

Aid Flows to Higher Education: Trends from Conflict-Affected Countries

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Introduction ¹

Conflict disrupts educational continuity and often destroys infrastructure and institutions. All levels of education are negatively affected by violent conflict, including higher education. Post-conflict reconstruction of the education sector has become a pressing issue regarding long-term stability, peace, development and sustainability of war-torn societies. One of the primary challenges for conflict-affected countries is the lack of funding for rebuilding and strengthening higher education. There are efforts by international donors to provide support and assistance, but based on the historical data and trends, the higher education sector remains neglected.

This policy brief aims to shed light on this issue by analysing the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) aid flows data from 2012 to 2021, focusing on trends in aid allocation to higher education in conflict-affected countries. The brief discusses overall trends and country-level data based on the aid flows and distribution in conflict-affected countries. Lastly, the policy brief provides recommendations to

address the neglect and uneven aid distribution to higher education.

Overview of aid to higher education trends (2012-2021)²

Between 2012-2021, foreign aid to all levels of education totalled US \$138.303 billion. In 2012, education received US \$11.974 billion, while in 2021, aid to education amounted to US \$15.059 billion. This represents an increase of 25.76% over decade. During the same decade, higher education received 33.37% of the aid allocated to education. While this is a significant share, it is important to note that aid to higher education has declined over time. For example, the share of higher education aid in 2003 was 49% of the overall aid flows to higher education, while in 2010 it stood at 39%.³

Higher education aid flows in developing countries

While aid to higher education in developing countries has expanded significantly in recent years, its

¹ This policy brief is based on the following paper:

Heleta, S. & Cochrane, L. (under review). Leaving higher education behind: Analysis of a decade of aid flows to higher education in conflict-affected countries.

² The analysis includes 23 conflict-affected countries.

³ It is essential to note a challenge in accurately assessing aid flows to education by sector. Approximately a quarter of all educational aid is categorised as 'level unspecified' in the OECD's CRS database. This classification complicates efforts to obtain a precise understanding of aid distribution across education sectors, posing a challenge in determining the actual support recipient countries receive for higher education.

distribution has been uneven. Between 2012 and 2021, overall aid to the sector rose by 32.15%, reaching US \$5.342 billion in 2021. However, a striking imbalance emerges when examining the types of aid: scholarships for study in donor countries absorbed a staggering 74.37% of all aid, experiencing a 41% increase during this period. In contrast, aid directed towards strengthening higher education systems and institutions within recipient countries received only 25.63% of the funding and grew at a much slower pace of 5.78%. Scholarships aid never reaches countries in need and is directed back to the universities in donor countries.

This disparity has further increased since 2015, when donors began prioritising different elements of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality education. Specifically, SDG 4, target 4b, which calls for expanding scholarships for people from developing countries to study in developed countries, has seemingly taken precedence over target 4.3, which advocates for equal access to post-secondary education within developing countries themselves. Consequently, donors have overwhelmingly favoured provision of international scholarships over investments in in-country higher education systems and institutions, raising concerns about such an approach's long-term sustainability and equity.

Higher education aid flows for conflict-affected countries

Scholarship aid takes centre stage in education funding for developing and conflict-affected countries, but the data on aid flow shows a diverging story upon investigation. Between 2012-2021, scholarships dominated the landscape of aid to higher education, with a 32% increase over the decade for developing countries and a stunning 98% surge for conflict-affected ones. This preference for scholarships is evident across board, with developing countries receiving around \$3.5 billion and conflict-affected countries receiving \$800 million in scholarship aid in 2021.

However, while scholarships are rising, support for higher education systems and institutions tells a different tale. This type of aid saw a modest 7% increase in developing countries, while in conflict-affected countries it declined by 3% over the 2012-2021 period. In 2021, developing countries received US \$938 million, while conflict-affected countries received US \$136 million. This suggests a concerning trend where immediate solutions through scholarships are prioritised over long-term investments in strengthening local higher education infrastructure.

This divergence highlights the need for a more balanced approach to aid for higher education, particularly in conflict zones. While scholarships offer valuable opportunities for individuals, neglecting the development of local systems and institutions risks jeopardising long-term educational stability and hindering the ability to cater to the broader needs of the student population and the society.

The annual trends in aid flows to higher education in conflict-affected countries by type of aid can be seen in Figure 1.

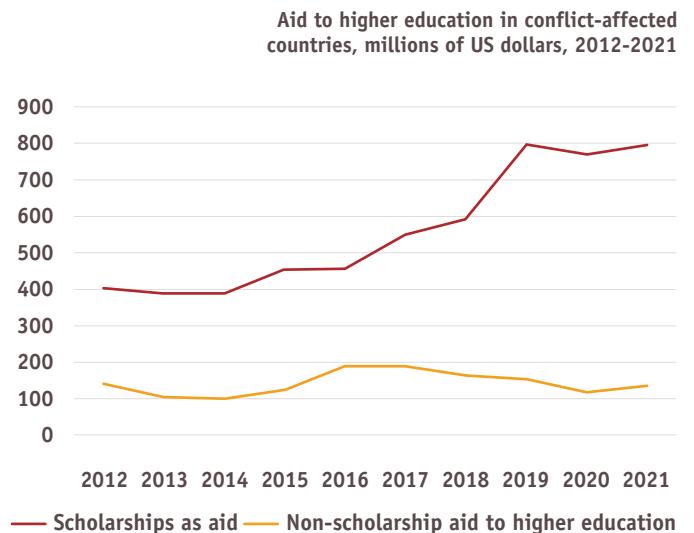


Figure 1: Annual trends in aid to higher education in conflict-affected countries, 2012-2021

These trends can be further explored based on the country-level discussion focusing on the type of aid given to conflict-affected countries.

Country level discussion

Figure 2 illustrates the aid flows to higher education in conflict-affected countries based on the type of aid between 2012-2021. While Syria and Ukraine received the largest amounts of aid for higher education, a closer look illustrates interesting insights: Most aid was given as scholarships for citizens from these countries to study abroad rather than directly supporting higher education systems within the countries. This trend holds for Libya, Cameroon, Yemen and others, with less than 10% of aid directed towards in-country higher education institutions. In contrast, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Mozambique and others stand out for receiving significant portions of aid directly for their higher education systems, ranging from 43% to 80%. However, when considering total aid amounts, 80% of aid for higher education in South Sudan translates to a mere \$29.2 million over a decade, while Syria's 2% aid amounts to \$21.35 million. Unpacking the reasons behind these disparities calls for further research, but the picture of aid allocation for higher education in conflict-affected countries is far more nuanced than initially appears.

Looking at different income levels within conflict-affected countries provides compelling trends that need to be explored further. Figure 3 illustrates aid to higher education trends across all income groups of the selected conflict-affected countries within the dataset.

The figure on the right shows the disparities in how aid for higher education in conflict zones is allocated. Across all income levels, scholarships aid is dominant, ranging between 70-92% of total aid. It is also evident that sixteen least developed and low-income conflict-affected countries received almost the same amount in scholarship aid as four

Aid to higher education in conflict-affected countries, types of aid, millions of US dollars, 2012-2021

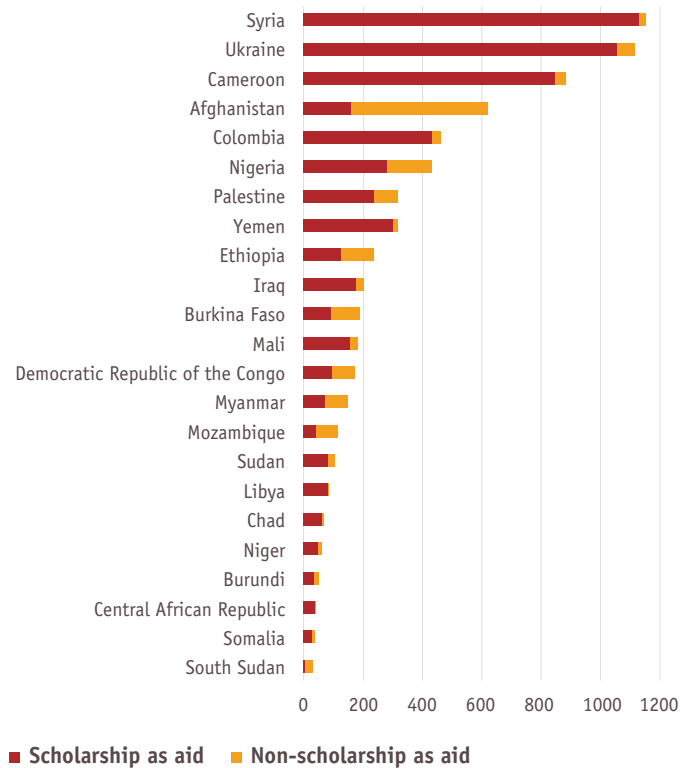


Figure 2: Overall aid to higher education in conflict-affected countries by type of aid, 2012-2021

Aid to higher education for conflict-affected countries, by types of aid and country income levels, millions of US dollars, 2012-2021

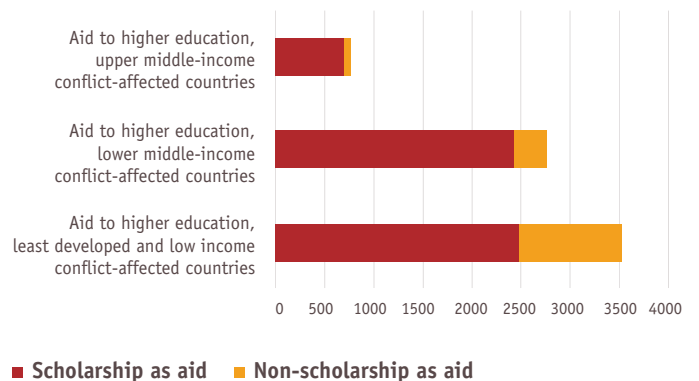


Figure 3: Overall aid to higher education in conflict-affected countries by types of aid and country income levels, 2012-2021.

lower middle-income conflict-affected countries. This uneven distribution raises pressing questions about the effectiveness of fixating on scholarships, as well as the larger inequality and inequity issues. To understand the nuanced narratives and experiences, further exploration of the complexities of the trends illustrated in Figure 3 is essential.

Recommendations

Higher education systems and institutions are often among the casualties of violent conflict. Strengthening, rebuilding and reforming higher education in conflict-affected countries can assist with building capacity to contribute to conflict resolution, peace-building, recovery and development. However, these countries often lack funding to strengthen and/or rebuild their systems and institutions. Foreign aid is supposed to contribute to overcoming this challenge. Yet, over the past few decades, higher education has been a neglected sector in in-conflict and post-conflict settings.

A multifaceted approach is crucial to address this neglect and the uneven distribution of aid for higher education in conflict zones. Moving beyond the scholarship-heavy status quo, increased support for in-country system strengthening is essential, building lasting foundations through infrastructure improvements, faculty training and research advancements. Scholarships can be reoriented, prioritising programmes encouraging recipients to return and contribute to teaching, learning and knowledge creation, creating a virtuous cycle of skills transfer. Equity and needs-based allocation models must guide resource distribution, considering factors such as conflict intensity and existing educational infrastructure.

Regional collaboration and knowledge sharing can optimise resource utilisation and tailor solutions to specific contexts. Transparency and accountability should be cornerstones, with robust monitoring and stakeholder engagement ensuring trust and programme relevance.

Finally, securing long-term funding commitments and investing in local capacity and infrastructure building are crucial for fostering ownership and sustainable progress in rebuilding and revitalising higher education systems and institutions in conflict zones. These recommendations are a few points to explore that could potentially improve access to quality education, especially in the case of conflict-affected countries and post-conflict reconstruction.

