War of Ignorance

Field study on the impact of the armed conflict on access to education in Yemen

Executive summary
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This study explores the various impacts of the escalating armed conflict since September 2014 on the public education system in Yemen. It discusses the direct and indirect impacts of the conflict on the education system, including on the infrastructure of schools and education sites, on the educational environment, and on students and teachers in public primary and secondary schools in the country. It also deals with the phenomenon of the displacement of students with their families during the conflict and the implications of displacement, including the difficulties of re-enrolling in education in host communities and the possibility of losing some school years. Among the main issues addressed in the study is the phenomenon of school dropout, which was significantly exacerbated by the conflict.

Methodology

To conduct the study, a sample of 700 individuals were randomly selected.

The main sample included 400 students (263 boys and 137 girls) from 137 primary, preparatory and secondary schools in nine governorates: Taiz, Sanaa (the governorate), Hudaydah, Aden, Abyan, Dhale, Hajjah, Saada, and the capital, Sanaa. The governorates selected were those with educational sectors that appeared, based on Mwatana’s monitoring and documentation of the conflict’s impact on schools since 2014, to have suffered the most direct damage. Mwatana also sought to include governorates under the control of different warring parties, and those located in different geographic regions.

In addition to the main sample of 400 students, the study included three smaller exploratory samples. The first was an exploratory sample of the displaced, which consisted of 100 displaced students (66 boys and 34 girls) in the same governorates and the same schools included in the main sample of students. The second exploratory sample was of dropouts, consisting of 100 students in the same governorates included in the main sample that dropped out of school during the conflict. The third exploratory sample was of teachers, consisting of 100 teachers (including 29 women teachers) from the same geographical areas and schools as the main sample of students.
A trained and specialized team of data collectors and researchers collected information by going to the identified schools during the 2019/2020 academic year, specifically from February to April 2020. The team also carried out a number of field visits to IDP communities living in places near identified schools in order to conduct interviews with displaced students. Other visits were also conducted to the residential areas near the schools with the aim of finding students who dropped out of school to conduct interviews with them or with their parents. All field interviews were conducted directly with respondents.

**Study aspects**

**First aspect: background and legal framework of the study**

In this section, we present the most important education-related international law instruments and conventions, including on the right to education in emergency situations, and provide background on the right to education in national legislation, as well as general features of the education sector in Yemen before the conflict, including school enrollment rates in public education, gender gaps, dropout rates, education quality, textbooks, expenditures on education, etc. This section also presents an overview of education in Yemen during the ongoing armed conflict.

**Second aspect: the impact of the conflict on students**

This section examines the impact of the conflict on students’ safe access to school and the continuity of the education process, as well as the economic impact of the conflict on students, violence amongst students inside schools, the psychological attitudes of students towards school in light of the armed conflict, and the conflict’s impact on the condition of facilities and services in schools, educational attainment, curricula, and assessment methods.

1- **Conflict’s impact on safe access to schools**
   
   A. The study concluded that the way to/from school is not safe due to the ongoing conflict. On their way to school, students faced various kinds of violence and security risks resulting from the armed conflict or the chaos accompanying it. These risks included armed clashes, which can erupt suddenly while students are going to or from schools, harassment by strangers, especially verbal harassment, and kidnapping attempts. The percentage of students who were exposed to risks of
this kind on the way to school was 24.6% of the 400 student sample. In other words, many students do not enjoy safe access to school during the ongoing conflict. That percentage would almost certainly have been greater if the study had been conducted in the first years of the conflict, as the intensity of fighting had significantly decreased in many regions during the study period (February - April 2020), and air strike on schools had also decreased significantly compared to the early years of the conflict.

B. The percentage of students whose families tried to prevent them from going to school temporarily due to security concerns during the 2019/2020 school year was 38.8% of the 400-student sample. This percentage is high, and indicates a significant negative impact of the conflict on education. At the same time, many families (61.2% of the 400-student sample) allowed their children to attend school when they perceived lower security risks in their areas. In other words, a decrease in the intensity of fighting was matched by a rapid increase in the rate of school attendance, which should stimulate the formation of constructive strategies to ensure an appropriate level of security for the wider school environment, including but not limited to ending attacks on schools and avoiding hostilities in schools’ vicinity and on the roads leading to schools, to help reduce families’ feelings of insecurity regarding access to schools.

C. 51.0% of the 400 student sample feared that dangers might threaten their trips to and from schools in the future. They feared, for example, that the road to school might become more dangerous. This pessimistic view reflected the respondent students’ perceptions of the possibility of military activities on the road to school, and their impression that the conflict might return to a more violent pace in the future, making their route to school more dangerous. About 62% of the 400 student sample said that they see many military personnel and vehicles on the school road, and 29% are forced to pass military and security checkpoints to reach or leave their schools.

2- Overall impact of conflict on the continuity of the education process

A. 81% of the 400 student sample said the armed conflict caused them to stop studying for different periods of time. This occurred as a result of their schools being attacked, continuous or intermittent clashes in the area where their schools were located, and their schools’ use as military barracks,
shelters or aid storage centers. Other reasons included teachers stopping teaching in protest of the salary cuts in some areas and teachers leaving the public education system to go teach in private schools or to do other jobs.

B. The longest period of time students reported staying away from schooling due to the conflict was two semesters—53.5% of the students who reported having to stop studying for various periods of time had to drop out of school for two semesters, meaning they lost an entire academic year to the conflict. For the rest of the students who reported having to stop studying at different points due to the conflict, other periods of involuntary absence from school ranged from less than one semester to one semester.

C. 61.3% of the students who reported having to stop studying for various periods of time were not able to enroll in alternative schools, public or private, while teaching was unavailable at their original schools. These students had to wait for their schools to reopen, as they could not enroll in alternative private schools for financial reasons or because there were no alternative schools, especially in rural areas.

3- Economic impact of conflict on students
The majority of students in the 400-student sample belong to low-income families. These families face difficult living conditions that have steadily weakened their ability to handle the expenses associated with educating their children, especially since most families in the sample had more than one child of school age, and had to pay the usual school fees in addition to subsidizing teachers to keep working while teacher salaries are suspended. If the conflict continues, a large number of students currently enrolled in school appear likely to drop out, as 47.2% of the 400 student sample said that their families are already unable to further sustain their education.

4- School violence
Violent behavior among students inside schools is abundant in different forms. 70% of the 100 teachers included in the survey linked the broadening of violent behaviors among students to the conflict, explaining that conflict promotes violent behavior, weakens teachers’ prestige, and reduces respect for rules in the school environment. On the other hand, students lack skills of conflict resolution and good management of relationships within the school, and schools
often do not have adequate containment mechanisms for violence among students, or educational methods to deal with cases of aggressive behavior between some students.

5- Conflict’s impact on students’ relationship towards school

Despite the armed conflict and the deteriorating economic conditions, the majority of students (78.2% of the 400 student sample) like school. This is due to a number of important factors, the most important of which are the love of education, their families’ encouragement to them to continue studying, having good friendships at school, enjoying time inside the school by playing with friends, participating in recreational school activities, and the sense of self-fulfillment students find from some activities.

6- School services

A. The conflict led to further deterioration in basic services inside schools. 74.5% of the students in the 400 student sample said that their school’s lack health services, including lacking first aid. 84.0% said their schools lacked clean drinking water, 78.3% said their schools lacked clean and hygienic toilets, 64.6% said that clean food is not available in canteens or small outlets inside their schools and only 35.0% of the students said they receive social care services through social workers and psychologists.

B. Most of the students receive their lessons in overcrowded classes. 52.2% of the students in the 400 student sample had classes with more than 50 students, and 29% had classes with between 25 and 50 students. Classrooms for girls appeared to be less crowded according to the study, perhaps due to the fact that less girls tend to attend school at different levels of education.

7- Educational attainment

A. There are many factors that led to lower educational attainment levels for students, especially in mathematics, English, science (physics, chemistry and biology) and Arabic language (reading and writing). Respondents from the 400 student sample said that factors involved in lower educational attainment levels included the lack of quietness in classrooms during lessons, lack of appropriate teaching aids to explain topics, teachers’ indifference to solving difficult exercises in the textbook,
lack of adequate use of the time allocated to explaining material, in addition to students’ absence from some lessons.

B. Teachers attributed students’ low educational attainment to several factors, including: poor living conditions for students and their families; lack of follow-up and attention from the family; inability to provide textbooks for more than half of the students; the lack of educational aids or access to them to explain and clarify topics; in addition to overcrowding. Unlike the students, the teachers did not mention teachers’ poor performance, inadequate teaching methods or failure to facilitate required interactions in classes among the factors contributing to students’ low educational attainment.

8- Curricula and assessment methods

A. Since 2016, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group has made radical, unilateral changes to some curricula relating to religion and national studies for tier one and tier two of the basic education (years 1 to 6) in areas under their control. While 71% of the responding teachers in the study said that the curricula they were using did not contain biased content in favor of one of the parties to the conflict, this is likely due to the fact that a large number of teachers interviewed lived in areas that did not witness any changes to the curriculum, i.e. areas not under the control of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. In addition, most of the textbooks distributed in the provincial schools are editions published prior to the outbreak of the conflict and have not been modified.

B. Obtaining a textbook remains a major obstacle for most Yemeni students. 59.5% of the students in the 400 student sample said they do not receive the necessary textbook through their school, but instead buy it from the used textbooks market.

C. According to most teachers interviewed, the general school assessments system has many flaws, such as designing tests in a way that tends to focus on memorizing rather than critical thinking, poor organization of the examination process, and the prevalence of cheating among students.
Third aspect: school dropout

This section includes an analysis of the reasons why students have dropped out of school during the conflict, and the chances of their return to school.

A. 48.3% of the 100 dropout students were forced to leave school due to their family’s poor economic conditions during the conflict. Other students found themselves out of school due to the inadequacy of the educational environment, the lack of family interest in education, or the school being far from their place of residence. In addition, some students feared going to school, particularly given the psychological pressure the conflict has imposed on them. Some students have left school to join the ranks of one of the parties to the conflict.

B. A large percentage of dropout students (75.8% of the 100 dropout students sample) had a desire to return to school if the economic situation of their families improved, a suitable learning environment became available, or if they received appropriate psychological support—indicating that school dropout often occurs due to significant contextual factors and pressure.

Fourth aspect: displacement and education

In this section, the study analyzes the factors behind students’ and their families’ displacement, mechanisms of integration into schools in host communities, and the relationship between the displaced students and alternative schools in terms of adaptability and the absence of discrimination.

A. Military confrontations in areas covered by the study caused the displacement of 67% of the sample of 100 displaced students. There were three other noted reasons for displacement: (i) exposure of homes to indiscriminate shelling, (ii) air strikes on homes, and (iii) the lack of job opportunities in the home community.

B. 52% of the sample of 100 displaced students were able to enroll in schools outside their communities of origin and in good facilities. 48% of the sample of 100 displaced students faced difficulties that prevented them from
enrolling in education immediately after their displacement, which forced them to stop studying for varying periods, up to one academic year. Among the difficulties faced included the loss of official documents, the registration period of the alternative school expiring, and the poor living conditions of the family after displacement and the inability of the family to provide the expenses of re-enrolling their children in school, in addition to other administrative obstacles.

C. The displaced students in the sample achieved a high degree of school integration within their host communities, and were able to establish good friendships at their new schools. The majority had a great sense of satisfaction at the school. 71% of the sample of 100 displaced students said that they did not experience any kind of discrimination or inequality in their new schools.

Fifth aspect: impact of conflict on teachers

This section includes analysis of various economic, social, psychological and security-related factors from the conflict that impact teachers.

A. Teachers have suffered from the negative economic impacts of the conflict, due to salary cuts and the overall poor economic conditions. Some teachers reported negative psychological effects resulting from the conflict and poverty, such as feelings of frustration, depression, and declining self-confidence. The social impact has been harsh on teachers as a result of a feeling of declining status in society and exposure to some social and family problems. Some teachers faced security threats due to the conflict, including threats or pressure due to their expressing some positions and opinions, or interference and attempts by the conflict parties to adapt their teaching practices to serve the conflict party’s needs.

B. Teachers believed that minimizing the impact of conflict on education depends on a set of factors. These include fostering a safe environment for the continuation of education in light of conflict; providing psychological and material support to teachers; students’ access to
adequate psychological support; raising awareness of all segments of society about the importance of education; and rehabilitating partially damaged schools.

**Sixth aspect: education’s impact on the conflict**

This section deals with some field/empirical indicators on the role that education plays in Yemen in terms of containing the effects of the conflict, and the positive role of school for students during the conflict.

A. Teachers are very sensitive to issues related to the conflict, and prefer not to discuss them for various reasons, but the study found that the largest percentage of teachers in the sample (77% of the 100 teacher sample) are not neutral in the negative sense, as they encourage their students to be tolerant and spread calls for peace and non-violence in their teaching practices. They do that indirectly in many cases, in order not to endanger their lives. Consequently, the role that teachers play within the school is mostly positive and does not feed the continuation of the conflict. Rather, it often helps contain its effects on education and curb the direct involvement of students in the conflict.

B-Schools are affected by the policies of the different parties to the conflict. All parties seek to politicize education to varying degrees, and to attract students to join the conflict, or indoctrinate them to their own ideas and perceptions. Warring parties have attempted to recruit students under the age of eighteen from school, to encourage them to engage in the conflict as fighters, and have turned schoolgrounds into “platforms” to deliver speeches, mobilizing slogans and to promote politicized and biased ideas towards conflict-related issues. Despite this, it appears education, even with the damage inflicted on it, has not yet turned into an activity serving the conflict, but rather represents an element of resistance to the negative values that the warring parties seek to instill among students. The study found that a large proportion of students in the 400 student sample (67%) reported they did not participate in conflict-related activities outside school, such as demonstrations, rallies, or cultural events associated with the warring parties. The study found also that, a very small percentage of the 400 student sample reported
they had responded to the offers or encouragement of recruitment in school, potentially indicating recruitment efforts depend on attracting students who are not in school.