

# A PLACE TO LEARN

JOINT ADVOCACY NOTE – 24<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2024

The Shelter Cluster Palestine and the oPt Education Cluster highlight the devastating impacts of the current situation in Gaza on children and the inextricable links between shelter and schooling. We urge all actors to ensure that barriers to education are addressed, especially through the provision of adequate shelter that facilitates holistic recovery and enables the right to learn.

## A CEASEFIRE IS URGENTLY NEEDED TO RESTORE ACCESS TO HOUSING AND EDUCATION

For over three months, none of the 625,000 children in Gaza have been able to go to school. In place of children eager to learn, school buildings have housed displaced families desperately seeking safety. Mattresses and blankets fill classrooms and hallways, desks are repurposed as walls and wardrobes, playgrounds are filled with tents and tarpaulins. Over 1.4 million people are currently sheltering in 264 schools, representing around 70 per cent of all school buildings in Gaza. This places massive strain on limited sanitation facilities, while overcrowding contributes to an unhygienic environment and rapid spread of disease, and increased protection risks due to lack of privacy, as well as damage to furniture and equipment.

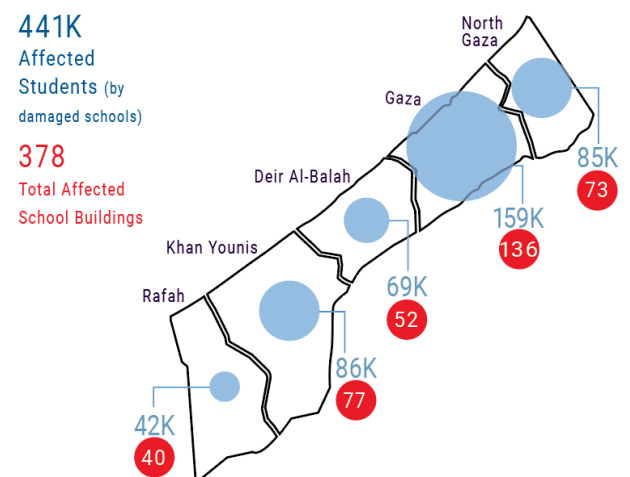
These conditions have had a significant negative impact on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children, teachers and caregivers, as well as severely harmed the ability of children in Gaza to exercise their right to learn. Education Cluster partners have endeavoured to provide recreational activities and supplies as well as psychosocial support in Khan Younis, Rafah, and Middle governorates, but have been limited by lack of access, security and staff capacity.<sup>1</sup> Children with Disabilities are particularly vulnerable, and risk being left out of the limited activities taking place. Many have lost their assistive devices, and many more children will need additional support as a result of injuries sustained in the war.

The educational infrastructure in Gaza has also been significantly affected. 90 per cent of all school buildings are either functioning as IDP shelters and/or have sustained damage. In addition to degradation due to their use as accommodation, 378 school buildings (76 per cent of all school buildings in Gaza) have suffered varying levels of damage as a result of the hostilities<sup>2</sup> including 237 which were used to shelter IDPs. As of 20 January 2024, UNRWA estimates that in total at least 335 internally displaced people (IDPs) sheltering in UNRWA premises (the vast majority of which are schools) have been killed and at least another 1,161 injured since the start of the war. Overall, 13 schools have been totally destroyed, while 104 schools have major damage, 127 schools moderate damage and 134 schools minor damage. Three quarters of the total damage has been sustained in the governorates of North Gaza, Gaza and Khan Younis.<sup>3</sup>

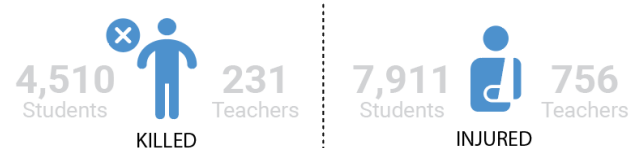
The casualties documented by the Ministry of Education highlight the **urgent need for a full and sustained ceasefire to:**

- stop further loss of life
- enable all those able to return to their homes to leave school buildings
- facilitate an increase humanitarian response activities to address the damage caused
- allow children in Gaza the chance to build a better future.

### DAMAGED SCHOOLS AND AFFECTED STUDENTS PER GOVERNORATE



### CASUALTIES (Students age group is 6-17 years old)



<sup>1</sup> The Education Cluster has eleven partners currently active in the Gaza strip (HI, CMBM, UNICEF, Tamer, Ma'an, Nafs, TCC, Right to Play, SYFS, AFKAR and UNRWA) who have reached 121,997 individual students and teachers since October 7th (51%M/49%F). Most of the Education Cluster response is delivered by local partners. No activities have been able to be implemented in North Gaza or Gaza governorates due to lack of access.

<sup>2</sup> In total, 378 schools have been damaged or destroyed, affecting 440,789 students (52% girls) and 16,465 teachers (58% female).

<sup>3</sup> 78% of North Gaza governorate, 68% of Gaza governorate and 64% of Khan Younis governorate school buildings have been damaged.

## PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO LEARN

Children's right to learn has been set out in international law, including through the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right has been and remains very significant for Palestinian children. The illiteracy rate in Palestine is one of the lowest in the world and reached 2.2% in 2022, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Children retain the right to learn during emergencies, as affirmed by the UNGA in 2010.

### **In Gaza, the right to learn is being prevented by:**

- The systematic damage and destruction of education facilities across Gaza
- The use of education facilities for military operations
- The required use of education facilities by people whose homes have been destroyed or who have been forced to move to avoid hostilities and need somewhere to shelter
- The almost complete displacement of the population that has deprived children of safety as well as a place to learn

These obstructions articulate the close links between education and shelter. Education activities need to occur close to where children live. Children need to have homes that are safe and provide refuge, as well as being a place where they can study. While school buildings in Gaza provide much needed refuge in emergencies, **lack of alternative accommodation can cause a barrier in access to education** after active hostilities cease. In addition, the widespread damage caused will require extensive work to reinstate learning spaces as well as to provide both temporary and durable housing that supports the right to learn.

In line with the Ministry of Education and UNRWA, the Education Cluster is following a three-phased approach to restore access to education:

1. Ensuring as much support as possible to children, teachers and caregivers in shelters and in host communities while the conflict is ongoing
2. Preparing a safe learning environment and re-establishing a sense of normalcy as soon as hostilities stop
3. Restoring the formal education system through reconstruction of education infrastructure and ensuring adequate staff

### **The provision of alternative shelter solutions is vital to be able to vacate schools being used as temporary accommodation.**

The length of displacement and quality of housing both during and after displacement has a direct impact on children's physical and mental wellbeing, as well as a conducive environment that can either support or hinder educational outcomes.

## ENABLING EDUCATION AND PSYCOSOCIAL RECOVERY

Enabling children to exercise their right to learn will require a significant investment of both human and financial resources.

### **Transitional solutions**

Temporary learning spaces will allow children resume learning and educational activities while displaced and educational structures are repaired or rebuilt. **The number of temporary learning spaces required will be dependent on restoring access to existing structures.** Investment in a range of transitional shelter options can encourage decongestion of school buildings, including repairs, transitional cash assistance, caravans, tents or sealing-off kits to facilitate rehabilitation and repairs. However, given the widespread damage and limited available space in Gaza, significant efforts are required to ensure access to physical, financial and human resources to be able to restore access to pre-existing and more durable housing and education structures.

### **Psychosocial Support**

The physical requirements to rebuild facilities will be insufficient on their own. A sustained and sensitive effort to support the mental health of children and teachers who have suffered during the hostilities is also required. The design of learning spaces should enhance the social and emotional well-being of children. Children, teachers, and caregivers will need significant, long-term, and careful psycho-social support to support an effective learning environment. **The provision of appropriate accommodation is a key component in protecting people's mental health as well as children's ability to learn.** The provision of adequate shelter is vital to supporting recovery and to provide a safe and restorative environment conducive to learning.

### **Funding**

Donors interested in the future stability and success of Gaza need to **ensure that funding to support the emergency and transitional education and shelter requirements is available**, in addition to enhancing financing and access to markets to facilitate the longer-term reconstruction of housing and educational facilities in a timely manner.

The above highlights the overarching need for shelter and education actors – and crucially, donors – to recognise the interlinked relationship between schools, shelter and psychosocial recovery in Gaza, and to prioritise actions that restores access to education by ensuring alternative adequate shelter that supports social, emotional, and mental well-being as well as educational outcomes.