



17 August, 2024 Khan Younis Elementary Co-ed School "A" © 2024 UNRWA

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# Palestinian Education Under Attack in Gaza: Restoration, Recovery, Rights and Responsibilities in and through Education

## Summary

### 1. Introduction

Education remains a cornerstone of pride for Palestinian families, with UNRWA, the Occupied Palestinian Territory Ministry of Education, and other partners playing a key role. Since October 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports figures from the Occupied Palestinian Territory Ministry of Health identifying that the current war in Gaza has killed over 40,000 Palestinians, including 10,627 children and 411 teachers, and have injured 15,394 students and 2,411 teachers. The war has devastated the education system in Gaza, disrupting the learning of 625,000 students. According to data from the Occupied Palestinian Territory Education Cluster, between October 2023 and July 2024, almost all school buildings in Gaza have been either entirely or partially destroyed following Israeli military strikes attacks. The extent of this damage underscores the urgent need for humanitarian frontline planning to restore education now, and for rebuilding the education system in Gaza as soon as there is a permanent ceasefire.

The impact of the current war in Gaza is compounded by over 76 years of Israel's occupation, which the International Court of Justice advisory opinion found to be unlawful, along with 17 years of blockade and recurrent attacks. Thus, a permanent ceasefire and an end to the occupation is required urgently to ensure Palestinian children and young people can realise their right to equitable and quality education. More immediately, teachers, students, and communities need support now.

This report presents evidence-based analyses of the immediate and enduring effects of educational disruption, drawing from existing data and interviews with children, young people, teachers, counsellors and experienced officials on the ground. It offers a series of recommendations for all actors, including UN agencies, international community and donors and the Occupied Palestinian Territory authorities, to support efforts at resuming equitable and quality teaching and learning in Gaza.

## 2. Threats to education progress for children and young people

***“In Gaza...we have no education system at all since October 7.”***

The report presents three projections for resuming education now, in a year, and in two years (if there are further delays to a permanent ceasefire). It projects that most learners will lose academic competencies of at least two years due to a combination of COVID-19 and the ongoing war. The effects are compounded by trauma, hunger, and war-induced disability, underscoring the need to resume education urgently.

In total, from 2019 to August 2024, children and young people have lost at least 14 months of schooling, equivalent to about two academic years. This is due to closures related to COVID-19, the escalation in May 2021, and the current war. As a result, “learning poverty”, i.e. the proportion of children unable to read a basic text by age 10, has increased by at least 20 percentage points. This is already from a very low base.

For a Grade 12 student registered to complete Tawjihi (the general secondary school leaving examination) in 2023, their chance of graduating is likely to be delayed between two to three years if no immediate return to schooling (with additional support for lost learning) is provided. This risks education loss for a generation of children and young people and undermines the achievement of the education Sustainable Development Goal.

## 3. Destruction of the physical environment for learning

***“We have gone through these [attacks] many times. Each time we lose schools. We try to redirect resources to build or rebuild but we always have a shortage.”***

Gaza's education infrastructure, which was already strained, has faced severe destruction from the ongoing war. 92.9% of schools have been damaged, and 84.6% require significant reconstruction to be usable. In the context of large-scale military operations and homes being destroyed, families have had to use school buildings as shelters. This has led to a lack of safe spaces and exacerbated trauma among students and teachers. Rebuilt learning spaces need to take into account the trauma that children, young people, and teachers have experienced while sheltering in schools, and they need adequate electricity and internet.

## 4. Increasing children and young people's vulnerabilities, eroding wellbeing

***“There is a ton of emptiness and deep sorrow that you can see in children.”***

The current war in Gaza, building on effects of the 17-year blockade, is severely impacting the physical and mental wellbeing of children and young people, exacerbating vulnerabilities such as trauma, displacement and disability. Children and young people with disabilities face difficulties due to inaccessible shelters and lack of assistive devices. This has worsened due to severe restrictions by the Israeli authorities affecting goods and essential supplies permitted to enter Gaza. The rise in orphans and children who have been separated from their families has increased the risk of child labour. The deteriorating healthcare and protection systems further threaten wellbeing, putting children and young people at greater risk of disease. Girls are particularly vulnerable due to a severe lack of menstrual hygiene supplies. Children and the wider population, express feelings of neglect by the international community, as well as curtailed aspirations for their future.

## 5. Teachers, counsellors, and teaching on the frontline

***“We need to care for the wellbeing of the teachers themselves. We can't expect teachers to provide educational services when they don't have hygiene kits and food and shelter themselves.”***

Many teachers and counsellors in Gaza have been killed and injured. Along with their students, they face severe physical and psychological strains, struggling with trauma, displacement, and inadequate access to necessities such as hygiene, food, and medical supplies. Despite these immense challenges, they demonstrate remarkable resilience and commitment, continuing to support students and communities. Teachers have taken on additional roles, including providing psychosocial support, underscoring their dedication to the profession and commitment to transformation.

To support teachers and counsellors to work in the current context, as well as prepare for the extremely difficult post-war reconstruction, they require urgent capacity building. In collaboration with counsellors, they need to support children facing trauma, address disability and inclusion in the classroom, provide referral pathways for child protection cases, and provide psychological support. More teachers and counsellors are needed in Gaza. Teaching and learning resources and materials are crucial as part of the immediate humanitarian response. Relevant and appropriate learning resources, taking into account the psychosocial effect of the war, are necessary.

## 6. Insufficient international financing for education

***“Education is the first to be impacted and the last to be restored.”***

The education sector has received a very small portion of necessary resources. Education is not seen as part of a humanitarian response by many donors, receiving just 3.5% of total funds of the 2024 Flash Appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Child protection only represents 0.8% of humanitarian appeal funding from the top 10 donors. UNRWA, with expertise in delivering education in Gaza, struggles to meet needs due to insufficient support. There are some positive examples of financial commitment, with Education Cannot Wait and the European Commission Humanitarian Aid allocating funds to education – although far more is needed.

## 7. Acting now for restoring rights and hope

***“Children in Gaza are experiencing hardship and still they remain positive, and they are hopeful. Every time there's talk of a ceasefire, you can see it in the children. You can see it in the communities, you know, like the hope that they bring with them.”***

This report outlines a four-point plan for education reconstruction and rebuilding in Gaza, emphasising the need for immediate action while upholding international law. It calls for restoring safe and relevant education, empowering teachers and counsellors, ensuring international commitment, including financing, and centring the voices of Palestinians in the rebuilding process. Achieving this plan requires strong political will and financial commitment from international actors. Failure to act now risks undermining the future of children in Gaza and the region.

## i. Actions for restoring education now

- **Support psychosocial needs** through recreational activities and trauma counselling.
- **Provide foundational learning support.**
- **Support disability needs**, including access to assistive devices.
- **Provide safe learning spaces**, protected by international humanitarian law.
- **Support teachers and counsellors for their own basic needs and wellbeing.**
- **Reestablish a child protection system** for effective specialist support referral.

## ii. Actions for rebuilding the education system

### Delivering relevant, quality education

- **Return to accredited learning**, complemented by supportive learning programmes.
- **Revise relevant learning resources and materials** for recovery and reconstruction.
- **Provide new modalities for learning**, including appropriate technology, where relevant.
- **Support disability needs** of children and young people.
- **Build schools**, starting with semi-permanent structures quickly, while planning for permanent education infrastructure as soon as possible, ensuring accessibility.
- **Rebuild other civilian infrastructure**, including housing and health facilities.
- **Adopt a multisectoral approach**, incorporating psychosocial and trauma counselling, school feeding, health schemes and WASH facilities.

### Enabling and empowering teachers and counsellors

- **Increase supply of teachers and counsellors** taking account of replacing those lost due to killing, displacement, and leaving Gaza, and the even greater needs of children and young people.
- **Provide continuous professional development** to support traumatised students.
- **Support needs of teachers and counsellors**, including those injured and with disabilities.

## iii. Actions for meaningful and effective international commitment

- **Uphold international humanitarian law immediately**, including stopping attacks on schools and other education facilities, and stopping the killing, injury and other forms of violence on children and young people, teachers, and humanitarian workers.
- **Lift the humanitarian blockade**, ensuring immediate access to learning provisions.
- **Increase education funding immediately.**
- **Enhance coordination between international agencies and INGOs**, ensuring support for education and child protection are connected.
- **Recognise and support UNRWA as a key provider of education for Palestinians.**

## iv. Actions for centering Palestinian perspectives

- **Engage Palestinian children, young people, teachers, counsellors, caregivers, and their communities** in any planning now and in the future.
- **Support a comprehensive education needs assessment** led by Palestinians as soon as feasible.
- **Link recovery plan of Gaza** with wider Palestinian education reconstruction approach, in alignment with the Conflict Recovery Framework.

Immediate and effective action from all international actors is crucial to uphold the right to quality education and provide hope for future generations in the region.