MONITORING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

Key insights and strategic recommendations
from a roundtable organised by
the Right to Education Initiative in July 2025

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Right to Education

Context and purpose

Access to reliable, context-sensitive data on education in conflict-affected areas is essential for informing public policies, advocacy, and protection measures. However, collecting accurate, timely, and comprehensive data on attacks on education and on the impacts of school closures on children and educational professionals poses severe ethical, methodological, logistical, and security challenges. This brief summarizes the key insights and strategic recommendations from an online roundtable, organised by the Right to Education Initiative in July 2025, which brought together around 30 researchers, practitioners, and civil society actors working in monitoring the right to education in conflict-affected regions, both from a local and global perspective. Here are the main takeaways of this discussion.

Key takeaways

1 • Lack of data is a reality, and this has a crucial impact on what we know and how we address attacks on education.

Data on attacks on educational facilities, students and educational personnel are crucially lacking, because they are either not collected or disclosed. In addition, the impact of attacks on education on communities, teachers and children's lives - and particularly on their rights - is largely under researched and absent from most existing analyses.

The absence of reliable data fosters ambiguity and can lead to misrepresentations of the reality on the ground, either obscuring the severity of a situation or underestimating positive developments.

We need to put data collection and analysis at the heart of education in emergency policies. Data is a prerequisite for evidence-informed decision making. Lack of data undermines each State's – as well as global – efforts to build tailored public policies that ensure that individual and collective rights are respected, protected and implemented.

2 • Research in conflict-affected contexts has always been risky but the shrinking of civic space in volatile and sensitive political contexts has critically undermined research development and dissemination.

Research in conflict-affected contexts is risky: for researchers and organisations conducting the study, for community actors involved in the research, for those willing to share their accounts of events, and even for those who are not taking part in the research but may be perceived as collaborating with data collection. Risks include - but are not limited to - threats to one's self or to one's family, violence, injuries, death, confiscation of materials, arrest, suspension of activities.

Political sensitiveness and tensions involving armed groups increase overall distrust and fear of reprisals. Moreover, in contexts where civic space is closing, increasing restrictions on data collection efforts - such state administrative constraints and suspicion of human rights monitoring - create critical barriers to civil society data collection and analysis. The shrinking of civic space has led to the suspension of research activities or the closure of legitimate civil society organisations as well as censorship (including self-censorship). This reality, associated with lack of funding, has led many organisations to close their programs in conflict-affected contexts, failing the promise to 'leave no one behind'. More often than not, even when collected, data cannot be published for safety reasons.

It is a crucial that States ensure that researchers and civil society organisations are able to collaborate with state agencies while conducting independent research.

3 • Security and ethics are non-negotiable, but some flexibility in research processes is necessary to allow for data to surface while ensuring safe, ethical, quality data collection.

Collecting data can expose communities, civil society organisations, enumerators, and researchers to retaliation – from both state and non-state actors. Risk assessment and mitigation is essential to ensure access to data as well as the safety of all those involved in the research process. Nevertheless, not everything can be predicted in advance and some flexibility in research protocols and methodology should be accepted and validated - from the early stages of research design to the production of final research reports.

Classical research methods may not be tailored to high-risk and rapidly evolving contexts. Ensuring that all relevant information on the methodology and research process is documented is not always possible. Sometimes researchers and organisations cannot disclose the negotiating process on the ground in order to have access to certain conflict-affected zones. Random interviewee selection may sometimes be constrained by field dynamics and following cohorts may be complicated due to people's displacement and difficulties to keep track of individual movements across territories and borders.

Researchers and civil society organisations should be encouraged to develop innovative research scenarios, adapt research protocols and combine multiple methodologies. Local voices and qualitative accounts are essential but underrepresented in research due to lack of safety, access, and recognition: anonymity, informed consent, and ethical clearance procedures should be adjusted to take into consideration the specific constraints of data collection in each context. Standardized statistical research methods that often fail in volatile contexts need to be adapted to take into consideration population displacement, access challenges and evolving security risks, especially when relying on longitudinal tracking or formal sampling. Moreover, local based knowledge of actors working on education and on child protection should not be undermined (for example, not included in reporting procedures) due to methodology and research constraints linked to western centric research standards that may actually be unfit to high-risk settings and specific local realities. For instance, it should be accepted to obtain verbal consent from participants that are anonymized by researchers to preserve their safety, not naming the authors of the research in the reporting process, and not disclosing all the details of research methodology when this may put researchers or their partners on the ground at risk.

We need to acknowledge that flexible, adaptive research methodologies and processes do not inherently compromise ethical and human rights standards, nor affect the quality of data collection and analysis. Innovative research methods as well as transparent iterative research, including the use of recall methods, remote interviews, and cross-verification through local media or satellite data should be valued and encouraged.

4 • Communities and local civil society organisations have embodied and contextualized experience of the reality on the ground. Their involvement in research is essential, but underfunded.

Local organisations are best placed to access affected populations and build trust, but lack resources, protection, and recognition. We are failing our global commitment to localize aid when it comes to data collection. International organisations, research journals and donors need to acknowledge and value local knowledge and local research methods.

Moreover, with authoritarian rule hindering public spaces in many parts of the world and major decreases in funding for development, many international organisations are canceling important programs and stepping out of places affected by conflict and protracted crises. If international funding does not reach local actors, there is little chance that accurate, timely information about what is happening on the ground will be collected. Without data, some crises will simply disappear from the map. Behind the statistics, it is actual human lives that are being ignored and threatened.

5 • The global funding crisis, including at the United Nations level, is threatening the continuity of critical monitoring systems undermining our ability to design and implement tailored public policies which ensure that no one is left behind.

Relevant funding policies must be backed up by data and robust monitoring systems. But no data revolution is possible if data collection continues to be underfunded. The United Nations liquidity crisis as well as recent major cuts in development funding have further compromised the ability of many actors to collect and analyse data.

We need to acknowledge that the various natures of conflict dynamics and the constantly evolving situation on the ground call for sustainable funding with flexible adaptive management rules. Building trusted relationships over time is crucial to ensure access to quality research – even more in high-risk settings, where violence and political tensions drive communities' behaviors and foster distrust and fear of reprisals. Yet, this is often incompatible with donor timelines and short-term project cycles, especially when taking into account the need to foster innovative ethical methodologies that are culturally and situationally adapted to mitigate risks of data collection.

Recommendations for collective action

- Put data collection and analysis at the heart of education policies in fragile and conflict-affected countries, ensuring that policies are designed and implemented based on evidence.

- Ensure that researchers and civil society organisations find a collaborative environment that fosters independent data collection and dissemination. Research freedom and independence needs to be acknowledged and respected.

- Recognize and support flexible, situational and culturally adapted methodologies in academic and donor frameworks and encourage innovative methodologies that ensure the safety of all stakeholders involved in research while at the same time respecting alternative ethical and epistemological standards. Ensure that international advocacy includes voices and data from under-represented zones, even when fragmentary.

- Ensure that communities' voices are heard by acknowledging, valuing and facilitating local knowledge and research methods, including by involving local researchers and civil society organisations. Step up to the commitment to delocalize aid by funding local organisations to collect and analyze data.

- Ensure that data collection and analysis are backed up by sustained continuous funding to allow for timely and sensitive research, while at the same time acknowledging the challenges of doing research in conflict-affected areas.

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