

Teachers crisis contexts: A forgotten factor in the right to quality education

Prepared by Chris Henderson, Geneva Graduate Institute, with inputs from members of the [Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies](#) and the [Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies \(INEE\) Teachers in Crisis Contexts \(TiCC\)](#) Working Group.

“Sometimes I ask myself if it is because I am a refugee teacher that I suffer? But then I realise that it is because not everyone prioritises education”

- Aloyo Stella Oryang, a South Sudanese refugee teacher in Uganda, at the Education Cannot Wait High-level Financing Conference, 2022

1. The rights of teachers in international instruments and frameworks

The [1966 UNESCO-ILO Recommendations on the Status of Teachers](#), an outcome of the Special Intergovernmental Conference on the Status of Teachers, acknowledges that the fulfilment of [Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) on the basic human right to education extends to and is dependent on the rights of teachers. The document notes the essential role of teachers in educational advancement and the importance of their contribution to the development of society. As such, teachers should enjoy the compensation and protection befitting the status of their role. The document’s guiding principles also state that “teachers should be free from any form of discrimination on grounds of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, or economic condition” (Principle 7) and that “working conditions for teachers should be such as will best promote effective learning and enable teachers to concentrate on their professional tasks” (Principle 8). Moreover, with regards to the rights of teachers, recommendation 79 states that “the participation of teachers in social and public life should be encouraged in the interests of the teacher’s personal development, of the education service, and of society as a whole.” And finally, recommendation 80 states that “teachers should be free to exercise all civic rights generally enjoyed by citizens.”

Aside from the above-cited UNESCO-ILO document, there is little mention of teachers in international human rights instruments. In addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the broad right to education is guaranteed through the the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (1966), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (1989), the [International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (1965), the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (1979), and the [International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants](#) (2005). Yet without guaranteeing the rights of teachers within these instruments and national education systems, the extent to which the right to quality education is guaranteed to all children and adolescents, as defined by [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#), is tenuous.

Within global documents focused on Education in Emergencies (EiE) settings, which refers to the coordination and provision of quality learning and psychosocial support in contexts affected

by conflict, forced displacement, or environmental disasters, the articulation of teachers' rights and needs are weak or altogether absent. For example, the [UNHCR Global Framework for Refugee Education](#) (2019) calls for increased attention to and support for refugee teachers so that refugee children have access to more capable teachers, rather than teachers' own right to investments in their wellbeing, lifelong learning, and development. Similarly, the [UNHCR Education Strategy 2030](#) (2019) promotes harmonised approaches to engaging qualified refugee teachers in national system schools, but again the focus is on better outcomes for refugee children and less on the rights of refugee teachers to the recognition and security afforded by national system inclusion. The second edition of the [Global Compact for Refugees Indicator Framework](#) (2022) also recognizes education as a crucial element of durable solutions for refugees and calls for greater investments in the sector, yet makes no mention of refugee or host-community teachers.

A shift in tone and focus is seen in the [UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting recommendation 14](#) (2021), which calls for improved participation and inclusion of refugee teachers in the design, implementation, and review of education interventions. This is in line with the [Transforming Education Summit's Action Track 3 Strategy 8](#) (2022), which calls for the inclusion of refugee teachers in national teacher management and development systems. In EiE settings, the most pertinent document guiding the realisation of the rights of teachers is [The Safe Schools Declaration Framework for Action](#) (2015), which states that "every teacher, professor, and school administrator should be able to teach and research in conditions of safety, security, and dignity."

Despite promising strides in the promotion of children and adolescents' right to education through international instruments and frameworks, **teachers are a forgotten factor in the right to quality education** in crisis contexts. In fact, without the prioritisation of teachers' rights, quality education is unattainable in the world's most complex and protracted settings.

2. Teachers' work in crisis contexts

"Education cannot wait, but without quality teachers education cannot work"

- Dr. Heike Kuhn, Head of Division, Education, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development Germany, at the United Nations Transforming Education Summit, 2022

[Teachers are at the heart of education sector recovery](#) as schooling systems across the globe continue to grapple with the lasting effects of the COVID-19 health pandemic. Though the scale and scope of the pandemic was unprecedented -- disrupting teaching and learning for [1.6 billion students and more than 100 million teachers and school personnel](#) -- countless educators have been teaching amidst conflict, crisis, and displacement for decades ([Sherif, Brooks, & Mendenhall, 2020](#)). In many instances, the pandemic compounded the stressors that teachers in crisis contexts already contend with and further eroded teachers' basic right to the status, compensation, and protection that should be afforded to teachers everywhere, regardless of the context in which they work.

It is well documented that amidst crises the support available to teachers is sporadic, uncoordinated, and of varied quality ([Burns & Lawrie, 2015](#)), that teacher management policies frequently restrict compensation, benefits, and long-term engagement in the profession ([Mendenhall, Gomez, & Varni, 2018](#)), and that teacher well-being is often overlooked despite the stressful (and sometimes traumatic) nature of teachers' work ([Falk et al., 2019, 2021](#); [INEE, 2021](#)). Further to this, the constellation of actors working closely with teachers -- most notably their supervisors and school leaders -- receive insufficient professional development support to create a positive school climate that enables teachers to effectively and safely carry out the roles expected of them ([Mendenhall et al., 2021](#)).

Opportunities for refugee teachers are additionally limited because their work is rarely protected by the labour standards of host countries ([UNHCR, 2022](#)). The lack of recognition and inadequate support systems for teachers in refugee-hosting areas has negative implications for their own job satisfaction, engagement, and wellbeing, which is also shown to have a negative flow-on effect for refugee children's schooling, achievement, and future prospects. And while refugee teachers are visible to the humanitarian sector, they are rarely prioritised and largely neglected in the national education system sector reviews that drive multi-year education planning and in the budgets that address teachers' most basic needs and rights ([UNHCR, 2022a](#)). In sum, the work of teaching, while offering some stability amid the uncertainty of complex crises, can also exacerbate the detrimental impact that a lack of rights has on individuals' wellbeing in crisis-affected settings ([Henderson, Mansour, & Hough, 2023](#)). At the extreme end of the spectrum, the work of teaching in protracted crises denies too many teachers the right to live with dignity ([GCPEA, 2015](#); [Sphere, 2018](#)).

3. Why teaching in crisis contexts is different

"You expect refugee teachers to be agents of change, but you refuse to provide us with the resources we need for our own agency"

- Mary Maker, former South Sudanese refugee teacher in Kenya, at the United Nations Transforming Education Summit, 2022

The rights of teachers in crisis contexts are further eroded by the conditions in which they work and as such it is important to outline the structural and systemic conditions that define (and degrade) the experience of teaching. In low income and developing country contexts, the development sector response is focused on long-term needs whereas humanitarian sector responses in acute crises are focused on short-term solutions. In development settings, interventions focus on policies and practices that benefit a broad population, whereas in humanitarian settings responses target a crisis-affected population within the broader context. In development, schools are intended to be permanent with investments in long-term infrastructure strengthening. In humanitarian settings, classrooms are designed to be temporary and rapid supply disbursement is a priority. Similarly, in development settings teachers are educated, certified and recruited to be career professionals, whereas teachers in humanitarian settings are often 'tentative' or 'spontaneous' teachers, many of whom volunteer or are selected by their communities, and receive only short-term contracts with inadequate and irregular stipends ([Kirk & Winthrop, 2007](#); [Dryden-Peterson, 2022](#)). Moreover, where teachers in development settings

teach national subject-based curriculum and contribute towards national assessments, teachers in humanitarian settings often teach ad-hoc or emergency curricula, with no assessment or certification opportunities and a focus on child and adolescent psycho-social support and socio-emotional learning.

Many refugee teachers who qualified in their country-of-origin also struggle to receive recognition of their teacher qualifications in countries of asylum, which hinders their access to the workforce and often condemns them to voluntary or community teacher status and inadequate 'incentive' pay ([UNHCR, 2018](#)). For teachers who have the opportunity to return to their country of origin, they face concurrent challenges in receiving recognition of experience and qualifications obtained in countries of asylum, sometimes over many years or decades. As such, poor recognition of experience and qualifications across borders limits refugee teachers' professional opportunities, access to further training and development, and job and employment prospects, which affects teachers' livelihoods and wellbeing and inhibits their aspirations for community and nation building through the work of teaching ([Dryden-Peterson, 2017](#)).

What these examples illustrate, is that while the UNESCO-ILO Recommendations on the Status of Teachers (1966) might apply to and uphold the rights of teachers working in development and high-income contexts, for teachers in fragile and crisis-affected settings structural and systemic barriers common to humanitarian responses fail to offer the same protections, thus perpetuating a crisis in teacher mental health, wellbeing, and retention ([Falk et al. 2019](#)) and worsening the sectors' ability to recruit, train, and retain a quality teacher workforce ([Mendenhall, Gomez, & Varni, 2018](#)).

4. Teachers as targets

"Education is important for everybody. But especially for those who have lost everything."

- Filipino Grande, Commissioner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the Education Cannot Wait High-level Financing Conference, 2022.

Teachers and other education personnel regularly come under attack while carrying out their duties in armed conflicts around the world ([GCPEA, 2014](#)). In 2020 and 2021, GCPEA identified 630 reported incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and education personnel across 28 profiled countries ([GCPEA, 2022](#)). In some contexts, teachers are killed, abducted, or threatened because they are seen as representing the state and/or for their membership in teachers' unions. In other conflicts, they are killed or injured by explosive weapons on their way to or from school or in violent clashes between armed forces and armed groups. Teachers also suffer sexual violence during or after attacks on schools by armed forces or groups ([GCPEA, 2014](#); [Save the Children, 2015](#)). In addition, when schools and universities are used as bases and barracks or for other military purposes, they can be targeted by opposing forces, placing teachers at considerable risk ([GCPEA, 2014](#); [GCPEA, 2022](#)). Globally, incidents of military use of schools and universities more than doubled between 2020 and 2021 ([GCPEA, 2022](#)).

The effects of these realities are pronounced. For example, in Colombia many teachers report that threats and acts of violence towards them shifts the quality and efficacy of their teaching

practices. Some teachers report that violence alters their sense of trust and the authenticity of their engagement with students and families. Teachers also report that they avoid teaching certain subjects due to the violence that state-sanctioned themes or histories can incite ([FECODE, 2021](#); [GCPEA, 2014](#)). Some teachers who actively engage in peacebuilding efforts to curb the recruitment of their students to armed forces have also been targeted by paramilitary groups, thus demotivating teachers from undertaking such vital initiatives ([FECODE, 2021](#)). In El Salado, for example, all 25 teachers working at one school received messages from an unidentified paramilitary group threatening to kill and dismember them on their way to school ([GCPEA, 2022](#)). Incidents like these are not isolated.

In Afghanistan, the re-accendence of the Taliban has resulted in numerous teachers and education leaders being threatened, arrested, and killed for promoting girls' education ([Al Jazeera, 2023](#); [GCPEA, 2021](#)). In Burkina Faso, over 230 teachers were targeted with violence in 2020 ([Amnesty International, 2021](#); [GCPEA, 2022](#)). As in Nigeria and Cameroon, armed groups like Boko Haram that oppose western-oriented education threatened, killed, or abducted educators in Burkina Faso to prevent them from teaching the national curriculum ([GCPEA, 2022](#)). In Syria, GCPEA ([2022](#)) describes how Syrian Democratic Forces explicitly target and forcibly conscript teachers. And in Myanmar, teachers aligned with the National Unity Government have been targeted by state forces, with over 40 teachers targeted and killed between 2021 and 2022 ([Save the Children, 2021](#)).

Conclusion

"I just want the freedom to be a professional"

- Ro Mujif, Rohingya refugee teacher, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

What this brief makes clear is that **teachers in crisis contexts are a forgotten factor in the right to quality education**. While international legal instruments and frameworks promote teachers' work and right to live with dignity, we see that teachers in crisis contexts are denied access to the continuous professional development, commensurate compensation, and formal recognition that allows them to engage in lifelong learning and enjoy the status of their profession. Instead, as conflict and the global population of forcibly displaced individuals reaches unprecedented levels, coupled with the effects of climate change and reduced humanitarian funding, we see that teachers' work in crisis contexts is a wellbeing risk in and of itself ([Henderson, Mansour, & Hough, 2023](#); [INEE, 2022](#)). As such, to promote and address the rights of teachers in crisis contexts is to invest in the material and symbolic factors that improve the conditions in which teachers work, thereby enhancing their dignity as valued and respected professionals.