



Disrupted Education

a View from Inside Syria:

Critical literature review and lessons
for policy and practice.

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Abstract: *UNSDG 4 seeks inclusive and quality education for all, however over 250 million children and youth worldwide are not in school. Military conflict is a root cause, and the case of Syria is a case in point, yet one for which limited research exists. This critical review assesses the available evidence on the causes and consequences within Syria according to SDG dimensions of access, quality and inclusion. The challenges identified require attention to systems not just symptoms as well as integrated interventions that address the diverse needs of children and youth. Attention to the education system in Syria is additionally important as it is expected that millions of refugees may return to Syria, putting demands on an already inadequate system. Utilizing available evidence, and scaling up based on lessons learned, is critical for meeting the needs of Syrian children and youth.*

Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges to SDG4's goal of access to quality and inclusive education for all, 250 million children and youth were already not in school globally (UNESCO, 2019). One of the main reasons is conflict (GCPEA, 2022). In situations of prolonged conflict, such as in northern Nigeria, eastern DR Congo, and Syria entire cohorts of children and youth have missed out on education. This paper focuses on the educational situation within Syria, bringing together the limited available research focusing domestically since the onset of the conflict. The dearth of literature as compared to the Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries points to the double marginalization of those inside the country: inability to flee a risky environment puts them at greater risk of falling through the cracks, as does insufficient research knowledge about their experiences and needs. Barriers preventing certain children from being in school or what is pushing them out of school must be better understood against the backdrop of ongoing conflict.

This paper critically reviews existing literature to bridge this gap through a synthesis of available evidence on the key impediments to children and youth accessing quality and inclusive education inside Syria, as well as lessons from efforts to remediate and mitigate consequences. We seek to demystify a less-researched aspect of the impact of the Syrian crisis on children, contributing insight to the research landscape and guiding more appropriate education policies and programmes for children inside Syria. Findings are organized around three themes: (1) barriers, (2) evidence, (3) challenges, and lessons learned (for each dimension respectively). We first provide a contextual background and outline the methodology utilized to support these findings.

Context of out of school children in Syria

The Syrian civil war has had a substantial impact on the Syrian education system and its institutions. In 2011, primary completion was 100% (WB, n.d.). The year following the onset of the conflict, attainment dropped by over 40%. Nearly 6 million people fled the country while another 6 million remain displaced within Syria, accounting for over half of the pre-conflict population. Of internally displaced populations, an estimated one third are out-of-school children and youth (Almasri *et al.*, 2019). This situation was significantly worsened during the COVID19 pandemic (SC, 2020a, 2020b). Humanitarian efforts work to ensure displaced populations are safe and their basic needs met (shelter, water, food, protection), however many children and youth are unable to continue education. Those able to access school are disrupted not only by conflict, but also issues of educational quality, un conducive learning environments, and high rates of malnutrition and infectious disease (Friedrich, 2016; UNESCO, 2022). Additionally, during the last decade, it is estimated that over 5,700 children have been recruited to fight in the conflict (UN News, 2021), one example of a long list of human rights violations children and youth regularly experience (see: SC, 2020b; Lawley, 2020; SCPR, 2020; MSF, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

The backdrop for this investigation is widespread infrastructure damage, resulting in an incapacitated education system (Christophersen, 2015; SC, 2020b, 2020a). Over half of all global attacks on education between 2011 and 2015 occurred in Syria continuing throughout the conflict, leading to damage or destruction of approximately 40% of its schools, and deaths or loss of teachers and enrolled students (SC, 2015; GCPEA, 2014, 2018, 2022). It is noteworthy that schools are specifically targeted and thus access to education is not only a matter of having a functional school but also a school that is safe (Jones and Naylor, 2014; Almasri *et al.*, 2019). The broader environment within which Syrian children and youth live is one of high unemployment, limited access to functioning hospitals, climate pressures destroying agriculture, and basic needs, such as safe drinking water and access to electricity, are limited (Dadu-Brown *et al.*, 2017; Bank and Fröhlich, 2018). The lack of safety and chronic uncertainty create further barriers to education within Syria. Violence and destruction have contributed to overcrowded classrooms, reduced school hours, high rates of absenteeism and drop-outs, in addition to insufficient textbooks and supplies, few trained teachers, and little to no capacity to support children with recreational and psychosocial support amidst the conflict (see SC, 2015, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Mizunoya and West, 2016; Zeno, 2021). SCPR (2020) has estimated that 460 million years of basic education were lost between 2011 and 2019, a loss equivalent to \$35 million, and a whole generation of children affected by extended deprivation from stable schooling.

The conceptual framework underpinning this investigation lies within discourses of educational sustainability in the context of emergencies and conflict-affected communities. The EiE (Education in Emergencies) field of research and practice has propagated the concepts of ‘relief-development continuum’ and ‘humanitarian-development nexus’, which encourage coherence and early response in education assistance within humanitarian crises or conflicts (WB, 2005; OECD, 2015; Nicolai *et al.*, 2019). In the context of the Syrian crisis, Qaddour and Husain (2022) argue that the chances of transitioning into sustainable, wide-reaching and well-equipped education systems necessitate bridging the gap between relief and long-term sustainable development early on. Following these principles is essential for sustainable and coherent education provision in protracted conflicts and could reduce numbers of those falling out of crumbling education systems. Within this conceptual framework and corresponding efforts to shift ways of work within conflict-affected settings, the constituent components of the SDG4 – access, inclusion, and quality – are scrutinized as a backbone for this research.

Methodology

This critical review does not follow a typical systematic review methodology as much of the evidence since 2012 is found in peer reviewed academic publications, but also in 'grey literature' such as reports by INGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and governments. This decision reflects our objective of synthesizing the available evidence-based knowledge from both academic and grey literature to support informed decision making, identifying gaps, and paving the way for further research and programmatic considerations.

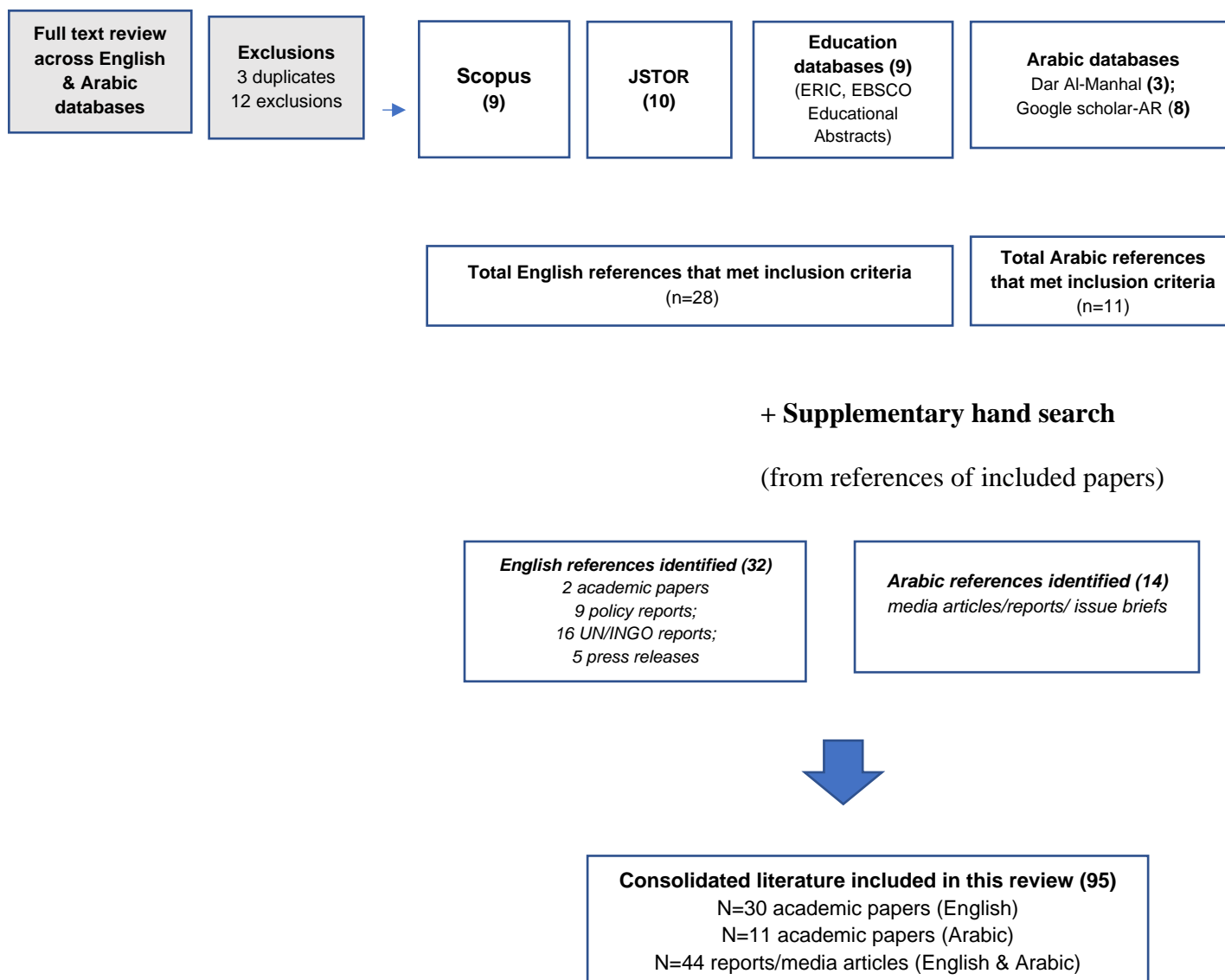
Literature search strategy and inclusion criteria

We consolidate documented and published materials about primary and secondary education in Syria within scholarly, practitioner, and related policy reports. The following search criteria were followed (see Table 1).

Table 1: Search inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Articles, Chapters, Books, Reports, Briefs, News Articles, Blog Posts	Social media, patents
Location	Within Syria	All others
Groups	Out of school children, reintegrated children of families internally displaced, children who remained in their communities	Syrian refugee children and youth outside of Syria
Time	2012-2022 (peer-reviewed academic literature) 2017-2022 (grey literature)	Pre-conflict literature
Language	English, Arabic	All others
Key Terms	Syria, Syrian, Out of School, Education, Children, Youth, Internally Displaced (persons/people), Right to Education, Conflict Affected, Fragility, Hard to Reach	N/A
Education Stage	K-12	All others
School Type	Formal, Nonformal, Bridging and Vocational Programs	All others
Other	Scrutinized education delivery and quality to children, government-run as well as under other forms of governance, or undefined	N/A

Scopus, JSTOR, ERIC, and Educational Abstracts (EBSCO database) were searched to identify multidisciplinary literature related to out of school children in Syria and education provision. A parallel search for Arabic literature was undertaken through Dar Al Manhal, supplemented with a Google Scholar-Arabic search. Titles, abstracts, and full text were closely screened to exclude duplicates, unavailable or excluded articles. For added rigor, the references of each article were hand-searched yielding further papers which met our inclusion criteria. Finally, we conducted an additional overview of reports produced by relief and humanitarian aid organizations inside Syria and identified key reports (grey literature) which directly informed our research questions. The search process and articles identified are detailed in Figure 1 below.



Through this analytic framework, we extracted all related evidence and plotted the relevant findings under each category of SDG4 criteria. To facilitate the analysis, the data was grouped by i) ‘barriers/challenges’ impacting access inclusion and quality of education, and ii) ‘achievements/positive initiatives’ undertaken. This was further clustered into subthemes, to shape the most prominent points within the findings section. These key findings were distilled across all records identified through this review -the English, Arabic, peer reviewed and grey literature reports, and form the basis for this paper.

The limitations regarding replicability should be considered in the context of alternatives; limiting our review to peer reviewed academic publications would have been more serious given how few of such publications are available and given the richness of reporting by non-academic entities. Our decision to include non-academic and Arabic resources aligns with our research objective of synthesizing available evidence to support informed decision making. This paper did not follow systematic review protocol, yet the review was conducted systematically; to that end we framed it as a critical literature review: given both authors’ experience in conflict-affected contexts, we do not simply report evidence but critically review it.

Findings: Education in Syria during the Conflict

Our findings are structured around the three key pillars of SDG4: access, quality, inclusion, which enable us to structure a clear flow of ideas and improve readability.

Access to Education for All

As outlined above, barriers to education are multiple: destroyed and/or non-functional schools; the targeting of educational institutions for attack and resulting lack of safety and constant fear of attack by students and teachers; highly volatile and politicized environment; high rates of poverty; high rates of malnutrition; frequent emotional and psychological distress due to experiences of conflict; lack of access to infrastructure and services, such as electricity and internet connectivity; infrastructure and services, such as electricity and internet connectivity; insufficient access to basic needs, including safe drinking water and shelter, resulting in education taking a secondary priority to ensuring survival. These barriers, however, are experienced unevenly across Syria, highlighting significant disparities within the country. For example, in government-controlled areas few schools are damaged, while in contested areas nearly all schools are destroyed or are non-functional or unsafe learning spaces (UNICEF, 2015; Al Hessian *et al.*, 2016; SCPR, 2020). Barriers to access also related to status and ethnicity, minority communities and those without legal status, such as displaced people in Syria from other regional conflicts face systemic discrimination (e.g., Iraqi refugees, discussed below; Ferris and Kirisci, 2016). According to Doocy and Lyles (2017), access to education is not statistically significant on the basis of gender, except when comparing displaced and non-displaced households.

Children at further disadvantage are those forced to flee conflict each time it gets closer to their communities. Millions of children in Syria’s northwest, who have experienced multiple displacements in search of safety (some as many as seven times), still live in tents, shelters or destroyed buildings (Deane, 2016; UN News, 2021), are excluded from education due to lack of documentation, cost, or lack of capacity. Conflict-induced displacement and destruction means many children and youth have no educational records, compounded by the lack of a government registration system (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016). The contested nature of governance and control complicates domestic decision making and blurs lines of responsibility, while the international community remains plagued with funding shortfalls and restricted access (Doocy and Lyles, 2017; Singh *et al.*, 2019; SC, 2020b). These challenges have inhibited NGOs’ and UN agencies’ ability to provide services. The United Nations was only able to reach 1% of the 422,000 people living in contested conflict areas and

5% among hard-to-reach populations (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016). Suspended humanitarian assistance to the Northwest region (e.g., Idlib) created a decline in education provision where NGOs had previously filled a gap (ICG, 2019). For those children and youth with access to education, a further challenge materialized: exams that are crucial for transitional academic years such as Grades 9 and 12, and act as gateways to higher education centers, are centralized and largely held in government-controlled territory (Anber and Al-Duais, 2019; AlSheikh Theeb *et al.*, 2022). Disparities are further compounded by digital divides, which are not only a matter of connectivity and cost but also one of equity for diverse learning abilities (AlSheikh Theeb *et al.*, 2022). That a whole generation of children and youth have limited access to education will have long-term economic, political, and human development impacts. Syria is not on track to meet SDG access targets 4.1, 4.2 and 4.6 . As long as the conflict continues, no serious progress can be made. Indeed, given the level of infrastructural damage, meeting the Millennium Development Goal target of full primary enrolment may take another generation to achieve.

However, there have been a few promising initiatives. Alternative education modes were rolled out to maintain continuity of education where possible, such as accelerated learning programs and alternative ‘curriculum B’ for those who had missed elementary education (Deane, 2016). Remote learning strategies sought to keep as many children as possible in education. Given the fluidity of the context, follow up mechanisms were designed to facilitate the reintegration of students who had fallen through the cracks or dropped out. While this does not replace traditional school, it nevertheless provided an opportunity for some to attain a certification of learning and a support system where access to education was challenging. Further strategies included home schooling support, mobile teachers to students’ homes, mobile phone-based (e.g., on WhatsApp) learning groups, adjusted or reduced school hours instead of complete closure of schools (e.g., in northern Syria), and open distance and flexible learning to widen reach (Creed and Morpeth, 2014; SC, 2015; SC, 2020b). During the worst aerial attacks on Halab, caves, homes, and underground shelters were used to enable children to continue their education (Enab Baladi, 2016b). Pre-existing material and infrastructure were capitalized on to address the education emergency, including UNRWA schools, community centers, and VTECH institutes, some running triple shifts. UNRWA’s self-learning programs, originally for Palestinian refugee children, (revised to align with the Syrian MoE,) were officially recognized, and reached many out-of-school children. ‘School clubs’ served as pathways for remedial education, integrating much-needed psychosocial support (UNICEF, 2015). Although secondary school enrolment rates remained relatively stable during the conflict (SCPR, 2020, p. 83), TVET opportunities for adolescents were also considered within educational responses and systems reaching more than 26,000 youth (Christophersen, 2015). Efforts such as these sought to widen access to a variety of education modes. In parallel, international civil society played an important advocacy role pushing for more access, inclusion, and budgets for education inside Syria. International conventions and guiding principles were mobilized to enforce humanitarian flows to the areas in most need (Singh *et al.*, 2019). Much of that has fallen onto deaf ears as we continue to see restrictions on humanitarian access to opposition-run areas during the recent earthquake.

Quality and adequacy of education provision

The literature pointed to the Syrian state’s incapacity to sustain adequate education provision equitably and the consequent regression in delivering quality education. The education system is described as ‘overstretched, underfunded and fragmented’ (UNICEF, 2021), ‘neglected’ in comparison to military efforts, fuel, and security (Al-Hinawy and Zeno, 2018) and ‘severely compromised’ (SCPR, 2020). This decline in the quality of education over the years of the conflict is attributed to a 71% decrease in expenditure on education between 2011-2019 (UNICEF, 2021), uncoordinated resource allocation for education more focused on emergency response than long-term development (Bouchane, 2016), destruction of education infrastructure and resource shortages (IRC, 2017; SCPR, 2020), and the deep

divisions resulting from civil war and in society (Al-Hinawy and Zeno, 2018). Syria's previously impeccable educational indicators dipped together with its HDI Education Index from 122nd in 2010 to 184th in 2019 (UNICEF *et al.*, 2013; SCPR, 2020). The conflict has been central to the decline of quality. A shortage of habitable classrooms, overcrowded classrooms running double or more shifts, prolonged periods of missed schooling and reduced learning hours and high pupil to teacher ratio compounded by the pressure to accommodate displaced children (SCPR, 2020; Omaish *et al.*, 2022). The learning and teaching environment has also been undermined by shortages of furniture, textbooks and educational material, extreme poverty and psychological trauma, multiple displacements interrupting the flow of learning, insecure environments un conducive to studying at home, and losses of qualified teachers and school leadership and staff (Mizunoya and West, 2016; Anber and Al-Duais, 2019). Interruptions in schooling have significantly affected the cumulative knowledge of basic concepts in sciences and languages, perceived as foundational subjects (Omaish *et al.*, 2022). Children fell behind their age-related stage, making transition to next grades and to higher education more difficult. A 2017 survey found that just over half of Syria's children at 6th, 7th, and 8th grades were unable to do 2nd grade Math and English (IRC, 2017), boys were more than twice as likely to fail reading and writing tasks (Omaish *et al.*, 2022). This review confirmed that learning outcomes were lacking for children who had been displaced multiple times or experienced gaps in schooling. Disparities in the quality of education across Syria's divides also surfaced, indicative of the Ministry of Education's provision to only government-controlled areas. In contrast, other regions witnessed a significant lack of qualified teachers due to migration, internal displacements, death or kidnappings, job opportunities with NGOs and UN organizations or direct engagement in the conflict (SCPR, 2020; Zeno, 2021). The evidence shows a 31% drop in teachers available for basic education between 2010-2018, with the drop in male teachers most pronounced (SCPR, 2020). Remaining teachers tended to be less experienced or untrained volunteers, with limited opportunities and funding to build capacities as well as absence of quality assurance mechanisms and leadership in education delivery (Deane, 2016; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2019; AlSheikh Theeb *et al.*, 2022). This shortfall together with students' lack of interest in studying, their dislike of indoctrination teaching approaches, elevated levels of stress, and learning environments un conducive to focus e.g. caves or underground venues (Al-Hinawy and Zeno, 2018; Anber and Al-Duais, 2019). Further, literature revealed prevalent parental concerns with the quality of education, its relevance in the context of war and poverty, and skepticism with new curricula unrecognized outside of opposition-ruled and Kurdish areas. Such perceptions appeared to impact parental choices of school enrolment (Al Hessian *et al.*, 2016; Espinosa and Ronan, 2022), and together with capacity issues, student learning experiences, help explain the high out-of-school figures that we see inside Syria. In such situations, quality education requires a system which takes the combination of these challenges into consideration.

Our review flags the importance of understanding these challenges to education quality in the context of fragmented, present-day Syria. With education becoming a 'battlefield' for the ideological wars of different fighting parties (SCPR, 2020), self-ruled and Kurdish areas are preoccupied with autonomy and resistance rather than quality and child-centred education provision (Omran for Strategic Studies, 2016). Six different curricula have been adopted across the lifespan of the conflict: government, ISIS, Syrian Interim government, Jabhat Tahrir Al Sham, Kurdish Autonomous Administration, and other religious curricula, (Zeno, 2021). Ideologically driven aspects are emphasized, taking precedence over quality and lifelong relevance of education, with subjects such as history, national studies, and parts of Syria's geography omitted (Al Hessian *et al.*, 2016). We see the example of ISIS-controlled areas' curricula focused on glorification of selective parts of Islamic history and physical preparedness for fighting (Nour, 2018). The revised and inconsistent curricula have led to substantial deterioration in education quality and a fragmented system. For students attending schools in regime-held areas and those forced to flee, the fragmentation has created educational gaps. Teachers challenges include indoctrinating children in sectarian discourse (SCPR, 2020; Zeno, 2021). More broadly, questions of curricula relevance to actual needs of post-conflict Syria and the consequences of such fragmentation for the next generation come to the fore (Al-Hinawy and Zeno, 2018). A related challenge is the lack of

accreditation of various curricula outside of the national schooling system and its impact on children's progression of transitioning to post-secondary education (Mizunoya and West, 2016; Al Hessian *et al.*, 2016). With the exception of the Kurdish curriculum which is recognized in the recently established universities of Rojava and Kofani, the scope of this problem is significant given the cited figure of 50,000 graduating seniors unable to access any national university in 2016 (Enab Baladi, 2016a). This concern underpins families' decisions to move internally to government-controlled areas in spite of their political sentiments, or allow their children to commute daily to nearby government-run schools to sit exams (Nour, 2018). A related concern is students' unreadiness to enter the labor market due to knowledge gaps resulting from quality issues in the education system. Deane's (2016) article highlights the limited number of young males finishing school and the lack of educational and foundational skills provision which exacerbates their employability and economic sustainability. There have not been sufficient bridging curricula tailored for such youth to remediate these knowledge gaps and their long-term implications (Omaish *et al.*, 2022). We are warned by Bouchane (2016) of their implications: a whole generation of under-skilled and under-employed youth, disenfranchised, without options, at higher vulnerability and at risk of exploitation, which he describes as 'a financial, economic, social and moral burden'.

Inclusion and elimination of discrimination

The SDG objectives require quality education that is inclusive for all. It calls for the elimination of discrimination in education provision at both the systemic level and the ground level, making inclusivity a condition regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation, gender, or ability. Inclusion in adequate quality education varies from governorate to governorate, depending on which political actors are in control. In relatively safe areas under government control, public services including education function as they did before the crisis, while in contested areas, areas under non-state local governance, and areas that have received large influxes of IDPs, many of these vulnerable children and youth are excluded from educational opportunities. Children living in besieged zones have been reported to experience 'absolute deprivation from education and health' for significant amounts of time, which hinders their inclusion and re-entry into the educational process (SC, 2017; SCPR, 2020). Omran for Strategic Studies (2016) highlights al-Hasakeh as one of the most neglected (self-rule) areas in education provision; its weak educational infrastructure predates the conflict and has had lower or late university enrolments as a result. Thus, we see how the demographic and political positioning of certain areas within the Syrian conflict have impacted educational provision and limited inclusivity among children in those areas. The situation of stateless children born in exile or denied nationality by law is particularly bleak. These include 'ajanib/maktumeen', Syrian Kurds, and refugees in Syria from Iraq and Palestine (Dunmore, 2014; Ferris and Kirisci, 2016; McGee, 2022).

The absence of safe schools (and routes to school) for children in some regions of Syria has been a major impediment to regular school attendance and inclusive education (UNICEF report, 2016). The literature reports a learning context rampant with instability and violence, tensions between displaced children and the hosting communities, and lack of protection for children's rights at schools and communities. Specific population groups have been more affected than others both inside and outside class (SCPR, 2020; Zeno, 2021). Two studies highlighted that children with disabilities were at higher risk of exclusion from education, with 81% reportedly unable to access to educational services in their areas (Mounzer and Stenhoff, 2021; Tchic and Farina, 2018). Both studies, however, state that more data is needed about the experience and barriers faced by children with disabilities. Although an above-cited study mentioned no gendered differences for enrollment in general, when the sub-population of people impacted by conflict is assessed specifically, there are gendered impacts, with the rate of female students not in primary school being much higher than that of males, and 90% of whom are excluded from secondary school (Bouchane, 2016). Parents' concerns about their daughters' vulnerability to sexual abuse force some families to decide between safety and education (The Lancet, 2014). Early marriage also plays a role in halting girls' inclusion in

education, while boys that have dropped out or are unable to return into the schooling system are at greatest risk of recruitment or cooptation by warring sides, or imprisonment (Singh *et al.*, 2019; UNICEF, 2018; Arvisais and Guidere, 2020). Furthermore, the longer children remain out of school and with no access to a consistent learning environment, the less likely they are to re-enroll in learning in the future, according to a Save the Children report (2020b).

The various curriculum changes experienced by children across Syria's polarized divides mentioned earlier also impact inclusion of children, and in some cases the reason for them exiting it. For example, non-Kurdish speaking children were impacted when the 'Rojava curriculum' was introduced across 600 schools in northeastern Syria, and either changed schools, left Rojava, or experienced social and ethnic tensions (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). Children living in ISIS-controlled areas experienced the forced closures of schools by ISIS in 2016 followed by the imposition of a new extremist curricula which made them feel alienated at school and in the community. Education was made compulsory only until 14 for males and 10 for females (SCPR, 2020). Various articles talked about the high levels of politicization of educational curricula as contradictory to the purpose of education as inclusive and non-discriminatory (Syria Untold, 2015; Al Hessian *et al.*, 2016; Omran for Strategic Studies, 2016; Azevedo *et al.*, 2020). Zeno's (2021) article suggests that the fragmentation of Syria's education system into multiple curricula fueled identity politics, increased 'othering', and sustained an 'ideological metaconflict with long-term and enduring effects on children and the future social cohesion of Syrian society'. Using education as a tool for indoctrination and lack of reconciliatory language can hardly serve SDG sub-target 4.7, which sees education as a means for sustainable, cohesive and equitable post conflict societies.

We are however reassured by the grey literature primarily which highlighted myriad efforts to reduce alienation and harm, and enhance inclusion wherever possible. UN/INGOs have led cross-regional initiatives to urge Arab and Northern governments to prioritize the impacts of multiple conflicts on children's wellbeing and education at advocacy, policy and resourcing levels (Qaddour and Hussain, 2022). On the ground, community-based formal and non-formal education programmes played an important role in filling a void no longer provided by the government to opposition-controlled areas and communities of displaced Syrians, common to conflict and post-conflict settings. International NGOs and UN agencies operating inside Syria have partnered with local communities and civil society organizations, designing tailored programmes that embody principles and practices of inclusion for the hard(est)-to-reach out-of-school children given their circumstances. These have included school rehabilitation projects, 'Back to Learning' campaigns, non-formal education outreach and organized home-schooling support where schools were deemed unsafe, attention to children's learning environments and mental health, and support for educators filling in when qualified teachers became scarce (SC., 2015; Mizunoya and West, 2016; SCPR, 2020). The shame of older children felt restarting school with younger peers after being forced to miss years or months of school, necessitated the creation of alternative, more appropriate educational pathways. Promising practices in northern Syria where this was quite pronounced were 'back to school' remedial pathways encouraging children to resume their education despite two or more years out of the schooling system, together with accelerated learning courses (SC, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). An integrated approach was incorporated into educational programs to address the underpinning causes pushing children out of school, with a view to the child's overall wellbeing, her/his inclusion. Multisectoral initiatives integrated education, psychosocial, health, peacebuilding and cohesion, poverty alleviation, family wellbeing, safety in various grey literature reports. For example, social-emotional learning opportunities were integrated within educational settings and initiatives, designed to help develop basic cognitive skills, improve memory, encourage perseverance, manage emotions, and enhance positive social interactions and conflict resolution techniques (IRC, 2017). Community engagement in education were recognized as necessary to help foster social cohesion and reintegration. An example was Bosley's (2022) report on the experience of children of ISIS militants, whose reintegration back into the communities that had rejected them necessitated building the capacities of families and communities to support in social cohesion and resilience. There was

limited literature on TVET or Vocational Secondary Education (VSE) and other adult schooling pathways for those who had fallen behind (including females married at a young age), indicating the need for more of these initiatives or more concerted documentation.

The literature also highlighted efforts to address the fallback on children's education resulting from fragmentation, some Kurdish and opposition-led areas driven others civil society supported. The number of schools increased under the Democratic Nation schools, coupled with institutional support for teacher training to enhance quality of education (Dadu-Brown *et al.*, 2017). In Halab, nonformal education centers grew to respond to the need for education and were later (in 2018) required to register officially with local governance for quality assurance purposes. This included various conditions attached including gender equality in enrolment and space of venue (Al-Asaad, 2019). Educational opportunities were expanded for children in self-rule areas such as the coast of Halab who had been less advantaged entering higher education with a degree deemed not legitimate by the Syrian government: opening a 'Free Halab University' and liaising with universities in France (Enab Baladi, 2019a). In the areas under Kurdish self-rule, various academies were established, along with two universities (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). International and local faith-based (Islamic) organizations, among other non-profit agencies, took on the role of printing 3 million school textbooks no longer accessible to all, to sustain educational provision (Enab Baladi, 2016a). Where resources and equal opportunity were restricted, such initiatives attempted to restore some balance and expand spaces for inclusion. The extent to which they are sufficient and able to reach all geographic areas is difficult to determine from the available literature, and is an area worth further investigation.

Discussion and Lessons from Syria

This review confirms the disproportionately less material about children inside Syria in contrast to Syrian refugee children in various host countries, which is particularly concerning since many more Syrian children remain in the country than outside of it. This disparity of evidence reflects issues of safety and access, for both interventions and researchers. The outcome, however, is sparse and fragmented data making informed, contextualized decision making more challenging. Of the literature we did identify, the majority was produced by the Global North (in English) through academic institutions, policy centers and think tanks, and UN and INGO agencies operating inside Syria directly or in partnership with local providers. Arabic peer reviewed literature was comparatively limited. From a knowledge production and utilization perspective, this landscape presents barriers between knowledge producers (largely based in the Global North and writing in English) with decision makers in Syria (primarily engaging with Arabic). The likely outcome of this is delayed uptake of best practices and lessons, and the relearning of what does not work by multiple actors (resulting in inefficiencies with limited resources). However, we also see this as an opportunity for leadership for actors to ensure that funding is available for research to be conducted in, or translated into, Arabic, and to have publications not only Open Access but presented in accessible formats for practitioners. The evidence also pointed to limited literature on community-supported and local governance bodies' initiatives in restoring education in their respective areas, however, the grey literature did point to some of the joint work undertaken with opposition-led areas education officials and other local initiatives. Promising practices of this were distilled primarily from the grey literature and presented as internal organizational reports - yet their aggregate impact in the fragmented Syrian context with its sharp geopolitical divides are hard to ascertain. The shortcoming of coherent data integrity that is up-to-date and consistent across the whole of Syria was noted in a 2022 report (Qaddour and Husain, 2022). Remediating this concern could result in greater accuracy, equity, and a more streamlined humanitarian response that does not 'leave anyone behind'.

Education plays a critical role in the immediate and long-term outcomes in a range of intersecting areas, including health, social inclusion, peace and security, as well as economic growth. If internal contradictions and differences are not addressed, inequalities in

education will have both immediate and extended consequences on children and youth, and affect post-conflict peace prospects (Bouchane, 2016; Deane, 2016; Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). Continuity in education is critical for maintaining a sense of normalcy and community cohesion by offering stability, coping mechanisms, and protection for children and families (Bouchane, 2016). While we cannot ascertain the aggregate added value of independent initiatives of civil society and NGO bodies, there is evidence that alludes to many benefits. Mendenhall et al. (2019) has referred to educational initiatives that operate alongside or in place of inaccessible government education systems as ‘complementary’ or ‘parallel’ education systems described . On the ground in conflict zones, these are seen to be necessary measures. This occurred in opposition-run areas where sporadic initiatives at community level were obligated to register officially and undergo quality assurance in year: while they had been more than justifiable at the time of their initiation, the right thing was to organize and integrate them as the situation became relatively more stable. Experience in conflict affected areas such as Afghanistan has shown that complementary education systems also known as ‘alternative basic education’, are designed with a strategy to hand-back over to them when the time is right. This may not be feasible in the messiness of the various Syrian actors. However, the takeaway here is that strategic input at the time of design and delivery of educational programmes inside is necessary for sustainability and does not appear to have been adequately done in the Syrian case. Given the added complexity and high polarization, there still has tended to be an emergency and relief mindset in reaching children under very difficult and dangerous circumstances; more mindful and strategic attention to tethering initiatives with local governance and/or local communities from the outset increases chances for continuity, sustainability, and less disruption when funding or access run out or situation changes.

While the role of international and Syrian civil society organizations in reaching Syrian families in dangerous environments cannot be understated, there is something to be said about the lack of coordination in sustainable funding and collective outcomes. The aggregate impact of initiatives to get children back to school inside Syria is both difficult to measure and less prioritized in this (and most) conflicts characterized by volatility, sharp polarization, and politicization of aid. It is evident that the reported initiatives taken to address the challenges have touched many lives and offer a glimmer of hope, however they beg the question of the feasibility of scaling up in continuity and sustainability in such contexts. A closer look at how choices are made by global civil society where to work and with which groups, insecurity, chronic underfunding, and tiptoeing around the GoS’s weaponization of humanitarian access (Berti, 2016) should be questioned at this point. In Syria-based operations, despite good intentions, activating the humanitarian-development nexus has been particularly challenging in the education sector (ICRC, 2021). These challenges include donor perceptions of education directorates acting politically, a preference for top-down approaches in education delivery as opposed to bottom-up needs (with some reasons for this, including recognition and accreditation issues noted earlier), and concerns that education is being used to build allegiance and assert control rather than operating in the best interests of children and youth. Recognizing the potential of education for deepening divisions or promoting long-term also aligns with the 2017 evolution of the humanitarian-development nexus into a triple nexus which includes a peacebuilding and stabilization dimension (WB, 2017). Thus, delivering education as a time-bound ‘programme’ or isolated interventions in selected geographic areas, though hugely valuable, could jeopardize lasting education systems through which children can rise above and beyond the volatile conditions which surround them.

The Syrian experience remains a multi-faceted conflict with multiple challenges at infrastructural, institutional, and community levels, the most striking of which has and continues to be the sheer danger and lack of human security or poverty associated with decisions to enroll children or withdraw them from schooling. A crucial learning with important implications for educational sustainability, is the inseparability of education from wellbeing of the whole family and its priorities, hence the necessity of prioritizing only integrated and community-supported approaches to keeping children in schools and/or drawing them back. When families are committed to schooling,

children are protected from being *drawn* into early marriage, recruitment to armed groups, or child labor (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). Further, secondary education reduces the likelihood of exacerbating conflict among youth as it expands their life choices and increases income opportunities (Ostby and Urdal, 2010). Thus, in addition to being a right, education appears to be a critical means of protection for families and children through the ebbs and flows of the conflict, reducing the chances of children and youth entering they cycle of conflict. This reinforces discourses advocating for a shift from emergency humanitarian projectization of remedial education to a more mindful long-term approach of working collaboratively and strategically to reduce inequalities through sustainable social development. A second striking issue particular to Syria is the conundrum of inclusion. The fragmentation and imposition of new curricula in the now divided and highly migratory status of Syrian families and their children, flag the question of how truly inclusive and representative are these curricula for all of Syria's children. Multiple curricula challenging communities who have felt excluded for decades have resisted oppression and called for new emancipatory representative narratives of belonging and citizenship (Espinosa and Ronan, 2022). Yet, they have created new forms of exclusion, for example those who did not 'fit' or speak the language at local community level and were forced to move. The lack of accreditation and delegitimization of these new curricula and learning centres established in areas where GoS education directorates stopped operating solved an immediate problem but created a larger concern of exclusion from recognition and higher education pathways. Quality assurance and ideological rather than educative intentions also require further scrutiny. This could hold geopolitical implications post-conflict and the impacts of this fragmented education system are yet to be seen once Syria emerges into a post-conflict state rebuilding phase. The dwindling qualified human resources on the ground is another key concern impacting quality and continuity of education. It reminds us of the tremendous impact of conflict and polarization on educators and educational leadership, who are forced to leave, defect or militarize, or affected by the conflict. Is enough being done on that aspect? All the above constitute critical areas in need of closer attention can be distilled from this review which corroborate other experiences and bring localized perspectives from inside Syria to the table.

This review of evidence needs to be thought about in a broader way as prospects for a resolution and return to normalcy do not seem close. Education sustainability under conditions of war are questionable with outreach determined by feasibility of access, safety, alliances, leading to oversaturation of efforts in some areas while others not receiving remedial education support. Each geographic hub has had distinct needs, and themselves have changed over the course of multiple displacements, changing governance, increasing restrictions by the Syrian government. So a decade on, we ask ourselves is it about doing 'good enough' to the principles of SDG4 or should we be investing more time and resources in advocating at systemic levels, addressing depoliticization of access and inclusion to education? Are the SDG4 targets sufficient as benchmarks for out of school children in highly complex and volatile environments and are INEE guidelines sufficiently attentive to the sustainability challenges that impact education in protracted conflicts? The Syrian experience raises these questions, demanding clearer answers from us collectively.

Conclusions and recommendations

This critical review aimed to synthesize the available literature on education in Syria, guided by the SDG targets of accessibility, quality, and inclusion. The results of this review make a unique contribution to the literature by illuminating a less researched dimension of the experience of Syrian children and families with education or the lack thereof since the crisis. Consolidating key insights from both academic studies and grey literature and focusing on barriers to access and quality of education as well as enabling and promising practices, this article goes beyond mere description of the evidence and provides a synthesis of the key implications of our findings for policy and practice offering considerations for researchers, humanitarian aid practitioners, and politicians. Moreover, the main contributions of this review are the lessons that can be drawn both for Syria and similar places of protracted conflict. We hope these

can provide a 'launch pad' or baseline for further research and evaluation, which can be particularly useful in contexts or topics that have received less attention or access such as that of the present study.

Access to quality and inclusive education, particularly in highly polarized places of violent conflict and displacement contexts is fundamentally challenging and must be additionally protective for children and youth, and especially for marginalized groups. While the world strives towards achieving the SDGs, and particularly that of education for all (SDG4), it is worth highlighting that children affected by conflict and forced displacement are weighed down by multiple additional challenges which make their achievability exceedingly difficult. The challenges that children outside of education or at risk of exclusion experience in Syria are perpetuated by the widespread infrastructural damage and de-prioritization of education due to a violent conflict which has not ceased since 2011. Competing political agendas perpetuated through ideologically rooted curricula plague the country with fragmentation and will impact Syria's future younger generations posing a regional security risk inviting ideologically motivated alliances across borders. Recognizing education as a right and a means for long-term cohesion and conflict resolution is essential in the context of polarization and protracted conflict. In the interim, the gaps and discrepancies in knowledge must be redressed to ensure that interventions are relevant, meaningful, and impactful. This review has identified some of these at both macro and micro levels. It has highlighted both barriers as well as steps taken to remediate some of the consequences on out of school children inside Syria and across its divides. Upon this basis, we recommend integrated approaches, of which inclusive education is one of the key components but alone does not address multiple barriers experienced as well as initiatives designed to mitigate impacts of conflict, natural disasters, insecurity on children's access to education (including temporary, bridging, and technical pathways for children and youth).

The challenges within Syria are daunting, however there are also millions of Syrian refugees hosted in neighboring nations (UNHCR, 2022)). While these populations are not the focus of this study, we recognize that it is the intention of many individuals and host governments that Syrians will return to Syria. This is already being witnessed, as returning families to areas of stability struggle to find places in schools for their children and youth as the schools are already overloaded and underfunded (SCPR, 2020). As a result, research on the domestic education system needs to also consider the demands that may be placed upon it in the coming years. This is not simply a matter of scaling access to education, but integrating students who have missed large parts of their education and/or who have learned in different curricula outside of Syria. From our perspective, this further emphasizes the importance of research to support evidence-informed decision making for the Syrian education system. Syria's stability and long-term prospects of recovery must prioritize the role of a stronger education system that safeguards the needs of Syria's future generations of children and youth (Qaddour and Husain, 2022). Further education in places of conflict must honor the multiple vulnerabilities of children and youth through people-centered, gender sensitive, rights-based interventions that give particular focus on "the poorest, most vulnerable, and the furthest behind" (Cardinal, 2016). The work of well-meaning international organizations is not sufficient. Special attention to keeping children and youth affected by conflict and poverty and displacement in schooling, and ensuring the resources and political will is there, must be advocated for more seriously.

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