Case Studies



Education in Emergencies Toolkit

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus in Education

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Introduction

The following case studies from **Burkina Faso**, **Myanmar**, and **Syria** offer different perspectives on the operationalisation of the **Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus** within the education sector. Each country is navigating a protracted crisis. Their various approaches to bridging the gap between immediate relief and long-term systemic resilience offer valuable lessons on state sovereignty, coordination, and the risks of parallel service delivery.

Contextual Similarities: Protracted Crises and Systemic Fragility

All three contexts are defined by **protracted, multidimensional crises** that have undermined education provision. In Burkina Faso, over 6,000 schools had closed by 2023 due to insecurity. Myanmar faces a complex emergency where military takeover, armed conflict, and disasters resulting from natural hazards have led to systemic collapse. Syria experienced a decade-long struggle during which civil war devastated the teaching workforce and destroyed one-third of the country's schools. Since the new government came to power in December 2024, the transition has marked a return of national leadership and improved coordination among stakeholders.

Divergent Governance and Leadership Models

The most striking difference lies in state leadership and institutional alignment. **Burkina Faso** exemplifies a **state-led Nexus approach**. The government maintains a "strict leadership," obliging all partners to align with the National Strategy for Education in Emergencies (EiE) 2025–2029. It enforces sovereignty through tools such as a special treasury account where partner funds are pooled to support both development and emergency activities.

Myanmar, conversely, is characterised by a **fragmented and contested context**. Here, the Nexus approach is "pragmatic," relying on a wide **variety of education providers** – including non-state actors – to maintain access in hard-to-reach areas.

Syria illustrates the complex challenges of a response in which temporary parallel delivery systems risked becoming permanent substitutes for national institutions. This undermined the return to a unified system until the 2024 regime change, which has since seen a **pivot back toward nationally-led coordination.**

SDC's Financial Flexibility and Continuity of Support

SDC has adapted its role in each context to support Nexus principles through **flexible financing and technical expertise**. In Burkina Faso, SDC transitioned from traditional basic education to the Protection pillar, using development funds for multi-year projects like PARSEB (Project to Support the Resilience of the Burkinabè Education System) to ensure continuity. In Myanmar, SDC utilises its Direct Action portfolio to support social infrastructure and community-led initiatives, emphasising conflict-sensitive programming. In Syria, due to the policy of non-engagement with sanctioned authorities that prevailed before 2024, capacity sharing with the local system was extremely limited. Nevertheless, SDC maintained multi-year funding (48 months) to provide a longer-term perspective.

Key Lessons for the Nexus

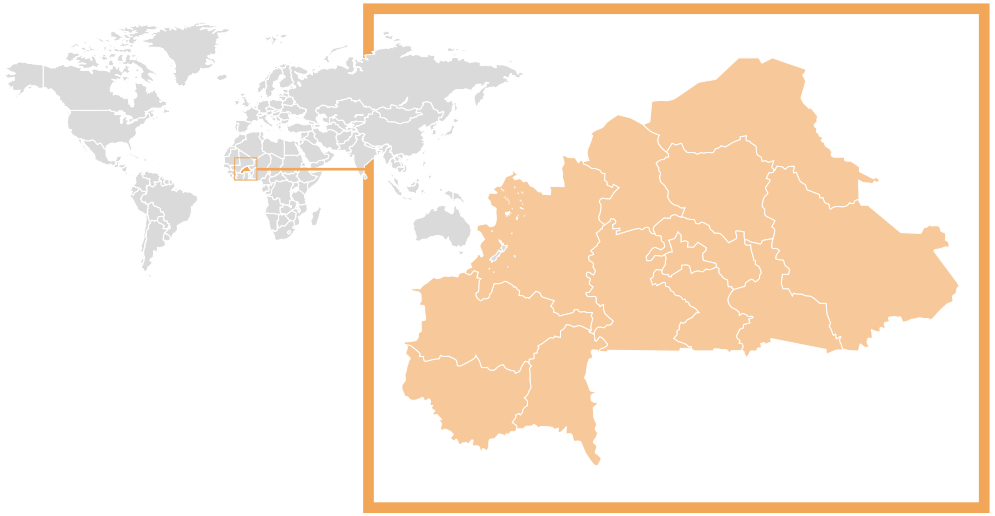
A common thread through the three education responses is the desire to ensure that education is a vehicle for **protection and stability.** In Burkina Faso, the Nexus 'Peace' pillar is reflected through the integration of social cohesion and peace into the national EiE strategy as well as into teacher training programmes. In Myanmar, local responses combine learning with Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and livelihoods. Similarly, the Syrian transitional authorities emphasise trauma-informed pedagogy to address the needs of a generation affected by violence.

The synthesis of these cases highlights critical strategic **challenges**. A major hurdle in both Myanmar and Syria is the **certification of learning**; without recognised exams, students in parallel or non-formal systems face "dead ends" in their educational pathways. Furthermore, while Burkina Faso's sovereign demands (like mandatory Treasury accounts) ensure alignment, they can create **administrative friction** that slows the rapid response required by humanitarian actors.

Critically, these studies demonstrate that an HDP Nexus approach in education requires **planning for transition out of the emergency phase from day one**. Whether through the state-centric model of Burkina Faso, the pragmatic localisation seen in Myanmar, or the reassertion of state leadership in Syria, the goal remains to ensure that emergency interventions **strengthen, rather than substitute, national education systems.**

Case Study

Burkina Faso: Building Educational Resilience in the Context of a Prolonged Crisis



Introduction: Education at the Heart of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

Burkina Faso is currently experiencing a prolonged, multidimensional crisis that places the education system at the intersection of critical issues related to humanitarian relief, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. The context calls for a response that goes beyond emergency aid and is part of a long-term resilience strategy. This case study analyses how the Nexus strategy is being implemented in an environment marked by major security and institutional challenges.

Background: A Multidimensional and Prolonged Crisis

The Intersection of Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Issues

The country is facing a major security crisis, characterised by massive population displacements as people flee conflict zones. According to figures from the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR), the number of forcibly displaced people peaked at 2,062,000 in March 31, 2023. In March 2024, the number of Burkinabè refugees in neighbouring countries stood at 210,000. The impact on the education sector has been direct and devastating. In 2023, more than 6,000 schools were closed, a situation that led to massive school dropout rates. More than 700,000 students and 20,000 teachers are directly affected by these closures, while school infrastructure in conflict zones is suffering systematic damage or destruction. At the same time, the influx of displaced students into "safe havens" is overwhelming existing capacity, creating unsustainable pressure on schools that are still operational. Nevertheless, there is a trend toward the reopening of educational facilities. According to the March 2026 monthly statistical report on education in emergency situations, the number of facilities that had reopened and were operational as of March 31, 2026, stood at 1,902, compared to 1,894 as of December 31, 2025. Elementary schools account for 96.6% of the reopened schools.

National Vision and Institutional Stability

Despite the institutional changes that took place in 2022 and the military's rise to power, the Burkinabè education system has maintained relative stability in areas where it continues to function normally. The Burkinabè authorities are staying the strategic course with strong political will. The **Sectoral Plan for Education and Training (2017–2030)** remains the guiding framework, aimed at building an inclusive and high-performing system despite internal and external vulnerabilities.

There has been a notable shift from a reactive approach to a structured approach to education in emergencies. Following the expiration of an initial strategy, the country has adopted the **new National Strategy for Education in Emergencies (EiE) 2025–2029.**



Caption: Classroom for internally displaced pupils at Bolibana School in Bobo.
Photo credit: Swiss Cooperation Office in Burkina Faso.

This strategy is supplemented by a guide to EiE standards in Burkina Faso, developed jointly by the Education Cluster and the Ministry of Education. A Nexus approach is now explicitly enshrined as the guiding principle of this new roadmap as well as in the guide. The "Peace" pillar of the Nexus is concretely reflected in the integration of social cohesion and peace into the EiE strategy as well as into teacher training programs.

State Leadership and Coordination

EiE coordination is carried out by a directorate within the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Education, ensuring integrated planning of the response. In a rapidly evolving institutional and civic landscape, where civil society actors and oversight mechanisms face increasing constraints, the Burkinabè government is asserting strict leadership. It independently sets priorities regarding humanitarian needs and rigorously oversees international interventions to prevent any "scattering" of humanitarian efforts. Alignment with national strategies is an absolute requirement: technical and financial partners are no longer permitted to implement programmes based solely on their own understanding of needs.

Coordination at the Highest Level

The **Technical Secretariat for Education in Emergencies** is responsible for the technical oversight and implementation of policy guidelines. Its direct affiliation with the Ministry's General Secretariat ensures that the emergency response is aligned with the overall vision for the education system. New administrative requirements reflect this commitment to control and sovereignty:

- The requirement for partners to open accounts at the Treasury Bank.
- The need to obtain prior authorisation for any field survey, assessment, or data collection.
- The requirement for national and foreign organisations to select no more than three areas of focus (one primary area and two secondary areas) from among 19 areas defined by the government.
- Strict and systematic alignment with national strategic documents.

Coordination Among Stakeholders

Burkina Faso has a long history of implementing a Nexus approach. Long before the formal activation of global humanitarian coordination mechanisms (Clusters), the Ministry was already coordinating at the sectoral level through the **Sectoral Partnership Framework**. Every two months, this framework brings together the government, technical partner organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to address challenges related to access, quality, management, and funding in education.

Today, the Education Cluster works in conjunction with this pre-existing partnership framework to pool resources. Dynamic dialogue and integrated planning are facilitated by thematic groups and joint monitoring missions.

Financial Mechanisms and Structural Tools

The **CAST-FSDEB** (Special Treasury Account) is the primary instrument of financial sovereignty. Funds from partners, including those from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), are held in this account, enabling the financing of both development and emergency initiatives. Initiatives such as the support provided by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) are part of this approach to strengthening systemic resilience.

Limitations and Persistent Challenges

Despite these advances, structural obstacles remain:

- A multitude of plans that sometimes leads to a lack of coherence between long-term development policies and emergency needs.
- Centralised procedures and government requirements (Treasury accounts, data authorisations) that are sometimes incompatible with the speed required for humanitarian action.
- Coordination remains insufficient at the subnational level, particularly within regional clusters.
- The Ministry of Education faces difficulties in managing cross-cutting issues such as protection, civil registration, and gender-based violence (GBV).

SDC's Position and Strategic Role in the Nexus

For SDC, the Nexus is not viewed as a mere juxtaposition of tools, but as a genuine transformation strategy aimed at enabling the Burkinabè education system to become its own driver of resilience.

Strategic and Financial Transition

Following its shift away from the traditional focus on basic education, SDC had to rethink its approach to maintain its influence. It made a strategic shift:

1. Reorientation toward the "Protection" pillar: In the 2026–2029 cooperation programme, education is now aligned with the "Protection / Saving Lives" pillar (humanitarian track), while vocational training remains linked to economic opportunities.

2. Flexible financing: SDC uses development funds to finance EiE through single-phase projects (the Project to Support the Resilience of the Burkinabé Education System – PARSEB 2023–2028), ensuring continuity of funding over four years despite the crisis.

The Role of the Lead as a Lever

Despite its withdrawal from CAST-FSDEB, SDC will take the lead among the education technical partners as from the summer of 2026. The challenge is to advance policy dialogue to reorient the remaining sectoral funds towards resilience – which is a way to mobilise partners who traditionally did not engage in emergency response – despite the drop in funding.

Design Interventions with a Focus on Continuity

The ultimate goal goes beyond the physical reopening of schools; it is to build a system capable of withstanding future shocks. This requires concrete pathways to sustainability:

- Planning for temporary schools designed from the outset to evolve into sustainable infrastructure.

- Supporting the gradual integration of community teachers into the national system to stabilise education provision.
- Rolling out accelerated education programmes and digitised minimum curricula (EiE curricula condensed from 9 to 5 months), ensuring compatibility with the national formal education track to prevent any disruption in students' academic progress.

Local Development and Social Cohesion

Localisation is considered a key factor in ensuring sustainability and acceptability. Communities, local authorities, and teachers are the key actors in protection efforts. The creation of "school councils" replaces traditional parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to provide a more dynamic management structure better suited to emergency contexts. This integrated approach incorporates protection (civil registration, GBV), school feeding, and psychosocial support for traumatised children.

Capitalisation and Scaling Up

SDC builds on its experience with alternative education models, particularly through the PARSEB project led by Enfants du Monde and EDUCO. It aims to use its role as lead agency to encourage the Ministry to:

- Fund the salaries of facilitators for the Accelerated Enrolment Strategies/Bridging Programmes through the national budget.
- Adopt models such as mobile centres (for herders) and low-cost centres such as community schools.
- Transform non-formal education into modular, skills-based training programmes for displaced, out-of-school, or never-enrolled youth, ensuring immediate economic opportunities.

Finally, the Quality, Inclusive, Protective, and Equitable Education (EQUIPE) programme trains teachers in differentiated instruction (managing large classes), social-emotional skills, and the identification of traumatised children, while promoting peace through educational content.

Identified Limitations and Risks

The approach carries risks: a potential erosion of SDC's political reputation following its withdrawal from the sectoral fund, uncertainty regarding the government's financial capacity to absorb recurring costs (salaries of accelerated education facilitators), and the difficulty of institutionalising psychosocial support within current budgets. Furthermore, an overall decline in humanitarian funding is projected starting in 2027, threatening the sustainability of the programs.

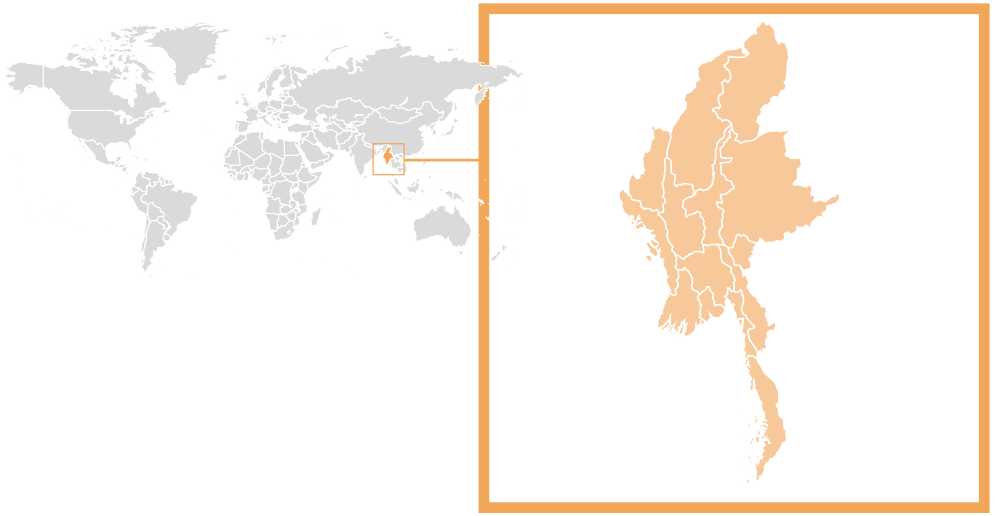
Outstanding questions

As the 2027 deadline approaches, several strategic challenges and unresolved issues remain for programme managers.

- The distinction between basic education and education in emergencies is becoming increasingly complex, as emergency-related needs arise.
- Given the anticipated decline in humanitarian funding starting in 2027, the question arises as to whether the national EiE strategy's ambitious goals can be maintained, making access to multi-year and flexible funding essential.
- The ability to reconcile the government's new sovereign requirements – such as the obligation to open accounts with the Treasury and strict data controls – with the imperative of responsiveness inherent in humanitarian action.
- The sustainability of the gains made in non-formal education will depend on the ability of the Ministry to cover the salaries of facilitators for the alternative education programmes it runs, using the national budget.
- The Ministry of Education cannot manage cross-cutting issues such as civil registration or protection against gender-based violence on its own, which necessitates strengthened intersectoral cooperation.
- Defining an appropriate educational response for areas facing significant security challenges, where insecurity makes it difficult to deploy teachers.

Case Study

Myanmar: Sustaining Learning in a Fragmented Context



Context

Multidimensional Crisis and Fragmented Systems

Myanmar is currently experiencing a multidimensional and protracted crisis characterised by the convergence of political, economic, social, and environmental shocks. Since 2020, the country has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the 2021 military takeover, a resurgence and escalation of armed conflict, and a deepening economic crisis marked by declining GDP, rising inflation, and increasing poverty levels. These structural pressures have been further compounded by recurrent natural hazards, including the 2025 earthquake, adding an additional layer of vulnerability for already fragile communities.

The cumulative effect of these overlapping crises has resulted in widespread displacement, with large segments of the population facing acute protection, livelihood, and access to services challenges. At the same time, governance fragmentation and contested authority structures have significantly weakened state capacity to provide basic services and coordinate responses. This has led to the emergence of parallel systems and diverse actors operating across territories with varying degrees of control and legitimacy.

Within this broader context, structural inequalities have been exacerbated. Rural populations, ethnic minorities, girls, young men and persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the crisis, facing compounded barriers to accessing education and other essential services. These dynamics reinforce pre-existing disparities while generating new forms of exclusion linked to conflict exposure, displacement status, and socio-economic vulnerability.

Myanmar thus represents an example of a complex, protracted crisis situated at the intersection of humanitarian, development, and peace challenges. The coexistence of immediate needs, long-term system disruption, and unresolved conflict drivers underscores the necessity of a Nexus approach that can simultaneously address protection concerns, sustain service provision, and contribute to system resilience and social cohesion.

Impact of the Crisis on Education

The education sector in Myanmar has been profoundly disrupted by the crisis, reflecting both systemic collapse and increasing fragmentation.

The formal education system has experienced a significant deterioration in capacity and functionality. State education institutions have been severely affected by insecurity, political tensions, and staffing constraints, including a notable decline in the number of teachers and education personnel. This has resulted



Caption: School renovation in Myanmar. 2023.
Photo credit: Swiss Cooperation Office in Myanmar.

in reduced institutional capacity to deliver education services and maintain continuity in learning. Prolonged school closures and insecurity have further disrupted access, contributing to substantial learning losses and declining participation rates, particularly at the secondary level.

As a result, access to education has become increasingly constrained across the country. The number of out-of-school children and youth has risen sharply, with adolescents particularly affected. Barriers to participation are multifaceted and include insecurity, displacement, economic hardship, direct and indirect costs of schooling, as well as exposure to protection risks such as forced recruitment.

Inequalities and exclusion have intensified as a result of the crisis. Disparities linked to gender, disability, geographic location, and socio-economic status have widened, with higher levels of exclusion observed at advanced stages of education. Marginalised groups – especially those experiencing multiple vulnerabilities, such as girls with disabilities in conflict-affected areas – face compounded barriers that limit both access and progression within the education system.

The quality and relevance of education have also deteriorated. Learning outcomes have declined, particularly foundational skills (literacy, numeracy, social and emotional learning), reflecting both disruptions in learning continuity and constraints in teaching capacity. At the same time, the crisis has disrupted education–employment linkages, including the collapse of workplace-based learning opportunities, apprenticeships, and pathways connecting education to labour market outcomes. This disconnection risks further reducing the perceived value of education among learners and their families.

At the system level, data gaps and weak monitoring mechanisms further constrain effective response. Limited access to reliable, up-to-date information hampers evidence-based planning, coordination, and prioritisation, making it difficult to design coherent interventions across actors and sectors.

Sector Responses: Adaptive Education Provision and Nexus Practice

Diversification of Provision and Adaptive Response Mechanisms

The collapse and fragmentation of Myanmar's formal education system have triggered a rapid and adaptive response from a range of actors. One of the most significant features has been the rapid expansion and diversification of education provision. Non-state actors – including ethnic education providers, civil society organisations, monastic schools, and community-based initiatives – have assumed a central role in maintaining access to education, particularly in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas. International NGOs and development partners have supported these actors through funding, technical assistance, and programme implementation.

In parallel, new forms of provision have emerged, including online and diaspora-led education initiatives, reflecting both the constraints and opportunities created by the crisis. These actors have adopted highly flexible delivery models to ensure continuity of learning despite insecurity and displacement. This diversification reflects a pragmatic response to a fragmented and contested environment, but also raises strategic questions about coherence, quality, and long-term system alignment.

Nexus practice is visible in locally-led responses that combine education with protection, psychosocial support, and livelihoods. Local organisations often sustain learning in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas where international access is limited. This localisation strengthens relevance and adaptability, but also requires careful attention to quality, accountability, safety, and sustainability.

Many interventions integrate MHPSS, safeguarding, prevention of recruitment, and risk mitigation for gender-based violence into education activities, reflecting the severe protection risks faced by learners and teachers. Others link learning with skills development or alternative pathways, recognising that disrupted education-employment links and economic hardship affect participation, retention, and the perceived value of education.

Implementation remains constrained by insecurity, limited and sensitive data, teacher attrition, and short-term funding cycles. In this context, the main challenge is not to achieve full system integration, but to support practical complementarity: flexible local delivery, shared technical resources, and gradual alignment around quality, inclusion, and continuity of learning.

Towards Nexus-Oriented Coordination and Complementarity

Myanmar's education sector operates through a pragmatic coordination architecture that brings together humanitarian, development, donor, UN, NGO, civil society, and ethnic education actors in a highly fragmented environment.

The Joint Response Framework (JRF) provides a shared strategic reference for international education investment. It offers a common framework through which different actors and financing mechanisms can align around agreed priorities over a medium- to longer-term horizon.

Coordination is organised through interlinked sector platforms that provide space for information sharing, joint analysis, prioritisation, and alignment among UN agencies, donors, NGOs, civil society organisations, and ethnic and local education actors.

Within this architecture, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) are complementary entry points. ECW processes, facilitated primarily through the Education Cluster, help to sustain emergency access, continuity of learning, and integrated support for crisis-affected children and youth.

GPE processes, facilitated through the merged Education Development Partners Group and Education Sector Representative Group serving as the Local Education Group, support broader sector dialogue, prioritisation, and medium- to longer-term planning. While their comparative advantages differ, both contribute to the JRF by helping to connect immediate response

priorities with more sustained sector objectives, despite the absence of a conventional state counterpart.

The Ethnic Education in States and Regions forum provides a space for ethnic and local education actors, particularly those working in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas.

Funding streams are linked through complementary steering structures, shared working groups, and efforts to align planning processes. In practice, these coordination arrangements support better planning and decision-making by reducing duplication, identifying gaps, strengthening the evidence base, and helping partners align investments across the sector. The close alignment between the JRF and the Education Cluster strategy is particularly important in ensuring that humanitarian responses reinforce, rather than sit apart from, broader sector priorities.

Coordination remains constrained by political fragmentation, restricted access, limited engagement with system owners, and sensitivities around data sharing. These constraints make it difficult to build a unified sector picture or fully harmonise responses. In this context, Myanmar illustrates a realistic form of Nexus operationalisation.

Strategic Positioning and Role of SDC within the Nexus

SDC has focused on maintaining relevant entry points across vocational skills development, social infrastructure, localisation, and community-based support, while applying Nexus principles through flexible and conflict-sensitive programming.

In vocational skills development, SDC shifted after the 2021 coup from work with public institutions and system-level reforms towards partnerships with private training providers, business associations, and other non-state actors.

Through its Direct Action portfolio, SDC has also continued to support community-level service delivery in conflict-affected areas, including social infrastructure linked to education, health, WASH, roads, and bridges. This support combines immediate assistance with longer-term sustainability by investing in operation and maintenance, disaster risk reduction, project-cycle management, and practical procedures that enable service providers to maintain services under volatile conditions.

Localisation is a central operational approach. SDC provides flexible support to local organisations that can access hard-to-reach areas, including through small grants and community-led initiatives. While basic education is not a formal priority under the current country strategy, this flexibility enables local partners to respond to education-related needs when these emerge from communities.

Community consultations are used before infrastructure investments to reduce tensions between displaced and host communities, and partners are encouraged to develop standard operating procedures, share technical practices, and adapt services to rapidly changing security conditions.

Psychosocial support and teacher well-being have emerged as important cross-cutting areas. Through capacity strengthening and locally requested initiatives, SDC has supported partners to address trauma and stress among children, teachers, and communities affected by prolonged conflict.

SDC contributes to Nexus practice less through high-profile sector leadership than through flexible financing, local partnerships, technical support, and cautious engagement that keeps services functioning in highly constrained settings.

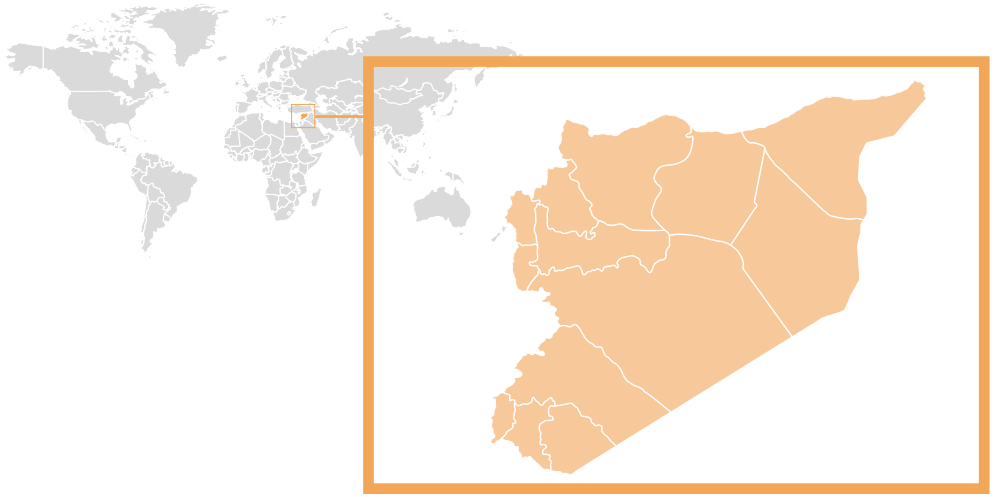
Outstanding questions

Despite ongoing adaptation efforts, several strategic challenges remain for future programming:

- Recognition and certification of learning remain difficult across fragmented pathways, especially where learners move between systems without unified governance or agreed standards.
- Support to non-state providers raises dilemmas around long-term coherence: these actors are essential for service delivery, but their role needs to contribute to future system alignment.
- Data gaps continue to limit evidence-based planning, particularly where access is restricted and information is politically sensitive.
- Rebuilding education–employment linkages requires pathways that are relevant, equitable, and attentive to risks around labour mobility.
- Community-based and alternative models have shown resilience, but their sustainability depends on predictable financing and institutional support.

Case Study

Syria: The Challenges of Using an HDP Nexus Approach



Introduction – the Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus in Syria, 2011-2026

Civil conflict has had profound consequences for the education of a generation of children and young people in Syria, devastating what was once one of the most developed education systems in the Arab world. For over a decade, Syria served as a stark example of the challenges of realising the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus.

In several respects, the Syrian response demonstrated ways of working that should be avoided when supporting education in crisis. Temporary parallel systems were allowed to become permanent substitutes for national institutions. While rapid humanitarian response frequently requires alternative education provision, the Syrian experience illustrates how prolonged parallel service delivery undermined the return to a strong national system delivering inclusive, quality education.

This case study provides important lessons that highlight the importance of answering two critical questions that are central to using successfully an HDP Nexus approach in education. Along with "How do we deliver education today?" all actors need constructively to respond to the challenge "How does our response strengthen the education system of tomorrow?"

The responses require embedding regular critical reflection into programming, coordination and collaboration, to ensure that emergency interventions contribute to strengthening, rather than substituting, national education systems.

Context: Almost 14 Years of Civil War

Before the civil war, Syria allocated an exemplary 5.1 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education. Enrolment in elementary education (the first 6 years) reached almost 100%, and 70% at secondary level. The system nevertheless struggled with overcrowding, and outdated curricula strongly influenced by the ideology of the ruling regime.

The conflict which started in March 2011 triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, leading to the internal displacement of 7.4 million Syrians, while 5.6 million fled as refugees. The Syrian Centre for Population Research estimates that over 460 million years of basic education were lost between 2011 and 2016, equivalent to a US$35 million in lost economic production. The widespread collapse of education provision was compounded by economic crisis, extreme inflation, and crippling energy shortages. The purchasing power of families was severely eroded, forcing many to prioritise basic survival over schooling.

Severe international sanctions and export controls created in the international community a climate of financial isolation and "over-



Caption: Teacher Rudayfah with her students in Al-Hol Camp, Syria. 2025.
Photo credit: UNICEF/Aldhaher.

compliance", a form of excessive risk avoidance. It can lead, for example, to blocking all financial transactions with a sanctioned country, entity or individual even when some transactions are authorised by humanitarian exemptions, or fall outside of the sanctions' scope. This heavily restricted access to educational materials, technologies, and regular financial channels.

The overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 was a critical juncture. The current transition provides an opportunity to reintegrate alternative humanitarian structures and make a reality of the HDP Nexus. Ongoing life-saving education response can be linked with the strengthening of a legitimate, nationally-led education system.

Impact of Civil War on Education, 2014-25

Fragmentation of political control and education governance

The conflict fractured Syria into multiple areas of political control. The al-Assad government continued to hold the south and centre of the country, while Kurdish-led groups controlled the northeast. Opposition groups holding power in the northwest included Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly associated with the Islamic State and now the ruling power.

The result was highly fragmented and politicised education governance. Across the divides, up to six different curricula were implemented. Education became the vehicle for ideological and religious positions, which sometimes took precedence over child-centred learning. Crucially, the lack of official accreditation for non-government curricula severely hindered students' ability to transition to higher education, as the Syrian government refused to recognise certificates issued in opposition areas.

Teaching and Learning

The teaching workforce was decimated. Over 150,000 teachers left the formal system because of displacement, death, or departure from Syria. Those who remained faced targeted violence, unpaid or low salaries, and overwhelming psychological distress. Learning outcomes plummeted dramatically. A 2017 survey showed that just over half of students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades lacked basic second-grade mathematics and English skills. Interruptions to schooling, exposure to violence and other potentially traumatising events, and a severe lack of teaching tools, including laboratories and digital technology, further eroded the quality of education.

School Facilities

The war caused unprecedented physical destruction. UNICEF estimated in 2021 that one in three of the country's schools were destroyed, severely damaged, or repurposed for military use. Facilities that remained functional were often unsafe and severely overcrowded, with some classrooms holding up to 195 students. Many schools lacked clean water, heating, and electricity, creating environments unconducive to learning. The 2023 earthquake added to the number of destroyed and damaged establishments.

Response of Education Actors

The heavily sanctioned state system contributed to the inability of international NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies to collaborate and coordinate with national government authorities. A lack of donor and agency coordination exacerbated the impact of sanctions, leading to an insufficient focus on a system-oriented approach.

Non-formal education (NFE) provision was the most common response, including accelerated education programmes, remote learning and "school clubs" to provide remedial education and psychosocial support. While these community-based interventions provided critical, life-saving protection and basic literacy, the international community reinforced fragmentation through uncoordinated funding, competing implementation models and limited investment in system strengthening.

Specifically, alternative education options lacked official certification allowing for progression through the system, and on to university. As a result, parents outside government controlled areas frequently chose to cross active conflict lines so their children could sit for official exams to access higher education.

In addition, international players bypassed local authorities due to sanctions. This reinforced a parallel education system, where NGOs paid teachers higher salaries than the public sector, undermining teacher motivation in public schools.

For many years, support to the continuity education continued to focus on approaches adapted to short-term relief. Despite the protracted crisis, education actors did not take a longer-term view, and plan for transition to a coherent system.

SDC's Response

SDC's response was shaped by the highly complex and sanctioned environment, complicated by poor coordination. Operations primarily targeted the northwest (Idlib) and northeast, supporting informal schools, child protection, and psychosocial support.

Due to the "silent rule" restricting engagement with sanctioned authorities – including HTS, declared 'terrorist actors' – SDC and its partners' capacity sharing with the local system was highly constrained. Interactions with local authorities were limited to securing operational "green lights". Limited coordination and unharmonised donor approaches deepened the challenges resulting from fragmented governance. In one example, other donors paid significantly higher teacher stipends than SDC, creating a pull factor to those schools that destabilised SDC-supported learning centres.

On the other hand, SDC was guided by OCHA's Humanitarian Response Plan and worked through NGO partners to navigate the lack of direct access to affected populations. Although funding during that period came from the humanitarian envelope, almost all programmes were multi-year, of at least 48 months. This longer-term funding perspective aligns with an HDP Nexus approach.

Reestablishment of Local Leadership: Evolution of the Context Since the Change of Regime, December 2024

The collapse of the al-Assad regime in December 2024 fundamentally altered the operational landscape. Despite the destruction, the

education sector has demonstrated resilience, with state-run schools and universities rapidly resuming operations.

The new transitional authorities have proactively re-entered international coordination spaces, resuming control of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Partnership Compact discussions. They are asserting strategic leadership in education, obliging donors and other partners to align with a unified national vision. Revision of the national curriculum has already begun. Former Ba'athist influences are being removed, although the increasing presence of Islamic themes has sparked some controversy.

The transition has disrupted the 'bubble' of international NGOs and donors – excluding national authorities – that had developed during the war. The international community is pivoting towards supporting a nationally-led system, allowing for more effective application of an HDP Nexus approach. Recent adaptations in international sanctions (for example, the United States General License 24) explicitly permit transactions with governing institutions and the payment of public employee salaries, removing a major barrier to systemic support.

Very significant challenges remain. These include addressing the needs of millions of children who have missed years of schooling during the conflict and need support to catchup. Vocational and technical training is particularly important, to provide a pathway to livelihoods. The reintegration of returning refugees, many of whom face language barriers having studied in Turkish or French rather than Arabic, is another aspect. All learners require teachers who are trained and supported to use trauma-informed pedagogy and support catchup classes.

Despite the challenges, with the return of strong national leadership in education, support to the education system in an HDP Nexus approach is the unquestioned priority.

What Should the International Community Learn from Syria?

Reinforce the Importance of Coordination

Weak coordination among donors, UN agencies and INGOs in the Syria response contributed to fragmented programming, duplication of interventions and inconsistent approaches. This was seen particularly regarding teacher incentives, curricula and non-formal education. The absence of a common strategic vision reinforced parallel service delivery rather than supporting a coherent education system.

Avoid Parallel Delivery Structures Wherever Possible

While the complexity created by sanctions is recognised, donors and implementing partners collectively contributed to the creation of parallel education systems. This weakened institutional ownership (see below), distorted incentives and delayed recovery of the national education system. For example, an exam result in NFE means nothing without recognised certification; education responses must integrate pathways to official examinations.

Strengthen Institutional Resilience

An HDP Nexus approach means working through, and strengthening, national and local institutions wherever feasible, rather than substituting them. While humanitarian actors practised conflict sensitivity at the individual and local level, they did not pay sufficient attention to how institutions operate and absorb shocks.

Prolonged parallel service delivery, even when justified by humanitarian imperatives, weakens institutional resilience if not accompanied by a clear transition strategy. Even in the face of huge challenges, an HDP Nexus approach means prioritising long-term institutional resilience, and treating all local authorities as system owners, not just information sources. Greater emphasis on harmonised donor coordination, joint planning, common financing approaches and progressive capacity strengthening of national and local education institutions, can facilitate this.

Link Humanitarian Interventions to Long-term Reforms from the Outset

Education in emergencies and protracted crisis goes beyond literacy and numeracy, integrating child protection, mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Ensuring that education provision is holistic, inclusive and of quality can be institutionalised through work with local, and wherever possible, national systems.

Reestablishing public salary structures, as demonstrated by Qatar's recent initiative to provide budget support for teacher salaries through the public payroll, needs to be a priority.

From Parallel Systems to System Recovery: A Call for Action

While successful in responding to immediate humanitarian needs, the response in Syria between 2011 and 2024 provides a global lesson on the long-term risks of alternative education systems in protracted crises.

Parallel delivery was often unavoidable in the acute phases of the conflict. But its continuation over more than a decade contributed to fragmented governance, weak ownership, competing incentives, duplication among donors and implementing partners, and limited investment in strengthening the national education system.

In an HDP Nexus approach, humanitarian responses should work with and strengthen existing education systems wherever feasible. Where non-system structures are necessary as a measure of last resort, a clear transition strategy needs to be planned from the outset. The comparative advantage of humanitarian actors lies in protecting access to and the quality of education during crises. Managing education systems over the long term requires close coordination and collaboration with the local leadership that exists, with a view to long term system support.

The lessons from the Syrian response serve to help all education actors improve the application of an HDP Nexus approach in future protracted crises.

Outstanding questions

- How could specific situations have been managed differently in Syria, that offer learning for future responses?
- How best to ensure that the positive aspects of the education response 2011-24 – such as integrated education and child protection programming – best be maintained in the new political context?
- With reduced SDC funding for education since January 2025, and a focus on 'Education in Emergencies', what is the best focus for SDC's support to the Syrian education system?

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If you have suggestions on how to answer the outstanding questions raised in each Case Study, or comments on the Case Studies, please send them to eenetwork@eda.admin.ch

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eenetwork@eda.admin.ch
www.sdc-economy-education.ch/en

Authors
SDC Economy and Education section
SDC Humanitarian Competence Center
SDC Education Backstopping team

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Anouk Pasquier Di Dio

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