



‘WILL I SEE MY CHILDREN AGAIN?’



Save the Children

A brief on attacks on education in Yemen. October 2021

Acknowledgements

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All names have been changed to protect the identities of children and the families featured in this paper.

Cover photo: Children studying in Al Wahda Milad Primary school in Taiz, which was bombed in 2016. The school now lies in ruins but students are still attending classes in this makeshift school. Photo by Mansoor Albaraa / Save The Children , November 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Overview	04
2	Background	05
3	Attacks on schools	06
4	Conflict exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities	08
5	Recommendations	12



Drawing by Ahmed*, 14, illustrating the impact of the war in Yemen on children as part of a collaborative story telling workshop. Drawn in July 2021.

I. OVERVIEW

This briefing note highlights the immediate and long-term devastating impact of attacks on education on the millions of children, teachers and schools that are affected by the brutal seven-year conflict in Yemen.

This briefing note is aimed at ensuring that the education crisis in Yemen is highlighted at the upcoming Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration: Ensuring Safe Education for All: From Commitment to Practice which takes place from 25-27 October 2021.

This note is informed by an assessment conducted in 2020 by Save the Children's partner Mwatana for Human Rights, publicly available information, as well as Save the Children's expertise as one of the largest education actors operational in Yemen since 1963.

The research sample covered 400 students from 137 primary, preparatory and secondary schools in nine governorates: Taiz, Sanaa (the governorate), Hudeidah, Aden, Abyan, Dhale, Hajjah, Saada, and the capital, Sanaa. The study also covered three groups of interest, including 100 displaced students, 100 students who dropped out of school, and 100 teachers, all within the same geographic distribution.

It concludes with key recommendations to national, regional and international actors to support children in Yemen to be better able to access their right to education.

The Safe Schools Declaration is an inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict. It is the outcome of a process led by Norway and Argentina in 2015 among UN Member States. The Declaration outlines commitments that seek to protect education from attack and restrict the use of educational facilities for military purposes. Ultimately, the aim of this commitment is to ensure the continuity of safe education during armed conflict. By endorsing the Declaration states commit to take steps to restore access to safe education and develop conflict-sensitive education systems to promote respect and inclusion of social or ethnic groups. The Declaration also offers a framework for states to collaborate, where endorsing countries meet on a regular basis to review progress and milestones of the implementation of the Declaration. For more information, see <https://ssd.protectingeducation.org>.



Children playing in Al Wahda Milad Primary school in Taiz, which was bombed in 2016. Photo by Mansoor Albaraa / Save The Children, November 2020

II. BACKGROUND

Over 11 million children remain in urgent need of humanitarian aid or protection assistance in Yemen, with over 10 million children in need of basic health care and eight million in need of emergency education support. Around 400,000 children are at risk of acute malnutrition, which if not treated could result in death.¹ Yemen remains a dangerous, insecure environment, where children are exposed to physical and mental harm because of the crisis. Approximately, 3,336 children have been killed in the past seven years.² Beyond the direct threat to personal safety, ongoing violence, instability and poor economic conditions in Yemen have forced over two million children out of schools, while millions more continue to be at risk of dropping out. More than 2,500 schools in Yemen have been affected by the conflict, many of which have been left destroyed.³

A recent study revealed that the military use of schools has been the top form of attacks on education reported by respondents.⁴ The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack identified at least 30 reports of military use of schools between 2017 and 2019 in Yemen.⁵ Not only does military use of school infrastructure infringe on students' right to a safe educational environment, but it also increases the likelihood of a school becoming a direct target. Further, the impact on education goes beyond direct attacks, with thousands of children are dropping out of school due to displacement, poverty, lack of schools and teachers. Similar to other public services, the quality of educational services has deteriorated significantly. Thousands of schools across the country lack safe drinking water, hygienic toilets, food, or psychosocial support services.

1 UNICEF, "Education disrupted: Impact of conflict on children's education in Yemen", July 2021, p.2 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UN0484486.pdf>

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 Mwatana, "War on Ignorance: Field study on the impact of the armed conflict on access to education in Yemen", p. 12

5 Education Under Attack 2020, Yemen Country profile, p. 255, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua_2020_full.pdf

III. ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Schools have repeatedly come under attack in Yemen both directly and indirectly. Types of attacks include air strikes, shelling, active exchange of fire in proximity to schools, planting of mines nearby schools, and armed forces and groups occupying schools for military purposes. 465 incidents of attacks, including the military use of education facilities, have been reported between 26 March 2015 and 28 February 2021. More than 400,000 children have been forced out of school as a direct result of the conflict, resulting in more than more than 2,500 schools damaged, used as collective shelters for displaced families, or occupied by armed groups.⁶

In March 2021 alone, five attacks on schools left more than 30,600 children without access to education. In Taiz, violence resulted in the deadliest quarter for children in over two years. Fifty children were killed or injured between January and March 2021. Schools in Taiz came under attack in four separate incidents, killing 11 civilians including four children. Another attack took place in Sana'a where a school was reportedly struck by warplanes.⁷ According to the education cluster, 50 per cent of schools in most governorates have been physically affected by the conflict. For example, in Hajjah governorate, 21 schools have been affected, seven of which were destroyed, two partially damaged, five occupied by armed groups, and three are close to active frontlines. The roads leading to three of the remaining schools are riddled with land mines while the remaining two schools serve as collective shelters.⁸

Children in Yemen also experience heightened insecurity on the way to and from school, as warplanes could strike, and clashes may erupt without warning. About one fifth of the children face a security incident on their way to school.⁹ Such incidents included kidnapping or attempted kidnapping, breakout of clashes, and harassment by strangers. This would have likely been worse if the study was conducted during the first year of conflict due to the intensity of the conflict.¹⁰ More than 40 per cent of children interviewed said that they are afraid of facing similar incidents in the future. Around 45 per cent of children reported observing some form of military presence on the way to or from school. This is particularly worrying, especially that nearly 90 per cent of children surveyed said that they walk to school every day.

6 UNICEF, "Education disrupted: Impact of conflict on children's education in Yemen", July 2021

7 Save the Children, Yemen: Tens of thousands of children denied access to education after a single month of attacks on schools. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/yemen-tens-thousands-children-denied-access-education-after-single-month-attacks-schools>

8 Yemen Education Cluster, Yemen Education Crisis: 2020 Secondary Data Review (SDR) Report https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/education_cluster_-_sdr_report_yemen_2020-08-17-.pdf

9 Mwatana, "War on Ignorance: Field study on the impact of the armed conflict on access to education in Yemen" p.4 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Executive-summary-of-education-study-FINAL-Jan-28-21.pdf>

10 *Ibid.*

In the assessment undertaken by Mwatana, nearly 85 per cent of teachers reported that their schools have come under attack, resulting in education being suspended in 48 per cent of these schools for more than two semesters. Attacks that affected the schools where the surveyed teachers taught include direct airstrikes (13 per cent), airstrikes hitting the vicinity of their schools (17 per cent), clashes breaking out near schools (24 per cent), and schools used for military purposes (16 per cent). Furthermore, nearly 75 per cent of displaced children surveyed reported that schools in their hometowns came under attack, with more than 40 per cent of these schools reportedly suspending classes for more than a year. Nearly 61 per cent of children whose school came under attack did not go back to school.

Even in areas where schools are undamaged, fear of attacks such as the recruitment of children at school, and high levels of violence among students discourage parents from sending their children to school. This affects girls disproportionately with 36 per cent of girls not attending school, compared to 24 per cent of boys.¹¹ This is similar to Mwatana's findings, as 58 per cent of children surveyed reported that their parents prevented them from going to school after their schools came under attack.



Girls studying in Al Wahda Milad Primary school in Taiz, which was bombed in 2016. The school now lies in ruins but students are still attending classes in this makeshift school. Photo by Mansoor Albaraa / Save The Children, November 2020

11 Yemen Education Cluster, Yemen Education Crisis: 2020 Secondary Data Review (SDR) Report, p.4

IV. CONFLICT EXACERBATES PRE-EXISTING VULNERABILITIES

Beyond the direct attacks on schools, teachers and children, the conflict has exacerbated vulnerabilities, and has been detrimental to the lives and well-being of children and teachers. Tens of thousands of displaced children have been forced out of their schools, away from their friends and teachers.

Increasing numbers of school dropouts

The conflict, as well as the impacts of COVID-19, have resulted in a doubling of the number of out of school children, from approximately 890,000¹² in 2015 to over two million in 2021. Displacement, attacks on education and endemic poverty are the primary factors forcing children out of school.

Being out of school further exposes children to protection issues and violations of their rights, in a country where eight out of ten children live within households that cannot afford to meet their basic needs such as food and shelter. With the child poverty rate of approximately 85 per cent, children find themselves forced to in sectors including agriculture, industry and services.

Children also find themselves coerced to engage in worst forms of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation and recruitment into armed groups.¹³ Recent research highlighted that nearly 70 per cent of school dropouts cannot go to school because they need to work. More than 40 per cent of children interviewed reported that they dropped out of school due to household financial hardships, while 12 per cent of children surveyed said that dropped out of school because of displacement.

Although one in five out of school children believe that they will not be able to resume their education, nearly half of children that dropped out of school believe that they could resume their education if their household financial situation improves.

In many cases, children, particularly boys, are coerced into dangerous forms of child labour, including joining armed groups. At least 3,600 children are believed to have been recruited to armed groups since the beginning of the conflict.¹⁴ This figure is likely to be a fraction of the real number given the challenges and sensitivities of monitoring and reporting on this practice. Girls in general are at specific

12 Ibid. p. 6

13 Findings on the worst forms of child labour, Yemen: Minimal advancement – efforts made but continued practice that delayed advancement, 2019 https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2019/Yemen.pdf

14 UNICEF, “Education disrupted: Impact of conflict on children’s education in Yemen”, July 2021 p.12



Drawing by Layla*, 12, illustrating the impact of the war in Yemen on children as part of a collaborative story telling workshop. Drawn in July 2021.

risk of forced marriage as a means of survival. Nearly 72.5 per cent of girls in Yemen get married before they reach 18 years of age,¹⁵ and as much as nine per cent of women aged 20 – 24 reportedly marrying before age 15.¹⁶ This adds further barriers for girls to finish their education.

Destroyed infrastructure and deteriorating education services

The conflict has decimated schools' infrastructure across the country, with many schools unable to be repaired or rehabilitated. Schools lack adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities due to damage and lack of resources. For example, nearly 37 per cent of schools in Aden lack adequate WASH facilities.¹⁷ Even at schools that have them, these facilities are not enough for the number of students, and often does not accommodate girls' WASH needs. Only 13 per cent of children interviewed reported that their school have clean and functional WASH facilities, while 77 per cent reported that there is no safe drinking water at their schools.

Lack of educational materials

Students reported facing a great deal of difficulty getting adequate school supplies and materials. School materials are often inadequate at each stage of the learning process and are supplemented by families via personal means, which is an additional financial strain for families in an economy which has been badly affected by the conflict. For example, obtaining a textbook is a major challenge for Yemeni children, with approximately 60 per cent of the students surveyed reporting that their schools do not provide textbooks meaning they are compelled to find funds to buy used books.¹⁸

Furthermore, the lack of classrooms, combined with the mass displacement of people caused a great deal of overcrowding in operational schools. In some areas, schools host as much as 80 children in a single classroom. At least 48 per cent of displaced children interviewed said that they did not resume their education promptly after arriving in host communities, and nearly 45 per cent of those spent a year or more out of school. Moreover, 66 per cent of displaced children reported that loss of documents and bureaucratic impediments are a major barrier they faced to enrolment in school. Despite having been out of school for varying periods of time, 57 per cent of displaced children reported that schools do not give them extra support to catch up due to their situation, with nearly 21 per cent stating that they felt that they are discriminated against at school.

15 UNICEF, "Education disrupted: Impact of conflict on children's education in Yemen", July 2021 p.13

16 UNICEF and ICRW (2017) Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – Yemen Country Brief. Amman, Jordan: UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office

17 Yemen Education Cluster, Yemen Education Crisis: 2020 Secondary Data Review (SDR) Report p.3

18 Lack of textbooks in Yemen has been an ongoing issue as none have been printed for many years. Therefore it is believed that a significant number of children do not have textbooks, due to the scarcity in the market and the unclear distribution mechanism at school level.

Teachers' salaries

Further complicating the situation, an estimated 190,000 teachers in Yemen have not received a regular salary for over four years, ultimately disincentivising them to pursue teaching. UNICEF estimates that this puts four million children at risk of missing out on their education as teachers find themselves forced to look for alternative jobs.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, 58 per cent of teachers that Mwatana spoke to reported that they were considering a profession other than teaching.

Quality of education

There are serious concerns with the quality of education, with over 48 per cent of teachers reporting that they do not finish the curriculum during the academic year. Approximately 40 per cent of teachers believe that students' educational attainment is weak or very weak, while nearly 79 per cent of teachers believe that current education provided by schools is inadequate to develop children's skills, with 60 per cent of them believing that children do not receive the necessary knowledge in schools.

The deteriorating mental health of children in Yemen also detrimentally affects their performance at school. Nearly half of the children who responded to a survey by Save the Children last year said that they struggle with feelings of sadness and depression. This led Save the Children to raise the alarm about a potential mental health crisis among children in the country, as children live in constant fear for their lives, the lives of their loved one, or whether they will have enough to eat.²⁰

'When we are at school we hear explosions. We run inside the school and when they finish we go out again to play. One of my friends got injured in one of the explosions.'

Omar, 8, Yemen

19 UNICEF, "Education disrupted: Impact of conflict on children's education in Yemen", July 2021 p.7

20 Save the Children, "Five years of fear and loss: the devastating impact of war on the mental health of Yemen's children", p.3

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The conflict in Yemen has reversed decades of educational gains for Yemeni children. The continuation of attacks on education, in all its forms, is yet another example of warring parties blatant disregard for their obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Save the Children urges immediate action by parties to create a step change in a spiralling crisis to protect children's futures, and calls for:

Endorsing states of the the Safe Schools Declaration

- Call on the parties to the conflict to cease all attacks against schools and universities and their use for military purposes, and implement the commitments set out in the Safe Schools Declaration and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.
- Call for the integrity of the CAAC mandate and for the publication of a complete and accurate list of perpetrators of grave violations against children in the Annexes of the Secretary General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, which is evidence-based and accurately reflects data collected and verified by the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), and free from political considerations.
- Call for unhindered access to document grave violations against children in all parts of the country and ensure the MRM is resourced to do so, including by funding dedicated child protection capacity and providing with the required financial, political, and operational support to fully deliver on child protection needs;
- Exert diplomatic pressure on parties to the conflict and work with them to ensure the principles of the Safe Schools Declaration are adhered to in Yemen.
- Support calls for accountability of violations of international law at the UN Human Rights Council

Warring parties in Yemen

- Ensure protection of civilians, including children, is prioritised at all costs. This includes ensuring military operations are undertaken in line with international humanitarian law including taking precautionary measures to minimise harm, children are not recruited or used by armed forces or groups and that both parties ensure landmines are not planted in residential areas, especially schools
- De-militarise schools, by removing all military presence from schools, including using schools as military objectives
- Guarantee humanitarian access, so children can access schools and educational facilities safely, and humanitarian actors can have access to such areas to provide services
- Preserve and prioritise support for schools, students and teachers to ensure the continuity of education

Donor states and institutions

- Increase support for emergency educational interventions, to ensure children are provided with quality and protective education in schools across Yemen, including rehabilitating damaged schools, and ensuring schools are equipped with basic WASH gender segregated facilities and food, with a clear referral pathway for protection services.
- Support livelihood interventions centred around children's protection, such as cash distributions, to alleviate the pressure on vulnerable households to mitigate negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, recruitment in to armed groups and early marriage,
- Fund and support, as a matter of urgency, stand alone and integrated child protection programming, including the capacity building of the social workforce and gender sensitive child protection systems and GBV services, including mental health and psychosocial support.
- Ensure adequate, multi-year funding to support investigations and prosecution of crimes against children in Yemen to enable them to be prioritised and mainstreamed in national and international judicial and non-judicial accountability mechanisms.
- Invest and advocate to build the capacity and capabilities of the education sector in Yemen, with a particular focus on local actors, so that the sector can implement quality and appropriate responses.

Humanitarian actors

- Scale up and strengthen integrated and multi-sectorial child protection interventions to reach more students and teachers in need, including increasing, developing and rolling out of targeted psychosocial support.
- Promote the importance of education among community members, particularly for girls who are at greater risk of being taken out of school for other than financial reasons.
- Ensure that all humanitarian needs assessments and humanitarian response plans are informed by a rapid intersectional gender and power analysis and the safe and ethical collection and analysis of sex-, age-, and diversity disaggregated data.

Human Rights Council

- Establish an international, independent and impartial mechanism to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of abuses and violations of IHL and IHRL to prepare files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, in accordance with international law standards, in national, regional or international courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes.
- Establish a mechanism that investigates alleged violations of IHRL in Yemen and identify those responsible with a view of ensuring that perpetrators of violations, including those that may constitute crimes against humanity, are held accountable, with a clear mandate on public reporting.

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