

Urgent Appeal to Protect Palestinian Children's Future

The escalation of hostilities in Gaza and the West Bank are having a catastrophic effect on Palestinian children's ability to learn, both now and in the future. The Education Cluster call for immediate actions to protect children and their right to learn.

On today's International Day of Education, we, as humanitarian organizations, acknowledge the commitments established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN Resolution 64/290, specifically the right to education in emergency situations. Safe and dignified education plays a pivotal role in not only breaking cycles of violence and poverty but transforming societies.

In Gaza, generations of children have had their right to education restricted

Crippled under 17 years of blockade and conflict, Gaza's education system bore extensive damage long before the hostilities following 7 October 2023. Entry restrictions on building materials hindered both the construction of new schools and repairs to those damaged in prior escalations. UN schools were frequently repurposed as emergency shelters for Gaza's internally displaced populations, often leading to weeks-long closures, teachers working double shifts to manage overcrowded classrooms, and driving students to bear the brunt of the consequences.

An UNRWA survey conducted after the May 2021 hostilities in the Gaza Strip revealed that 42% of UNRWA first-grade school children required psychosocial support. Nine months later, 35% of these children continued to suffer from trauma-related reactions, with reports of some having restored to suicide. A 2022 Save the Children report highlighted that 80% of children felt trapped in a perpetual state of fear, worry, sadness, or grief, with three-quarters of children bed-wetting in fear and a growing number more exhibiting reactive mutism. As the intergenerational impact of war inevitably influences children's behaviour and cognitive abilities outside the classroom, depriving them of one of the few havens for safe and dignified learning is particularly distressing.

An already dire situation has reached unprecedented new lows

Today, access to education in Gaza isn't just limited, it's non-existent. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) every single student, comprising approximately 625,000 children, currently lacks their fundamental right to education. Since 7 October 2023, there has been no access to education for more than 625,000 students and 22,564 teachers in Gaza. According to the Education Cluster, over 76% of schools in Gaza are damaged or destroyed. 264 are being used as shelter for 1.4 million people internally displaced in Gaza. The deprivation, however, doesn't end there — as of 23 January 2024, the MoE reported that **4,510** students and **231** teachers were killed, while another **7,911** students and **756** teachers were injured.

The current conditions are exposing children to extremely traumatic episodes while stripping them of their coping options. Children cannot access the safe places critical to their recovery, while repeated displacement and relentless bombing have ripped away any sense of security. Israeli restrictions on aid and aid personnel entering Gaza have severely limited access to professional psychosocial support. The effects this will have on children's long-term ability to learn is untold.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, thousands of children remain deprived of their right to education

A combination of settler violence, infrastructure demolition, access restrictions and forcible displacement shape a dangerous if not deadly environment for thousands of Palestinian children living

in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. According to the West Bank Protection Consortium, in the last year alone, 5,870 children across 117 communities within the West Bank were without a primary school. Another 4,599 children faced challenges in accessing daily education due to movement restrictions, security checkpoints, and continuous subjection to harassment, intimidation, and violence on their way to school.

In May 2023, members of the Ein Samiya community were forcibly transferred three months prior to the demolition of their primary school by the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA), compelling 12 students to transfer to Kafer Malek schools and leaving another 10 without access. Then, in November 2023, another school in Khirbet Zanuta had two of its classrooms burned to the ground and later bulldozed and demolished by violent settlers. In both instances, the surrounding communities were displaced and forcibly transferred, and children lost their access to education.

Violence in the West Bank has skyrocketed, limiting access to education

In the months following 7 October 2023, violence across the West Bank reached unprecedented levels. According to OCHA, as of 23 January 2024, Israeli forces and settlers have killed 360 Palestinians, including 92 children, across the West Bank. There have been an additional 42 attacks by Israeli soldiers and or settlers on Palestinian public schools. The MoE reported that 41 students have been killed, with another 282 injured and 85 arrested. An additional five teachers and administrative staff in the West Bank have been injured, with over 71 arrested.

The escalation of violence in the West Bank has only exacerbated the already-restricted education system. Not only is access to education a key component of humanitarian assistance, but protected learning can mitigate the psychosocial impact of armed conflicts through a sense of normalcy, stability, structure, and a hope for a better future.

Call to Action to Parties to the conflict, including education providers, donors, and Member States

Even if the current escalation of hostilities in the West Bank and Gaza subside, the need for sustainable reconstruction efforts focused on the child's right to learn remains essential.

- **To recognize the catastrophic damage to the education system in Gaza.**
- **To ceasefire immediately and definitively.** Under the risk of bombs, children are unable to learn, and teachers are unable to teach.
- **To recognize the right to education** as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to do so during emergencies as set out in UN Resolution 64/290 of 2010, taking all possible measures to cease perpetration of Grave Violations against children including killing and maiming, attacks against schools, and denial of humanitarian access to children.
- **To increase as much as possible immediate education support**, including professional mental health and psychosocial support to children in Gaza and the West Bank.
- **To prepare to resume education activities once the conflict ends.** In doing so, rebuilding infrastructure, paying close attention to childrens' psychosocial, cognitive, physical health and wellbeing development, and implementing alternative learning solutions such as distance learning.
- **To ensure that critical funding is met**, both for long-term reconstruction and immediate needs. Worryingly, only three percent of the education flash appeal for education has been funded.