

TECHNICAL BRIEF:

**Understanding the
Dimensions of Conflict &
Crisis**

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

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

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

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

Disclaimer

This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed here are entirely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the ERICC Programme, the authors’ respective organisations, or the UK government’s official policies. Copyright lies with the author of a paper; however, as per ERICC contracts, the authors have granted permission for the non-commercial use of the intellectual property to ERICC Research Programme Consortium, and by extension to the funder.

Suggested citation

Use and reproduction of material from ERICC publications are encouraged, as long as they are not for commercial purposes, and as long as there is due attribution. Suggested citation: Falk, D., Pherali, T., Diazgranados, S., Homonchuk, O. (September 2024). Understanding the Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis. ERICC Technical Brief. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.27119604.v2>



A. Context matters for education

Perhaps now more than at any other time in recent history children are seeking schooling amid uncertainty (Nicolai et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2021). To date, nearly 120 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes (UNHCR, 2023a), and compounded crises – including global health pandemics, climate-induced disasters, economic shocks, and wars, to name a few – disrupt the provision of education and adversely affect learners and teachers alike (Education Cannot Wait, 2023; UNHCR, 2023b). Amid such insecurity, education can provide protection for children in their day-to-day lives, while also building social foundations towards long-term goals of sustainable development and peace (Aguilar & Retamal 2009; Arega, 2023; Jordans, Pigott, & Tol, 2016; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Pherali, 2019, 2022; Tol et al., 2013; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Yet, multidimensional challenges hinder efforts to deliver quality, inclusive education in these settings, with many children and youth struggling to attend, progress, learn, and thrive in formal and nonformal schools (Ghafter-Kucher, 2018; Mendenhall et al., Forthcoming; Sommers & Nasrallah, 2024).

Exacerbating these challenges is the lack of a coherent body of evidence on what has worked, how, and for whom to improve education outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings (Kim et al., 2024a). While there have been several rigorous or systematic reviews with the aim of synthesising educational interventions in these settings (Aber et al., 2021; Burde et al., 2019; Deitz et al., 2021; Diazgranados Ferráns et al., 2024; Lasater et al., 2022), significant gaps remain regarding how children learn while their communities are caught in the middle of complex crises that frequently disrupt teaching and learning. Further, disparate descriptions of conflict and crisis limit analytical comparisons of educational systems; reforms, programmes and practices; drivers of learning and development; and individual and societal outcomes across diverse conflict and crisis contexts.

To effectively identify not only what is likely to work, but also how, for whom, at what cost, and under what conditions, it is critical to better understand the characteristics of different conflict-affected and crisis settings. The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) programme has thus developed the Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis to characterise the settings within which educational conditions are shaped and policies and programmes are designed to improve access, quality, and continuity of education in order to support children’s learning and development. Understanding these dimensions will enable researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to ask contextually relevant questions on the nature of conflict and crisis; develop policies and programmes that are conflict- and crisis-sensitive; and adapt educational responses when the contexts of conflict and crisis change over time.

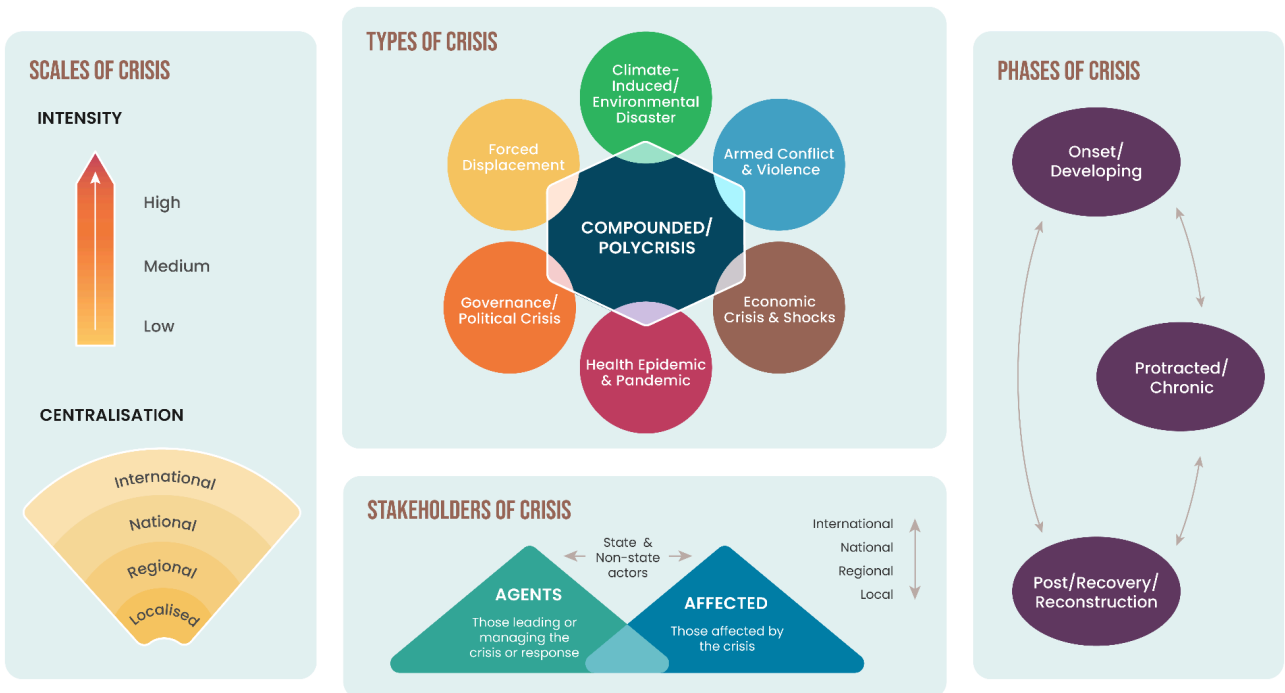
B. ERICC Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis

There are four key dimensions that characterise the conflict and crises within which educational conditions are shaped, and policies and programmes are designed to improve access, quality, and continuity of education in order to support children’s learning and development (Figure 1):

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

These four dimensions emerged most prominently across a rapid, rigorous review of more than 100 resources on tools and frameworks for identifying and analysing conflict, crisis, and education, as well as through multiple in-person and virtual consultations with ERICC consortium partners. The dimensions represent key categories to consider when seeking to understand the settings affected by conflict and crisis, and serve as a heuristic tool to describe the contextual setting of conflict and crisis for research studies.

Figure 1. Four key dimensions of conflict and crisis



Box 1. ERICC's three complementary tools

The Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis complement ERICC's Conceptual Framework (Kim et al., 2024) and Political Economy Analysis (PEA) Framework (Homonchuck et al., 2024) to situate and describe the settings in which research has been, or is being planned to be, conducted. These complementary tools improve evidence organisation, generation, and decision-making, by making it possible to recognise how conflict, crisis, and education influence and interact with one another over time and across multiple levels. Education systems are situated within complex historical, social, political, and economic structures of society, which affect its purpose, goals, policies, and everyday practices. ERICC's three tools acknowledge this and provide a rigorous, standardised approach to analyse education systems to enable an understanding of how best to support children's learning and development in conflict and crisis settings. In this way, ERICC's three tools provide researchers with a roadmap for examining:

- What researchers need to understand in terms of the education system and pathways for learning (conceptual framework)
- Where these education systems and pathways for learning are located (dimensions)
- How to analyse education systems, pathways for learning, and contextual settings, as well as the relationship between education and the conflict and crisis (PEA framework)

The Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis do not aim to replace existing approaches for analysing conflict and crisis, nor do they provide a new typology or framework for assessing conflict and crisis. Instead, they aim to describe these phenomena and provide a common language to encourage and enable comparison of evidence across conflict and crisis settings. Currently, there are multiple approaches for identifying and analysing conflict and crisis, from bilateral and multilateral agencies, United Nations agencies, academics and scholars, and humanitarian and development organisations, across the fields of conflict, refugee and forced migration, disaster risk reduction, international relations, and comparative and international education, among others. These approaches provide evidence-based tools and frameworks for better understanding the contextual setting of conflict and crisis for multiple purposes, such as to design and/or evaluate education interventions or conduct risk and resilience assessments. However, while they enable rigorous analysis of the conflict or crisis within a particular setting, they often remain institutionally siloed and confined within individual fields. This limits the potential to develop a comprehensive approach to analyse crisis-affected contexts or settings with a conflict-sensitive lens and critical perspective.

The ERICC Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis aim to help researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers better organise existing evidence and identify evidence gaps across diverse contexts of conflict and crises by introducing shared and standardised language. At a technical level, this will enable comparison to assess the relevance and applicability of findings across different settings. At a conceptual level, it will enable research design to utilise sampling and analytical approaches that

facilitate deeper understanding of the bidirectional relationship between conflict, crisis, and education across diverse settings affected by conflict and crisis.

C. Defining and understanding the dimensions

The four Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis are the types, phases, scales and stakeholders in conflict and crisis settings.

Types of conflict and crisis describe the emergency and/or insecurity. While there are distinct categories, most settings experience **polycrisis or compounded crises**, where multiple types of crises are present, interacting with one another and often exacerbating the crises or causing new crises (UNICEF, 2023). Thus, while we outline below specific types of crises, it is important to recognise that they often exist concurrently and in relation to one another (Davies, 2003; Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

- **Armed conflict and violence.** *Armed conflict* refers to interstate (between two or more states)/intrastate (between state and non-state actors within existing borders)/extra-state (between state and non-state actors beyond existing borders)/sub-state (between non-state actors independent of existing borders) violent conflicts (Chojnacki, 2006). The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) defines an armed conflict as ‘a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory over which the use of armed force between the military forces of two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, has resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths each year’ (Gleditsch et al., 2002: 619). A more helpful qualitative definition, used by the Working Group for Research on the Causes of War (AKUF) (2016), specifies five types of wars in terms of the object and goals of the conflicting parties: ‘anti-regime wars’ (e.g. Syria), ‘wars of autonomy and secession’ (e.g. Timor-Leste), ‘interstate wars’ (e.g. Ukraine and Russia) and ‘decolonisation wars’ (e.g. Algerian war of independence) are concerned with freedom and change of political authority; there are also ‘ethnic wars’ (e.g. the Yugoslav war and the Darfur conflict) and ‘revolutionary wars’ (e.g. the Maoist rebellion in Nepal). UCDP also accounts for a further category of internationalised intrastate violent conflict (e.g. Afghanistan). Each type of conflict has distinct political characteristics and therefore differentiated effects on social sectors such as education. *Violence* is a dominant feature of armed conflicts but it may occur in many other scenarios. It may include terrorism, gang violence, communal fighting and violence against specific populations – such as sexual and gender-based violence or violence against minority groups, including linguistic, ethnic or religious groups, among others (ICRC, 2011; UNDRR, 2023b). In a broad theoretical sense, violence can manifest itself not only physically but also in the form of structural, cultural and symbolic violence (Galtung, 1969).
- **Climate-induced/environmental disasters** refer to natural and human-made crises including earthquakes, typhoons and hurricanes, landslides, flooding, tsunamis, drought and famine, as well as changing or inconsistent rainy seasons, which disrupt cultivation and livestock production, among others (UNDRR, 2023). These disasters disrupt the functioning of local, regional and/or national systems and often impede the capacity of populations to cope (DFID, 2002). Recurrent

and intensifying disasters often disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable groups in the global south despite being primarily driven by the global north (Global Hub for EIE, 2023).

- **Forced displacement** is often a consequence of other crises and refers to emergencies or insecurity that force populations to flee their homes across national borders to become refugees, or within their countries to become internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2023a). Forced displacement affects both the populations forced to flee and the communities within which they seek refuge, who often are marginalised themselves and confronted with acute, and frequently recurrent, influxes of displaced populations (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).
- **Economic crisis and shocks** refer to both chronic poverty and acute fiscal crises that affect the economic health and well-being of a community or country. It can include high rates of unemployment, rising inflation, inequitable access to social welfare, widening economic disparities based on regional or ethnic divisions, increased competition over resources, and macroeconomic instability, among others (DFID, 2002; UNICEF, 2019).
- **Health epidemics and pandemics** refer to the often sudden and unexpected spread of disease within a community, region, or country (epidemic), or worldwide (pandemic) (IFRC, n.d.). These illnesses can occur through air, water, food, bodily fluids, or vectors and are serious health threats and infectious hazards at the local, regional, national, and global level (IFRC, n.d.; WHO, n.d.).
- **Governance/political crisis** refers to the deterioration or collapse of political and administrative systems, often because of widespread corruption, misappropriation of public funds, lack of transparency and accountability, inequitable provision of social service and administrative systems, nepotism, weakly institutionalised or an unrepresentative governing body, and flawed election processes, among others (DFID, 2002; UNICEF, 2019).

Phases of conflict and crisis describe the duration or timing of the emergency and/or insecurity. Conflict and crisis are not linear; while distinct phases of conflict, crisis, and response have been documented, in reality they are often complex, iterative, and overlapping (Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2015). It is challenging to untangle the interconnected dimensions of and relationships between conflict, crisis, and education as their sum is not reducible to their parts; yet, to understand their multifaceted connections and interactions, it is pertinent to identify and analyse these parts (Davies, 2003).

- **Onset/developing** refers to the immediate or beginning phase of the conflict and/or crisis. In this phase, conflict or crises may have recently occurred or increased in intensity (Burde et al., 2015).
- **Protracted/chronic** refers to recurrent, ongoing or prolonged phases of emergencies and insecurity where there is often insufficient institutional capacity to react or respond (INEE, n.d.).
- **Recovery/reconstruction** refers to the post-conflict or post-crisis phase, often guided by development principles aimed at fostering resilience and restoring the capacity of local, regional, and national institutions to recover and prepare for ongoing and future crises (IASC, 2008).

Scales of conflict and crisis describe the magnitude and spread of the emergency and/or insecurity. **Intensity** refers to the magnitude of the conflict or crisis, which can vary from low to high intensity.

Centralisation refers to the concentration or spread of the conflict or crisis, and can vary from localised pockets to subnational, national, and international levels.

Stakeholders of conflict and crisis describe the groups of people involved in the emergency or insecurity, from those contributing to the conflict or crisis to those leading the humanitarian response to those most affected (UNDP, 2016). **Agents** refer to individuals, groups, or institutions that cause, drive, or influence the conflict or crisis as well as entities that lead the response. **Affected populations** refer to the individuals or groups most impacted or influenced by the conflict or crisis. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and often those most affected by the conflict and crisis are also those leading the response. The simplification of these categories is to assist with immediate analysis of the setting experiencing conflict and crisis, while PEA and critical approaches are required to understand the complex social reality of the individuals, communities, and entities involved in conflict and crisis.

D. Conclusion

Conflict and crisis settings differ in terms of characteristics, such as type, phase, scale, and stakeholders involved, but also in terms of education provision and the relationship between conflict, crisis, and education (Davies, 2005; Gross & Davies, 2015; Kirk, 2007). In many contexts, more than one crisis is prevalent, creating a situation of polycrisis or compounded crises (UNICEF, 2023a). Education research in these settings needs to account for how the processes of education intersect with the complexity of multiple crises affecting the lives of children, youth, educators, and the broader community.

The Dimensions of Conflict & Crisis provide researchers with an organisational and analytical tool to better understand, describe, and generate contextual knowledge of conflict and crisis settings. A nuanced understanding of these dimensions can aid researchers and evidence users in the process of identifying the degree to which evidence generated in a given conflict and crisis setting, with a given population, can provide insights and inform policy and practice decisions in a different setting, or for a different population. The complex, persistent, and pervasive nature of conflict and crisis requires standardised approaches for describing these settings, to make it possible to build a cohesive evidence base and research agenda for understanding, and ultimately improving, access, quality, and continuity of education for children and youth, regardless of where they live.

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