



**EDUCATION
CANNOT
WAIT**

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INSIGHTS FROM PARTNERS

Supporting Peace Through Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises



This brief is the first in a new Education Cannot Wait (ECW) Knowledge Exchange Series. The series aims to foster collaboration and surface practice-based learning from crisis-affected contexts on how to better align humanitarian, development and peace efforts – the “Triple Nexus” – in education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC).

Drawing on experience from partners and programmes across diverse geographies, each brief distils emerging insights, approaches and lessons to inform policy and operational practice. This first edition focuses on how education can advance peacebuilding, foster social cohesion and reinforce resilience in crisis-affected settings.

Elements of this brief were informed by a virtual learning exchange convened by ECW in June 2025. The event brought together ECW grantees and partners, as well as Generations for Peace – an external partner working specifically on peacebuilding – and featured experiences primarily from Colombia, Jordan and Somalia.



Why it matters

Around the world, education systems are under mounting pressure – not only to deliver learning, but to foster protection and social cohesion in the face of escalating violence, political fragmentation and deepening inequalities. Conflict is the leading driver of emergencies and protracted crises in countries where ECW operates. In 2024, alone, 20 out of the 33 ECW programme countries were affected by violent conflict according to the World Bank’s Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations List.¹

Violent conflicts keep entire generations of children out of school or in classrooms marked by fear and danger. In 2024, an estimated 520 million children—or more than 1 out of 5—were living in a conflict zone.² Conflict drives forced displacement: 49 million children have been forcibly displaced by conflict and violence, either within their own countries or as refugees.³ These dynamics are accelerating. Over the past five years, the number of global conflicts has doubled.⁴ Crises are no longer isolated—they are increasingly interconnected, protracted

and complex, with education systems caught in the crossfire.

A growing body of evidence confirms that education—when inclusive, equitable and conflict-sensitive—can reduce violence and contribute to sustainable peace.⁵ But realizing this potential requires an intentional design. Too often, peacebuilding remains an aspirational goal rather than an integral part of education programmes. Without crisis-sensitive approaches and sustained investment, the opportunity to make education a foundation for peace is easily lost.

This learning brief draws on the practical experiences of ECW partners operating in diverse, selected contexts to explore how education programmes can advance peace and social cohesion objectives. While not intended as a comprehensive portfolio review, it offers emerging insights from ongoing initiatives, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in linking EiEPC with peacebuilding in conflict-affected settings.



Emerging Insights from partners

While peacebuilding through education holds enormous potential, it is rarely straightforward. Education programmes operate in environments marked by social tensions, fragmented governance and political volatility – conditions that make progress fragile and uneven.

While frameworks such as the 4Rs (recognition, redistribution, representation, and reconciliation) underscore the multi-tiered and multi-faceted nature of peacebuilding in post-conflict settings, ECW partners participating in the recent knowledge exchange event highlighted a number of specific challenges:⁶

- Teachers lack consistent support to deliver peace-related content like social emotional learning and reconciliation.
- Peacebuilding can be seen as politically sensitive, particularly in active conflict contexts. To safeguard neutrality, humanitarian actors in some settings may be limited to a focus on “do no harm” approaches rather than addressing underlying root causes of conflict.
- Mistrust and division cannot be overcome by classroom interventions alone. They require sustained engagement with the wider community, as well as national policy and curriculum measures.
- Peace and social cohesion outcomes—such as perceptions of belonging, trust, safety and inclusion—are difficult to quantify, making it harder to understand whether education programmes are contributing to them.

¹ World Bank. (2024). FY25 list of fragile and conflict-affected situations. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/b3c737c4687db176ec98f5c434d0de91-0090082024/original/FCSListFY25.pdf>

² Østby, G., & Rustad, S. A. (2025, November 4). Record high: One in five children in conflict zones. Peace Research Institute Oslo. <https://www.prio.org/comments/1829>

³ UNICEF. (2024). Child displacement and refugees: Displacement. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement>

⁴ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2024). *ACLED Conflict Index*. <https://acleddata.com/series/acleddata-conflict-index>

⁵ See for example: Tøstby, G., Urdal, H., & Dupuy, K. (2019). Does education lead to pacification? *Review of Educational Research*, 89(1), 46–92; Institute for Economics & Peace & GPE (2024). *Key findings on education and peace*; Liuzzi, S., et al. (2021). *Education programs and violence: Evidence review*; ACER (2020). *Education in conflict-affected states*.

⁶ Novelli, M., Lopes Cardozo, M. T. A., & Smith, A. (2019). The “4 Rs” as a tool for critical policy analysis of the education sector in conflict-affected states. *Education and Conflict Review*, 2, 70–75.

These challenges don't diminish the case for linking EiEPC and peace, they underscore its urgency. Building peace through education is not a linear process. It requires continued engagement in complex environments, and sustained investment in relationships that foster long-term transformation. Consultations with stakeholders point to several foundational approaches that can make education a genuine gateway to improved social relations within and across communities.

A Understanding conflict dynamics is essential when designing and implementing EiEPC

Effective peace-responsive education programming depends on continuous, localized analysis of conflict dynamics, power relations and social cleavages. Without timely data on intergroup tensions, identity-based exclusion or shifting protection risks, it is nearly impossible to design responses that reduce harm, foster equity or rebuild trust.

In Somalia, through the ECW-supported Multi-Year Resilience Programme, conflict analyses using education demand surveys and community consultations helped shape strategies to make schools safer and more inclusive, especially for marginalized children. These insights guided the design of education services aimed at reducing risks and promoting protection and learning. In Colombia, the Multi-Year Resilience Programme combines education data with information from protection actors and community leaders to identify schools affected by insecurity – often in areas where schools are the only visible presence of the state. Based on this understanding, partners conduct door-to-door outreach to identify out-of-school children, engage families, and create safe and peaceful learning environments that support children's development and wellbeing.

B Equity and inclusion in access and learning are necessary conditions for peace

Education can be a driver of peace – or a source of division – depending on how it is delivered. Real or perceived inequalities in access can intensify grievances

and erode trust in institutions. While humanitarian actors may not be able to address structural inequalities rooted in national policies, they can ensure equity within their own programmes. In active conflict settings, this requires designing emergency education responses that avoid reinforcing tensions and instead prioritize fairness and inclusion. Equity must therefore be a guiding principle in programme design and implementation, ensuring that marginalized groups – such as internally displaced persons and refugees – receive quality support and services.

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, education programmes that reached both Rohingya and host communities helped reduce friction by addressing disparities. In Colombia, the ECW-supported programme prioritizes historically marginalized rural communities and is designed to address intersecting vulnerabilities – including ethnicity – while creating safe, inclusive spaces that restore trust among communities that have been in conflict for generations, as well as in public institutions. This entails a dedicated collaboration with the entire school community – including families and protection actors, as well as education authorities. In Somalia, the Multi-Year Resilience Programme reaches displaced children, returnees, girls and marginalized clans. Access is shaped through ongoing consultation, ensuring services are delivered equitably within complex social dynamics.

C Communities are at the heart of education and peacebuilding

In crisis-affected settings, where trust in public institutions is often broken, communities are not just stakeholders – they are the primary agents of peace. Education programming must centre their leadership, experience and knowledge to be effective, legitimate, equitable and relevant. To support peace, EiEPC programmes should prioritize the meaningful inclusion of those most affected by conflict and marginalization, who are often at risk of being excluded from decision-making processes. Local organizations led by women, youth, and refugees possess valuable insights into the drivers of exclusion and intercommunal tensions, positioning them as essential partners in designing and implementing durable solutions.

In Colombia, schools act as a bridge between state and society. The Multi-Year Resilience Programme engages communities as co-creators of solutions, supporting localized teacher recruitment, community-led safety plans, and youth “life projects” that foster self-awareness and civic engagement. In Somalia, Multi-Year Resilience Programme-supported community consultations helped shape equity-focused responses, such as mentorship initiatives that significantly improved girls’ retention – widely recognized as building more just societies and long-lasting peace.⁷ In Jordan, insights from Generations for Peace underscored that youth-led delivery of peacebuilding activities through the *Nashatati* programme enhanced relevance and effectiveness by grounding initiatives in young people’s lived realities.

D Peacebuilding extends beyond curriculum content to school culture

Integrating peace education into curricula can be an entry point for embedding peacebuilding in EiEPC. When implemented well, it can promote reconciliation, civic values and social cohesion. However, integrating peace education can be challenging, particularly in crisis-affected contexts. In Uganda, peace education has been introduced into the national curriculum as a standalone subject. However, participants noted that structural challenges – such as limited teacher capacity and overcrowded timetables – can affect implementation. This highlights a broader issue: policy-level reform is not enough without the means to carry it through in classrooms.

More sustainable approaches embed peace not just in content, but across the learning environment. In Jordan, partners from Generations for Peace scaled peace education through a cascade model that trains educators and introduces extracurricular activities – such as role-playing, arts-based learning and reflective exercises – across more than 2,000 schools. In Somalia, ECW’s Multi-Year Resilience Programme partner, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), linked school-based learning with life skills and livelihood planning, empowering youth as agents of change. In

Colombia, where there is no unified national curriculum, the Multi-Year Resilience Programme works with local education authorities to embed peace content across all stages of learning. Early years focus on holistic development; primary and secondary levels integrate civic, social-emotional, climate and anti-discrimination skills; and upper secondary supports life project planning. This localized, ecosystem-based approach strengthens institutional capacity while aligning with community needs and priorities.

E EiEPC actors can support efforts to institutionalize peace in education systems

Where possible, local and national education authorities should be engaged in peacebuilding through EiEPC – both to ensure sustainability and to strengthen national capacity. While fragile governance or contested legitimacy may limit access to public services in some contexts, strengthening institutions is essential for scaling and sustaining peace-responsive education. This requires working with education authorities at all levels to co-own peacebuilding strategies, foster trust, and uphold humanitarian and “do no harm” principles.

In Somalia, as part of its education efforts, ECW’s Multi-Year Resilience Programme partner, ADRA, and the Ministry of Education currently co-lead the Teaching and Learning Working Group to localize and adapt conflict-sensitive learning materials. State Ministries of Education lead implementation with partner support, reinforcing alignment with national policy. In Colombia, the Ministry of Education has led the design of the second ECW-supported Multi-Year Resilience Programme, together with local and national partners, prioritizing areas historically affected by conflict and aiming to consolidate regional systems, including rural secondary education. In Jordan, Generations for Peace launched a pilot in vulnerable communities. Following promising results, the model was scaled through cascade teacher training and advocacy. Eventually, it was adopted by the Ministry of Education and integrated into the national curriculum, with partners continuing to provide mentoring and support.

⁷ United Nations Children’s Fund. (2016). *Gender, education and peacebuilding: Brief*. UNICEF. https://ecdpeace.org/sites/default/files/pdf/04-05_Gender_and_Peacebuilding_2_%28English%29.pdf



Looking Forward

Building peace through education requires moving beyond isolated initiatives toward systemic approaches that embed peacebuilding across all levels of the education ecosystem. As shared by partners, peacebuilding should not be treated as a standalone intervention but as a thread woven throughout education – informing curriculum and pedagogy, guiding how schools are governed and connected to their communities, and shaping how systems coordinate across sectors.

When equity, inclusion, and meaningful community participation are central to education programmes, education becomes more than a pathway to learning. It can provide supportive spaces for healing, strengthen social connections, and help foster a sense of belonging. However, education alone cannot deliver peace. Its impact depends on the broader context, including overall protection environments, governance systems, and efforts to address underlying grievances. In many settings, education can play an important supportive role in

strengthening social cohesion, but it must work alongside wider political and social processes to contribute to lasting peace.

Lessons from partners working across crisis-affected contexts point to the importance of investing in teacher support, community-driven approaches, including meaningful youth engagement, and the institutionalization of peace education and social emotional learning within national systems.

For ECW, this reinforces the value of integrated and multi-sectoral programming that positions education to be an effective enabler for broader wellbeing and peace.

The learning synthesized in this brief can help inform future EiEPC investments, approaches and partnerships – strengthening collective efforts to embed peace more intentionally across education systems in emergencies and protracted crises.

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS OUTLINE PRIORITY ACTIONS TO SUPPORT MORE PEACE-RESPONSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS:

- ✓ **Embed continuous, participatory and inclusive conflict analyses** within programme design and implementation to adapt to evolving risks, address exclusion dynamics and “do no harm.”
- ✓ **Strengthening evidence and learning on ways in which EiEPC programmes have contributed to peace outcomes**, including through better ways of measuring improvements in social cohesion, trust and inclusion.
- ✓ **Invest in teacher capacity and well-being** so educators can foster inclusive, safe and reflective learning environments, and deliver peacebuilding and social emotional learning content effectively.
- ✓ **Strengthen locally-led and community-driven approaches** by empowering parents, youth and local organizations – particularly women- and refugee-led groups – to co-design and lead education and peacebuilding initiatives.
- ✓ **Promote the integration of peace and social cohesion across education responses** by supporting collaboration with ministries of education and development partners, and by embedding peace-responsive approaches in curriculum, pedagogy and school practices.