



Displacement and Education: The challenge of accessibility for IDP children worldwide

This short piece marking the International Day of Education calls attention to internally displaced children worldwide, who are frequently denied their fundamental right to an education. With essential input from the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC), the article looks at how and why so many IDP children are unable to access schooling. It also highlights the severe repercussions on child development, health and long-term well-being. Drawing on examples from around the world and insights from existing data on gaps and good practices, the authors highlight steps that must be taken to ensure the right of IDP children to go to school.

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Introduction

Marking the International Day of Education, we want to give visibility to one of the most neglected and under-documented groups of children: internally displaced girls and boys forced to leave their homes because of conflicts, violence or disasters, whose education is often interrupted, jeopardized or ended prematurely.¹ As highlighted in [international law](#), children have a right to access education; education should be treated as a primary right, not a '[secondary need](#)'. In some cases, the interruption of education is temporary, but as protracted displacement situations arise, children can face [years of interrupted education](#). The necessity of addressing school accessibility challenges for IDP children is clear. The protection of IDP children's access to free education at the primary level, as called for in the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), provides

a sense of stability and is beneficial to children's [mental health and well-being](#).

Conflicts, violence and disasters forced nearly [32 million children under the age of 18](#) into internal displacement in 2023, the highest number on record. Conflicts in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen accounted for over half of them. [Continued crises throughout 2024](#) prompted more children to flee, sometimes without their families. Being displaced, even within one's own country, can have [severe repercussions on education](#). Internally displaced children often see their education at least temporarily interrupted and may struggle to catch up once they are able to go back to school. They sometimes must adapt to different curricula or classes held in another language. They may also face stigma and trauma from their displacement or the events that prompted it. Access to education during displacement and emergencies serves as a foundation for [self-reliance and recovery](#), highlighting the importance of cooperation and coordination to limit the length of time without access.

This article provides an overview of the state of knowledge on the impacts of internal displacement on education, highlighting examples from some of the world's most severe crises across different regions. Existing data and remaining gaps in understanding how best to support internally displaced children's education are also presented, along with examples of successful support.

Internally displaced children's access to education

Evidence from Multi-Sector Needs Assessments (MSNAs) indicates that in several humanitarian crises in 2024, IDP children had significantly less access to formal education than non-displaced children. For example, in [Burkina Faso](#), only 51% of school-aged IDP children were reported to have attended formal school at some point during the 2023-2024 school year – much less than the reported 76% of non-displaced children. In [Mali](#), the difference was even more pronounced as only 36% of IDP children reportedly accessed education compared to 65% of non-displaced children.

In some contexts, MSNA data also suggests that IDP children from households living with host families have better access to education than those living in IDP housing sites or camps. For example, in the [DRC](#), only 37% of site-based IDP children attended formal schooling – less than the reported 64% of IDP children from households living with host families and 75% of non-displaced children. Similarly, in the [Central African Republic \(CAR\)](#), only 70% of site-based IDP children had access to formal schooling, compared to 74% of children living with host families and 80% of non-displaced children. However, in some contexts, IDP children were not found to be worse off in terms of access to education, so it is essential to better account for local contexts and IDP profiles.

Barriers to education in internal displacement

When children are uprooted from their homes, schools and familiar environments, they are confronted with specific challenges that often affect their education. Some of the most frequently documented barriers to education in internal displacement include distance from school, lack of financial resources, loss of documentation, security risk, and negative repercussions on children's health or psychosocial well-being that make learning more difficult. IDP families often arrive when the school year has already begun or after the enrolment period, which may prevent their children from attending school. Additionally, enrolment in formal education can be hindered by loss of documentation. That, in turn, can impact the ability of IDP children to [enrol in higher education later](#) in life should they fail to obtain formal education documentation from earlier years.

Surveys conducted in the context of conflict-related displacement in [Colombia](#) and drought-related displacement in [Ethiopia](#) highlight physical distance from the nearest school as a key barrier for internally displaced children. When displaced people have to live in informal settlements, on the outskirts of towns or in under-resourced displacement camps, they may be unable to access schools or the transportation means needed to get there. Another potential barrier impacting both boys and girls is [physical safety](#) while traveling to and from school. In certain situations, the dangers of getting to school safely may deter attendance.

In some cases, educational facilities are simply not available, destroyed by the disasters or hostilities that prompted the displacement to begin with. The availability of resources, including [schools](#) in safe locations, can be drastically impacted in conflict situations. This is the case [in Gaza](#), where the Education Cluster estimates that nearly 90% of all school buildings had been destroyed or damaged as of March 2024. In other contexts, such [as Yemen](#), schools are used as temporary shelters to house displaced people, making it impossible for children to pursue their education free of significant disruption.

Financial difficulties faced by many displaced families, who lost their assets during their flight or can no longer pursue their habitual income-generating activities, are another frequent challenge. Even in contexts where access to public schools is free, associated costs, such as school materials, uniforms, transportation or meals, can constitute an obstacle. This was highlighted in the context of drought-related internal displacement [in Mogadishu, Somalia](#), and many other contexts. The reduction of costs to IDP families for school and the creation of [scholarships or stipends](#) would be a helpful step toward removing financial barriers.

Internal displacement can also result in the deterioration of children's physical and mental health and well-being. This, in turn, can damage their ability to learn. [In Sudan](#), as of November 2023, the malnutrition rate among children under five was the highest in the world, with 19 million children having lost access to education. The trauma faced by IDP children can negatively impact their well-being and the ability to receive [psychosocial support](#) through education, which can help mitigate adverse long-term consequences by [providing stability, a sense of normalcy](#), and the ability to foster social connections.

Differences in local languages and curricula can also make it more difficult for IDP children to integrate into local schools. In addition, the trauma coming from displacement can also affect children's ability to integrate, concentrate and learn. In many instances, schools and educational staff, with or without support from external actors, take measures to integrate IDP children. For example, they might waive school fees, pair IDP children with other children, or even reassess existing schooling plans.

Internal displacement can also strain the local education system in the host community, leading to a shortage of teaching and learning equipment, lack of space, or overcrowded classrooms. Additionally, in the [CAR](#) and the [DRC](#), 3% of the school-aged non-displaced children accessing education reportedly experienced disruptions to their education during the 2023-2024 school year because schools were used as IDP shelters. One proposed solution to a lack of teachers in IDP contexts is the [hiring of IDP teachers](#), including women, to improve accessibility, especially for girls seeking education.

Measuring the impacts of internal displacement on education

Internal displacement not only affects children's access to quality education but can have further repercussions on their health, well-being and future livelihoods, impacting their ability to contribute during adulthood and affecting the peace and development of their communities. Addressing barriers to education in internal displacement contexts is therefore particularly important for affected children and society at large. Yet, the data that would allow proper planning and support are lacking. To date, [there are no internationally comparable figures](#) on school attendance, completion and learning outcomes of IDP children. Multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as the [International Data Alliance for Children on the Move](#), the [Global Education Cluster](#), and the [Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies](#), seek to coordinate data collection efforts better and harmonize definitions and methodologies, but more progress is needed.

Comprehensive and detailed information on how internal displacement impacts children's education is also lacking in many contexts. One of the reasons is that survey sampling frames are not consistent with the latest population movements and updated population figures. Another reason is the lack of disaggregated displacement status data, including gender, age, and ability. It is, however, crucial to identify and tailor support for groups of children at higher risk of staying out of school. For instance, research has found that in some contexts, [internally displaced girls](#) are less able than boys to pursue their education, while in other contexts, boys are more affected. Children with disabilities or from minority groups or poorer families may also require dedicated attention.

Lack of financial resources to address internal displacement, support internally displaced people and conduct the necessary assessments to inform needed interventions remains the most critical issue, more so than methodological, technical, security or accessibility concerns and challenges. Because we have a general understanding of what barriers exist but limited demographic data on children displaced globally, improvements must be made in the collection of [regular, relevant, and disaggregated data](#) for factors such as age, disability, sex, and education. There are several barriers to education faced by IDP children, including interruptions to their education and development, thereby impacting their mental well-being as they try to work through the experiences that led to displacement. Education is a right, and understanding the barriers can help us better develop systems to increase accessibility in displacement situations across the globe.

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