Exploring ways to support teachers and teaching in systems in crisis

Blog

Emergency and refugee education

A common but unfortunate consequence of a nation under severe stress is neglect of its education system. Such stress might result from active or recent armed conflict, economic crisis, or radical regime change. Among other factors, the ensuing system failure is evident in the absence of teacher training and supervision, in schools’ not receiving learning materials, and, most egregiously, in extended delays or a complete stoppage in paying teachers’ salaries. These systems suffer from what Susan Hopgood, President of Education International (EI-IE), recently referred to as “educational blackouts” that threaten the education of millions of students.

We have a duty,” she said, “to solve this problem.

On 2 September 2022, Education International (EI) and Geneva Global hosted a virtual salon specifically to respond to Hopgood’s call to duty. A group of over 35 national education leaders, experts from international development and aid institutions, and members of the philanthropic community logged on to bring strategic definition to the problem and to start identifying concrete ways for the international community to keep teachers teaching and students learning while a prevailing education system crisis resolves. The salon aspired to bring fresh and innovative thinking to the topic, convening many development actors who do not typically interact and who would then carry the topic to the recent Transforming Education Summit.

Moderated by Rob Jenkins, UNICEF’s Global Director for Education and Adolescent Development, the salon comprised three parts, which focused on two functional questions:

1. What innovative funding options might we find that would allow and motivate international donors to pay teachers’ salaries and provide critical inputs to support formal education at scale when crisis impedes a country’s education system to function?
2. What innovative methods might serve to manage, disburse, and account for salaries and other funds and resources to ensure the satisfactory operation of schools in countries where
crisis hobbles the education system?

The substantive discussion began with presentations by teachers and union members from three countries – Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Myanmar – that are currently experiencing severe educational “blackouts.” They provided salon participants with a stark perspective of the lived impacts of such crises.

A regional branch leader of the Public Primary Schools Teachers League in Lebanon, reported that the average teacher salary is just $80 a month, scarcely enough to cover the minimum cost of a teacher’s family for four days. Further, she shared, Lebanese teachers face significant barriers to claiming the little salary they earn, including months-long stoppages in pay and bank restrictions that limit their access to funds earmarked by the ministry and international aid agencies for teacher salaries.

Afghan teachers face parallel challenges in obtaining their salaries, according to a member of the National Teacher Elected Council of Afghanistan. This situation is exacerbated by Afghanistan’s struggle to define priority areas for spending and to procure the sufficient funds to operate schools.

Myanmar’s Ministry of Education experiences a similar critical lack of funds due, in part, to the difficulty government faces in collecting taxes. As for Myanmar’s educators, a representative of the Myanmar Teachers Federation, explained that some 200,000 teachers are engaged in ongoing strikes advocating collectively for civil and political change.

It is evident that across all three featured contexts, teachers are underpaid and under-supported by under-resourced and over-extended education systems.

Following, two colleagues shared the findings of two international expert groups that EI and Geneva Global had convened prior to the salon to prepare analytic overviews of two essential questions:

1. What mechanisms do international actors currently use to fill the gap when systems fail, and what challenges do they confront? (Presentation available [here](#))
2. What solutions, common and innovative, might permit the international community to overcome the challenges to face in supporting education continuity during system crises? (Presentation available [here](#))

The expert group tasked with the first question identified that, during a crisis, teachers’ reliable access to salaries and other compensation such as benefits, ongoing professional development, and learning supplies is the first priority in maintaining teaching and learning. Achieving this requires attention to four key challenges:

1. the limited understanding of major impediments and possible short- or long-term fixes
2. reluctance of international actors to pay teacher salaries and recurrent costs
3. the endemic inefficiencies of teacher management systems, and
4. general contradictions between national policies and donor work.

The solutions-focused group recognized these challenges while raising two strategies to meet teachers’ needs. These were (i) the identification of key actors from the international development community but also including local communities, civil society, and teachers’ unions, and (ii) the elaboration of multiple pathways to compensate and provide material and technical support to teachers. The group articulated a set of key principles around which to orient future solutions.
including the need for a functioning teacher management system, for crisis readiness, for a reevaluation of the policies and practices of international partners that hinder crisis response, and for the involvement of teachers and other key actors in planning and implementing responses. All solutions should be holistic, context-specific, and sustainable.

The presentations stimulated rich discussions among participants in two breakout groups. There, participants surfaced three main areas for follow-up, including research, funding, and the creation of an international framework. One group, noting the severe lack of evidence on the payment of teachers in education systems in crisis, called for the establishment of a community of practice or expert group to advance research. They recommended a comprehensive mapping exercise of two main aspects. The first would study current crisis contexts to characterize the nature and mechanisms of the system failure and of indigenous responses. The other would investigate how international actors are equipped, or not, and act, or don’t, to ensure that teachers have the sustained support they require for teaching and learning to occur when systems falter or fail.

The second group proposed development of a pooled fund that would allow donors and other stakeholders to provide monetary, material, and technical support to teachers in derelict systems. It should aim to connect funding to functioning government structures as well as to create effective cash transfer mechanisms and other payment systems.

Both groups acknowledged the value of an international agreement, likely involving education unions and civil society, to protect teacher salaries from international sanctions and establish effective accountability and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the efficient disbursement of funds to teachers and schools in crisis contexts.

In the end, the participants recognized that this is just the start to the elaboration of a set of objectives, strategies, and mechanisms for supporting teachers and teaching when systems are in crisis and to the mobilization of international actors around this goal. However, there was a collective and boisterous acclaim that the goal is critical and that the time to embrace and advance it is now. Education International and a group of partners took this discussion and outcomes to the Transforming Education Summit, seeking allies to generate research, action, and momentum around the topic. A few strong candidates emerged, including the newly announced Global Commission on the Teaching Profession and the #TeachersTransform campaign.

We look forward to sharing this story as it unfolds.