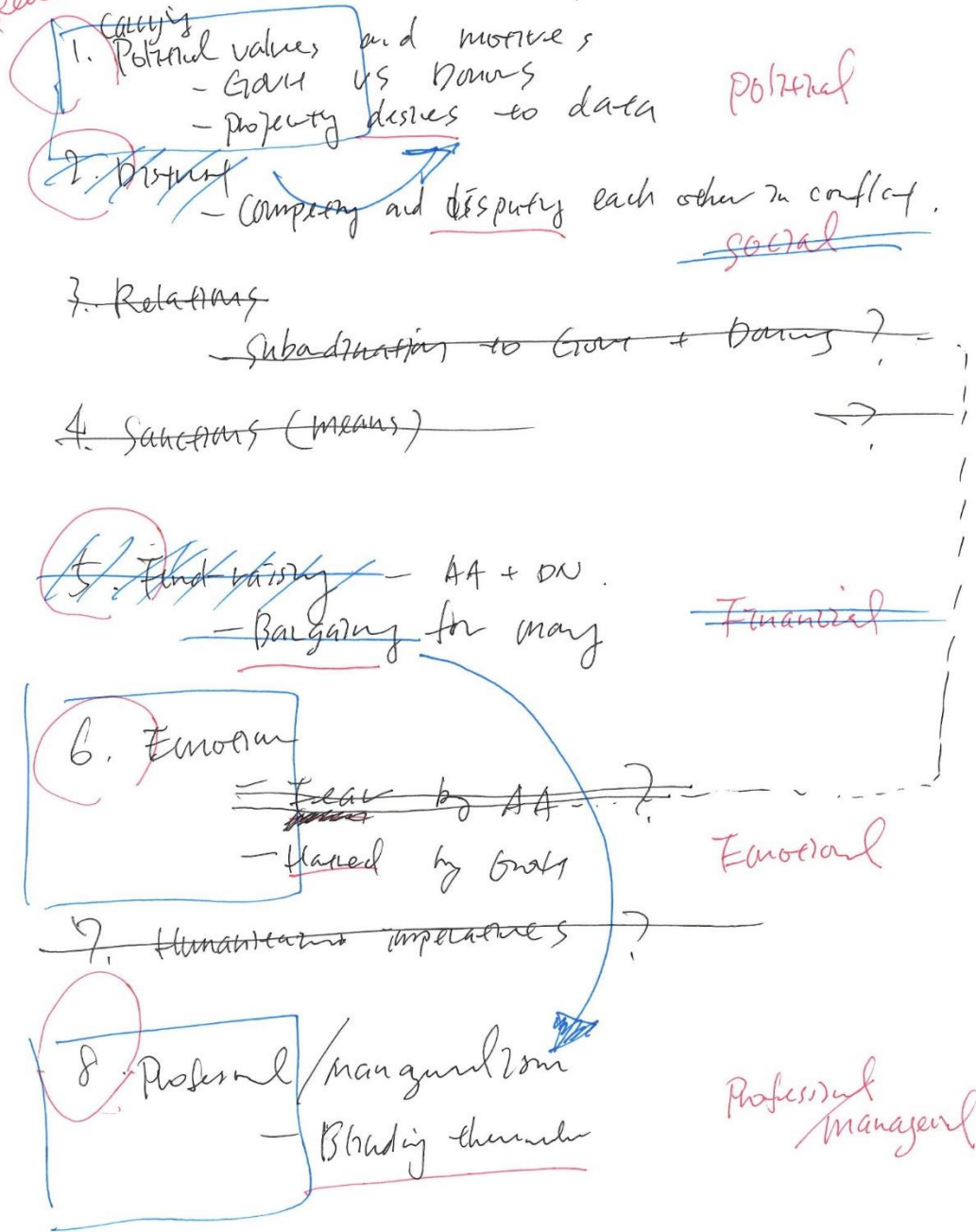
Appendix 6. List of Codes for Data Analysis

Codes/nodes extracted from NVivo.

Code	References
0. Context	
Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
0.1. Naive relations	
Focused Code	
'Confronting inner struggles – fear	
Initial Code	References
Having fear of being ousted	3
Not wanting to anger the Gov't	7
Not wanting to anger the Turkish gov't	4
Taking risks or not	10
Focused Code	
'Having to handle naive relations	
Initial Code	References
Being squeezed into the middle	7
Not accepting funding	10
Not pushing back against the Gov't	3
Observing power dynamics	8
Focused Code	
'Situating in political conflict	
Initial Code	References
Being aware of the absence of political transition	2
Being fragmented	2
Being militarily encircled	1
Being tested	2
Expecting political process	5
Fighting each other	1
Operating in a high-risk environment	8
Relating military operation and education	3
There being no political progress	1
Waging war and adding sanctions	2
Focused Code	
'Subordinating and suffering from donors' control	
Initial Code	References
Allowing the UN to manoeuvre funding use	1
Being able to track funding	1
Being flexible with funding	9
Delivering aid to Idleb	1
Differentiating geographical and population control	2
Diversifying funding	1
Donors expecting immediate results	4
Functioning as ACU	2

	Funding refugees more than IDPs		6
	Having to work with local councils		6
	Needs outweighing funding		2
	Negotiating with donors		27
	Not wanting to lose donors		4
	Patronaging funding		1
	Promoting good donorship with trust building		3
	Requiring donor's money		2
	Selling programme to donors		1
	Telling donors about what you did		1
	Threatening donors		2
	Trusting partners - i.e. UN		5
	Turning down money		4
	Using government numbers		3

Focused Code	
'Subordinating and suffering from Gov't control	

Initial Code	References
Access being restricted	40
Assessing only areas we can access	21
Being stable	1
Collaborating with government	6
Coming under censorship and control	15
Consulting with the Gov't	4
Coordinating for appeal plans	4
Coordinating with Gov't	42
Failing negotiations	4
Gov't restricting access	14
Gov't retaking territories back	10
Having limited access	1
Issuing a communiqué	2
Not recognising NGOs defiant against the Gov't	2
Recognising Syria as legitimate	4
Requiring engagement with MOE	4
Seeking approval	24
Showing legitimacy as an authority	7
Staying quiet	4
Working with SARC	3

1. The empirical

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
1.1. Epistemic fallacy (severity scales, partisan silos)	

Focused Code	
'Leaning to a confirmation bias - easy to justify themselves	

Initial Code	References
Clashing perceived realities	2
Cutting corners	2
Showing a bias	9

Focused Code	
'Lebelling	

Initial Code	References
labelling beneficiaries	2

Focused Code	
'Reducing people's lives to empirical data	

Initial Code	References
Depicting people's lives	1
Losing different realities	3
Lumping everyone together	6
Making innocent mistakes	3

Focused Code	
'Worldviews forming realities	

Initial Code	References
Believing that they believe to be true	4
Constructing narratives	16
Constructing needs based on what is known	2
Fitting numbers into rhetoric	1
Following the government narrative	0
Having facts and fiction	2
Looking at government rhetoric	2
Personal analysis seeping	7

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
1.2. Positivism (Scientism, linear thinking, what works)	

Tenet 1. Rationality and linearity (what works)	

Focused Code	
'Being rational and factual	

Initial Code	References
Being in positivistic rational thinking	20
Being perceived to be valid	2
Making decisions based on facts	2
Supporting scientific rather than constructivist approaches	3
Woking on estimation and predictability	5

Focused Code	
'Engaging in managerialism	

Initial Code	References
Balancing workload and utility	1
Being a whole machinery	5
Being accountable to donors	13
Being complacent	1
Bridging Govt's and donors	1
Counting beneficiaries - superficial	6
Donors asking for evidence base	1
Fitting within our prioritisation	2
Getting everything	1
Lacking accountability for beneficiaries	5
Linking beneficiaries to donors	2
Making feedback loops	3
Not being able to monitor everyone	4

	Seeing the cost of an evidence base	4
	Seeking transparency	2
	Spending opportunity cost	1
	Spending time for reporting	18
	Taking more energy	2
	Tick boxing	3
	Trying to be open and transparent	3
	Working on monitoring	2

Focused Code	
'Prioritising who to support (severity scales)	

Initial Code	References
Asking who is vulnerable	12
Harmonising severity scales	3
Identifying needs	22
Measuring severity	70
Prioritising beneficiaries	9
Questioning action vs. research	3

Focused Code	
'Resolving a problem (knowledge-driven)	

Initial Code	References
Arguing and programming on numbers available	10
Linking knowledge and programme	3
Numbers driving things	3

Focused Code	
'Seeking analytical techniques and rationality	

Initial Code	References
Admitting better than nothing	3
Analysing data	7
Developing governorate profiles	1
Ensuring no duplication	2
Establishing systems to account for numbers	13
Explaining MSNA	2
Getting abstract information	6
Having HNO and HRP	11
Having to validate every statement	3
Making scenarios	5
Preparing data collection	16
Triangulating	35
Using partial data	7

Tenet 2. Objectivity (disinterestedness)	

Focused Code	
'Quantifying	

Initial Code	References
Estimating child mortality	6
Estimating returnees	4
Making numbers consistent	2
Numbers entailing objectivity	10

	Numbers impacting people's life	1
	Numbers winning	1
	Quantifying achievements	13
	Relying on baseline data	10
	Requiring population estimate	17
	Seeing HNO as factual evidence	2
	Supporting EMIS	3
	There being nothing else	5
	Using census	6
	Using verified numbers	5
	Weighting data sources	1

Tenet 3. De-politicisation and democratisation	
Focused Code	
'Keeping away from politics and empowering	

Initial Code	References
Equalising the power of voices	1
Justifying decisions	2
Justifying their position	10
Seeing evidence as the backbone	1
Seeing things differently	1
Supporting schools	3
Using data for guidance	30
Using evidence for advocacy	24

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
1.3. Interpretivism (Regulatory scientism, relational and discursive thinking, malleability)	

Tenet 1. Complexity and non-linearity	
Focused Code	
'Grappling with uncertainty (data and situation)	

Initial Code	References
Being hit and miss	1
Being messy	5
Changing control areas	16
Changing over time	24
Data being obsolete	17
Falling out of formal domains	1
Generating different findings	6
Knowing data are flawed	3
Lacking clarity of situation	41
No one knowing children crossing the line for exams	5
Not able to foresee what's happening	1
Not knowing	32
Not understanding the big picture	3
Struggling with counting population	3
There being changes in population estimates	20
There being no accurate number	25
There being no reliable benchmark	4

Focused Code	
'Recognising grey reality	

Initial Code	References
Getting more complicated	17
Nothing being black and white	3
Seeing reality as more grey	8

Focused Code	
'Relying on local info	

Initial Code	References
Collecting info at community level	2
Not being homogeneous	11
Not using big numbers	2
Recognising differing needs	5

Focused Code	
'Unable to be scientific in conflict	

Initial Code	References
Being patchy	1
Bridging technical grounds	2
Calculating by percentage	8
Contradicting figures	4
Correcting methods	4
Correcting numbers	7
Cross referencing	1
Double counting	10
Engaging in difficult estimate	2
Exercising trials and errors	1
Little knowing who informants are	1
Not being able to verify	9
Not engaging in a politically driven survey	1
Putting different figures together	1
Recognising devil in details	1
Reconciling figures	7
Removing outliers	1
Selecting sample households	2
There being a methodological gap	17
There being no scientific estimate	14
There being no standards	3
Using different data sources	1
Using expert knowledge	16
Using methodologically wrong tools	8
Using SMART for national-level estimate	3
Valuing quality data and info	5

Tenet 2. Relationality (fuzzy fact-value lines)	

Focused Code	
'Holding different value assumptions	

Initial Code	References
Facing multiple realities	7
Having different motives	4

Focused Code	

'Lacking autonomy in knowing situations

Initial Code	References
Concerning data ownership	1
Not being approved	9
Relying on informants	32

Tenet 3. Politicisation and de-democratisation (post truth)	

Focused Code	

'Data being susceptible to politics and interests

Initial Code	References
Being cautious in reporting	5
Being far away from reality	4
Data being problematic	15
Dealing with data sensitivity	7
Distorting the picture	5
Not being honest	1
Not painting the whole picture	6
Not separating positivistic and interpretive approaches	2
Not taking severity as a bible	3
Numbers being tied up with money	13
Numbers meaning different things	2
Objectivity disappearing	2
Playing number games	13
Using data for any purpose	20

2. The actual	

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
2.1. Politicisation of evidence use	

Focused Code	
Selective use'	

Initial Code	References
Cherry-picking numbers	4
Not wanting to talk about what is not achieved	17
Seeking what you want	7
Using a single source	8
Using numbers for politics	17

Focused Code	
Data fabrication'	

Initial Code	References
Cooking numbers	1
Increasing child mortality	2
Inflating numbers	18
Negotiating data and numbers	1
Using wrong numbers	3

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
2.2. Political technology	

Focused Code	
'Making things seem neutral	

Initial Code	References
Depoliticising politics	1
Going above politics	2
Making spurious correlations	1
Treating data as reality	1

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
2.3. Educational exclusion	

Focused Code	
'Disturbing children's learning	

Discontinued education aid	

Initial Code	References
Asking if we reach the most vulnerable	7
Being between political factions	1
Missing operational continuality	11
Questioning if children are learning	25
Rights being undermined	10
Systematically excluding particular areas	6

Parallel education system	

Initial Code	References
Being certified and accredited by West	14
Presenting different systems in different locations	2
There being no teachers and textbooks	3
Using slightly different curriculum and textbooks	18
Worrying to create parallel education structures	22

Exam for accreditation and certification	

Initial Code	References
Crossing lines for exams	14
Taking exams again only a year after - taking time	3

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
2.4. Unexpected phenomena	

Focused Code	
'Being under pressure	

Initial Code	References
Being under stress	2
Having pressure	16

Focused Code	
'Humanitarian principles being sidelined	

Initial Code	References
Contravening humanitarian principles	6
Not adhering to humanitarian principles	25
Not being neutral	4
Taking sides	16

Focused Code	
'Leading to aid inefficiency	

Initial Code	References

Dividing affiliations	3
Limiting coverage and reach	5
Not considering cost efficiency	5

Focused Code	
'Politics delaying humanitarian decisions	

Initial Code	References
Addressing time constraints	3
Delivering aid to Dar'a	2
Diverting discussions	2
Slowing the process	2

Focused Code	
'Treating unfairly	

Initial Code	References
Not listening to Syrians	1

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
2.5. Humanitarian action	

Focused Code	
'Addressing humanitarian needs	

Initial Code	References
Addressing multiple vulnerabilities	3
Continuing humanitarian assistance	12
Explaining why OOSC remains high	10
Fleeing from Gov't control	1
Lacking funding	4
Making sure of aid utility	4
Putting OOSC as agenda	9
Shifting programme interventions	4
Supporting based on needs	46
Supporting niche areas	2
Supporting OOSC with SLP	8
There being massive needs	7

Focused Code	
'Making important decisions	

Initial Code	References
Being cautious of our investment	2
Pumping in millions of dollars	2

Focused Code	
'Operating in partnership	

Initial Code	References
Being expensive	1
Ensuring consultative process	2
Jointly working	3
Not being able to find partners	1
Working through NGOs	14

Focused Code	
'Prioritising accessibility	

Initial Code	References
Seeing sustained access as criteria	3

Focused Code	
'Providing ideal system support	

Initial Code	References
Supporting formal education system	18

Focused Code	
'Supporting the most vulnerable - equity	

Initial Code	References
Differentiating equity and equality	2

Focused Code	
'Valuing humanitarianism and professionalism	

Initial Code	References
Being professional	11
Being touted to abide by humanitarian principles	6
Dealing with rights protection	2
Ensuring impartiality	39
Performing as a moral compass	4
There being humanitarian exception	1

Focused Code	
'Valuing WOS	

Initial Code	References
Bringing actors all together	12
Capacities being limited	10
Complementing the Gov't	3
Defining access to hard-to-reach areas	7
Defining newly accessible areas	8
Improving coordination	6
Leveraging over all actors	2
Prioritising HTR and besieged areas	17
Supporting from where we can	2
Taking a Whole of Syria (WOS) approach	17

3. The real	

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
3.1. Political Discourse - Values and motives	

Values and motives	

Focused Code	
'Carrying political motives in aid	

Initial Code	References
Bringing in with propaganda	1
Donors presenting its interests	9
Engaging in cross-border operation	10
Engaging in stabilisation	50
Having an agenda	1
Investing in Syria's resilience	11
Not being politically acceptable	1

Not supporting ISIS areas		1
Problematising legitimacy		4
Seeing structure as a root cause		5
Seeking a political transition		9
Seeking accountability and transitional justice		2
Supporting opposition-held areas		23
Supporting reconciliation		3
Supporting teacher incentives		17
Wanting to support moderate opposition groups		3

Focused Code	
'Playing a political game - Contradiction	

Initial Code	References
Being hypocritical	2
Contradicting conditions	4
Counting a political gain or loss	5
Covering all of Syria	3
Looking at things thru political lens	12
Playing both sides	2
Reflecting government's views	1
Turning humanitarian into politicisation	10

Focused Code	
'Political elements Influencing	

Initial Code	References
Being modded or influenced	4
Coming from opposition areas	1
Interpreting needs based on politics	20
Not toppling the tower with one evidence	1
Not wanting to legitimise Turkish presence	4
Political interests overriding education needs	19
Politics driving us	56

Focused Code	
'Political landscape forming donor policy directions	

Initial Code	References
Being influenced by media	6
Being sceptical of development support	1
Changing political stance	2
Not being static	1
Opposition areas disappearing	1
Reassessing willingness of political transition	9
Slowly disappearing	2
There being hype	3

Focused Code	
'Projecting their political desires to data	

Initial Code	References
Gov't giving impression of normalisation	7
Illustrating your vision	1
Willing to make data reflect their interests	13

Measures (sanctions)	
Focused Code	
'Allocating money based on political interests (funding conditionality)	

Initial Code	References
Being restricted with donor conditionality	50
Dictating where resources are spent	4
Donors telling where to go	6
Having political funding	3
Money being taken away	2
Not supporting a particular activity	3
Scrutinising data	4
Scrutinising everything	14
Vetting beneficiaries	4
Vetting questions to ask	1

Focused Code	
'Enforcing sanctions	

Initial Code	References
Allocating more money to opposition areas	21
Capitals directing foreign policies	35
Following parliaments' position	3
Not being able to work with Ministry	12
Preventing the collapse of state structure	1
Putting blanket sanctions	1
Restricting sanctions to specific targets	4
Setting a red line	13
There being no engagement by Gov't	2

Focused Code	
'Worrying how they appear to taxpayers	

Initial Code	References
Addressing counter-terrorism	10
Addressing unwelcomed refugees	7
Being seen as furthering the Gov't	16
Caring taxpayers	8
Distinguishing between humanitarian and stabilisation	7
Donors not supporting radical opposition groups	13
Gov't having fear to conflict with international law	1
Having fear of funding being diverted	15
Justifying how money was spent	7
Not supporting the UN	1
Not wanting country to be jeopardised	1
Not wanting to be seen as subsidising Gov't	21
Not wanting to look bad	17
Not wanting to share risks	1
Saving face	1
There being justifiable fear	5
Worrying national security	4

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
3.2. Social Discourse – Distrust	

Focused Code	
'Competing and not trusting	

Initial Code	References
Arguing it's a fake	1
Being stubborn	1
Competing others	2
Confronting political clash	6
Counter-arguing for justification	2
Data being unreliable	22
Disputing numbers	11
Not trusting government data	13
There being tension and suspicion	39

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
3.3. Financial Discourse - Fund-raising motives	

Focused Code	
'Seeking financial resources	

Initial Code	References
Asking for everything available	2
Bargaining for money	2
Dealing with ethical questions	2

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
3.4. Emotional Discourse – Emotions	

Focused Code	
'Elevating hatred over reasons	

Initial Code	References
Basing bad faith	2
Being emotionally involved	12
Being hostile	9
Seeing opposition as terrorists	1

Focused Code	
'Reacting with emotion	

Initial Code	References
Getting frustrated	13

Theoretical Categorisation and Redescription	
3.5. Professional & Managerial Discourse - Ontological monovalence	

Focused Code	
'Blinding ourselves with evidence use (the other side of severity scales)	

Initial Code	References
Being forgotten	4
Being hard to see what's happening in opposition areas	5
Being status quo and no learning	2
Getting things neglected	1
Having little presence and little info	1
Perpetuating the gaps	1
There being people underserved	2

4. Reflexivity	

Focused Code	
'Challenging data	

Initial Code	References
Asking who's questioning	4
Investing in data	20
Not taking it as face value	1
Questioning how we use data for what	9
Questioning of what numbers are used and not	7
Questioning research findings	1

Focused Code	
'Hegemony - Cementing the ruled	

Initial Code	References
Being complicit	2

Focused Code	
'Making trade-offs – pragmatism	

Initial Code	References
Affirming both are right	2
Balancing and compromising (Trade-offs)	18
Becoming a futile endeavour	1
Being mandated and accepted to operate	1
Being muddled	1
Being not so productive	1
Being pragmatic in partnership	2
Dealing with trade-offs	1
Disclaiming numbers	2
Finding ourselves in between	1
Knowing what to do	1
Positioning UNICEF's stance in dilemma	14
Prevailing with truth	1
Putting footnote	1
Putting pride aside	1
There being no useless data	1

Focused Code	
'Others	

Initial Code	References
Already having programme ideas	2
Counter-balancing fragilities	1
Doing remote management	7
Getting services	1
Happening everywhere	2
Internal arrangement changing	5
Telling different country examples	2

Focused Code	
'Provisional knowing in conflict (fallible knowledge)	

Initial Code	References
Finding trends	4
Having grey knowledge	1

	Making sense of things you see	2
	Making the best estimate	16
	Not practising an evidence base	1
	Using guestimates	4
Focused Code		
'Reflecting		
	Initial Code	**References**
	Accepting what you don't want	2
	Asking why we're doing this survey	2
	Being conflict sensitive	6
	Being counterfactual	1
	Knowing you don't know	1
	Measuring the impact of evidence use	1
	Mixing confidence and ignorance	1
	Reflecting on evidence use	7
	Reflecting the way we work	22
	Thinking stories behind numbers	7
	Using common sense	4
	Valuing evidence literacy	13