



# PUTTING EQUITY AT THE CENTER OF EDUCATION IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT

In education, the concept of equity is so commonplace in the policy discourse that its actual role and contributions are often overlooked or simply presumed. Equity is an involved, intentional and dynamic undertaking, not a default setting. In the context of crisis and conflict, it can even seem like an improbable ideal.



Yet, placing equity considerations at the center of education programming, especially in crisis and conflict settings, can serve as an integral pathway to improved educational access, learning, and achievement. This brief provides USAID implementing partners with a starting point for defining equity in education and exploring strategies for improving equity in educational access and learning outcomes, especially in crisis and conflict-affected settings.

Currently, over 74 million children and youth of school age are out of school due to crisis and conflict; many will either never go to school or will have their schooling cut short.<sup>1</sup> At the individual level, the fact that a child or youth is denied an education due to ongoing crisis or conflict represents a devastating personal loss of opportunity. At a societal level, crisis and conflict can deny entire generations and communities of the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills so that they may contribute toward

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<sup>1</sup> Overseas Development Institute. (2016). *Education cannot wait: Proposing a fund for education in emergencies*. Retrieved from <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10497.pdf>, as cited in USAID. (2018, November). *USAID education policy*. Washington, DC: Author.



## USAID Education Policy Principle 6: Promote Equity and Inclusion

- Support reforms in education policies, frameworks, and financing to ensure equity and inclusion.
- Design education programs that are accessible, inclusive, and culturally and conflict-sensitive.
- Ensure learning environments are safe, violence free, and inclusive.

rebuilding and stabilization. All too often, the impacts of crisis and conflict on education are not borne equally by all. Instead, society's most vulnerable, whether due to poverty, geography, sex, or other factors of marginalization such as disability and gender identity, are those who are least likely to attend or complete school in these contexts. Furthermore, in environments where physical and social infrastructure are severely compromised, unequal access to the scarce opportunities that remain can serve as a source of grievance that can further exacerbate conflict.<sup>2</sup>

In such compromised contexts, equity in education serves as far more than a moral good; it is a practical and strategic necessity to breaking cycles of poverty, discrimination, and further inequality that threaten the stability and security of societies around the globe. Studies have documented the economic and human development returns on investing in educational equity, including improvements toward more inclusive growth, social cohesion, and resilience, to name a few.<sup>3</sup>

## U.S. Guidance on Equity

The U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education outlines a clear commitment to providing the most marginalized and vulnerable populations with access to a safe, equitable, and quality education. The USAID Education Policy (2018) is even more explicit in putting equity front and center, both as one of the six principles that guide the strategy and in its four policy priorities. Priority I, for example, states that, “Children and youth, **particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable**, have increased access to quality education that is safe, relevant, and promotes social well-being”<sup>4</sup> [emphasis added]. Hundreds of millions of children are denied access to a safe, quality education because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, location, poverty, religion, ethnicity, or disability. This priority is especially relevant for children facing such barriers while also contending with armed conflict or humanitarian crises, HIV/AIDS, child labor, adolescent marriage, or trafficking.



Figure I shows a mapping of how the USAID equity and inclusion principle manifests across the four priority areas for USAID programming.

<sup>2</sup> FHI 360. (2016). Education inequality and violent conflict: Evidence and policy considerations. *EPDC Policy Brief* (June). Retrieved from <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-epdc-brief-edu-inequality-violent-conflict.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. (2015). *The investment case for education and equity*. New York, NY: UNICEF.

<sup>4</sup> USAID. (2018). *USAID education policy*. Retrieved from [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018\\_Education\\_Policy\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018_Education_Policy_FINAL_WEB.pdf)

# Figure 1. Illustrative Mapping of Equity and Inclusion principle across USAID education priorities

## USAID EDUCATION POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Prioritize country-focus and ownership
  - Focus and concentrate investments on measurably and sustainably improving learning and educational outcomes
  - Strengthen systems and develop capacity in local institutions
  - Work in partnership and leverage resources
  - Drive decision-making and investments using evidence and data
  - **Promote equity and inclusion**
    - Support reforms in education policies, frameworks and financing to ensure equity and inclusion
    - Design education programs that are accessible, inclusive and culturally and conflict sensitive
    - Ensure learning environments are safe, violence-free, and inclusive
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## USAID EDUCATION POLICY PRIORITIES

**Children and youth, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable, have increased access to quality education that is safe, relevant, and promotes social well-being.**

*Reaching marginalized and vulnerable populations requires a deliberate focus.*

**Assessments of equity and inclusion should inform policy making and programming.**

*Increasing access to quality education in crisis and conflict contexts is paramount.*

**Once a safe learning environment is established, a focus on equity, service delivery, and institutional capacity is critical to achieve learning outcomes.**

**Children and youth gain literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills that are foundational to future learning and success.**

**Equitable and inclusive teaching and learning approaches are critical to ensuring that all children and youth have a strong foundation in reading, math and social and emotional skills.**

**Youth gain the skills they need to lead productive lives, gain employment, and positively contribute to society.**

**Equitable and inclusive youth development approaches are essential for youth to develop transferable, foundational and technical skills that enable them to transition into further education and employment.**

**Higher education institutions have the capacity to be central actors in development by conducting and applying research, delivering quality education, and engaging with communities.**

*Higher education institutions should provide quality and relevant education.*

**Programming focused on faculty development should be designed to promote equity and inclusion.**

# Defining Equity

The terms *equity* and *equality* are sometimes used interchangeably. In actuality, they convey different, though related, ideas. In broad terms, while *equality* refers to “a state of being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities,”<sup>5</sup> *equity* refers to an action or process that reduces barriers and increases opportunities for those who do not enjoy equal status or rights, including through redistribution of resources, to reduce systemic inequality and move toward greater equality. “*Equity* is thus understood as a path to achieving *equality*.”<sup>6</sup> When applied to education in particular, **ensuring equity means ensuring that the most marginalized and vulnerable children and young people, regardless of gender identity, ethnicity, disability status, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, geographic location, or other factors, have an equal opportunity to access, learn, and complete safe, quality, relevant education.** Equity intertwines the concepts of fairness and inclusion. ***Fairness*** is about ensuring that personal or social circumstances are not barriers to achieving positive outcomes; ***inclusion*** specifies that all individuals have access to a minimum standard of services.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the commitment to equity involves a two-fold process of reducing existing barriers (i.e., social, cultural, economic) in a fair manner and increasing opportunities through inclusion.



## Definition of Equity in Education

Ensuring equity in education means ensuring that the most marginalized and vulnerable children and young people, regardless of gender identity, ethnicity, disability status, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, geographic location, or other factors, have an equal opportunity to access, learn, and complete safe, quality, relevant education.



**The commitment to equity involves a two-fold process of reducing existing barriers (i.e., social, cultural, economic) in a fair manner and increasing opportunities through inclusion.**

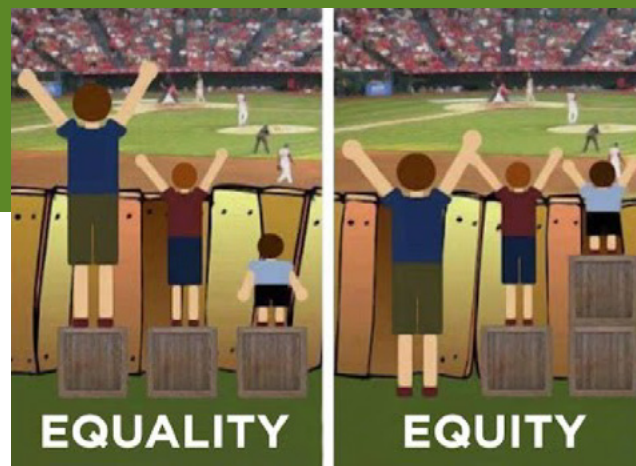
<sup>5</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI). (2018). *Education equity indicators for access guidance for practitioners in crisis and conflict-affected contexts* (p. 6). Retrieved from <http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2018/11/13/education-equity-indicators-for-access-guidance-for-practitioners-in-crisis-and-conflict-affected-contexts>

<sup>6</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI). (2018). *Education equity indicators for access guidance for practitioners in crisis and conflict-affected contexts* (p. 6). Retrieved from <http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2018/11/13/education-equity-indicators-for-access-guidance-for-practitioners-in-crisis-and-conflict-affected-contexts>

<sup>7</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2017. *No more failures: Ten steps to equity in education*. Paris, FR: Author.

## Figure 2. Graphic depicting the difference between equity and equality

Development and humanitarian practitioners are familiar with graphics (see Figure 2) that illustrate the concepts of *equity* and *equality*. However, these graphics don't sufficiently detail the variety of obstacles that often stand in the way of achieving equity. To understand this better, it helps to delineate the levels and barriers involved.



(Source: The Education Trust)

## Barriers to Equitable Education in Crisis and Conflict Settings

Equity in education consists of fair access to safe, quality, relevant resources, learning opportunities, and learning outcomes. Table 1 outlines types of barriers that may impede or limit equity in educational access or learning outcomes. The Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI) has identified a set of individual or group identity characteristics that serve as **dimensions of equity**, including gender, socioeconomic status, and race. The way in which society reacts to each of these dimensions can inhibit access to, achievement in, and relevance of educational resources and experiences. It can be especially difficult to meet the needs of populations that are subject to negative societal attitudes as stigma and discrimination are often deeply entrenched. Often, this discrimination is based on judgements or stereotypes focusing on dimensions unique or endemic to an individual's identity. These individual characteristics, listed in Table 1, while not barriers in and of themselves, often influence the level of marginalization or inequity the person may face. As such, these *endemic factors* are among the most common barriers to equity in any educational setting or context, but they are particularly compounded or compromised when crisis or conflict is present.<sup>8</sup>

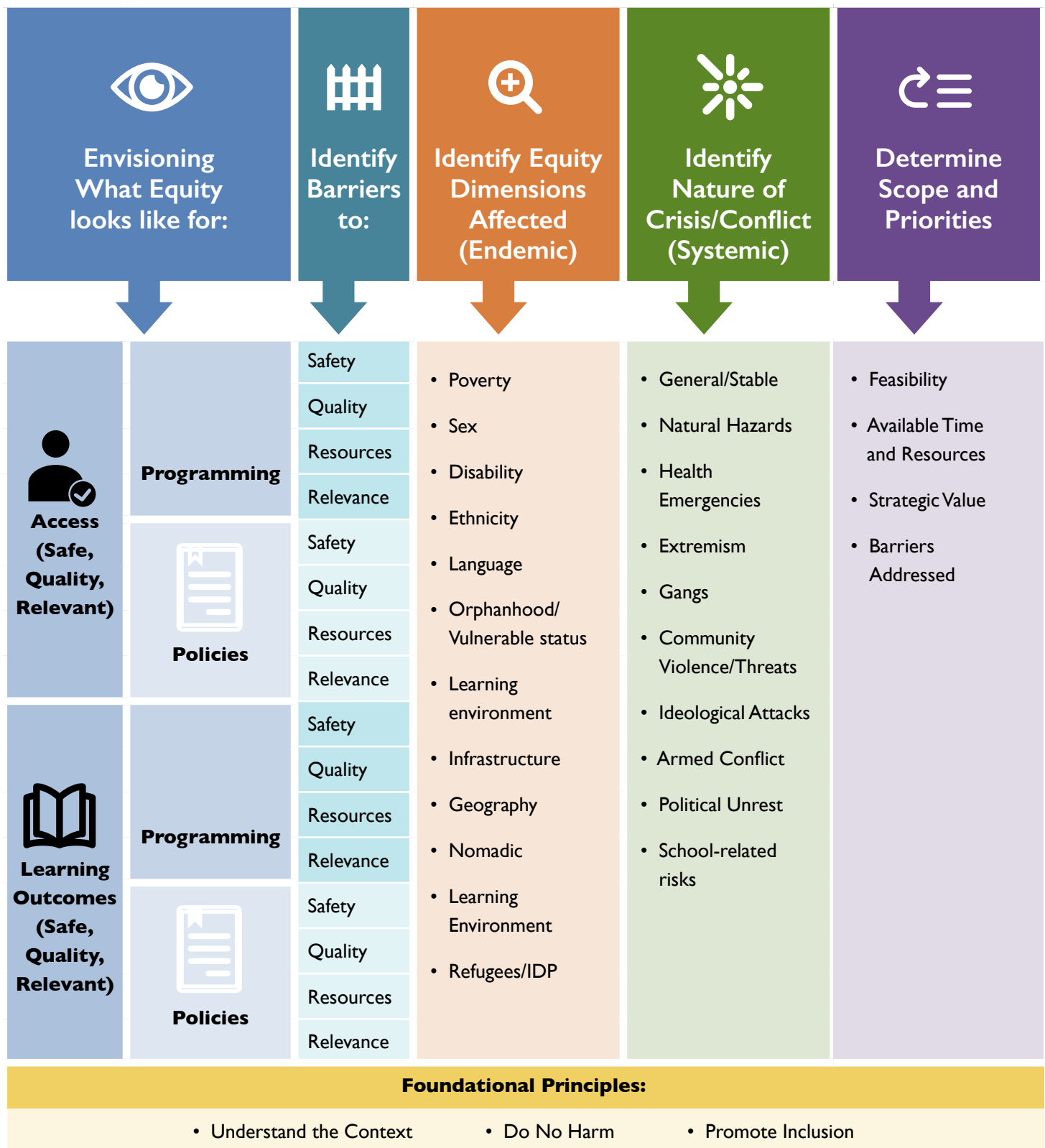


In crisis and conflict-affected environments, *all* children are vulnerable to exclusion from education, given the macro-level context that may be characterized by the specific **nature or type of instability** (conflict, fragility, permanent insecurity, natural hazards, health emergencies, etc.). These macro-level factors can serve as **systemic barriers** to equity. Such barriers can be exacerbated by threats, such as corruption, elitism, instability, and limited capacities of leaders in government and civil society, which may further slow progress toward equality. Barriers can also persist due to already formed negative beliefs about certain populations.

<sup>8</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI). (2016). *Mainstreaming equity in education*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2017/10/27/mainstreaming-equity-in-education>.



# Table I. Equity in EiCC Framework



Moreover, evidence shows that educational inequity is a predictor of conflict, and in turn, exposure to conflict further exacerbates educational inequities.<sup>9</sup> In effect, crisis and conflict-affected contexts compound society's pre-existing inequities through destabilizing shocks and stressors. Achieving educational equity in such challenging environments inevitably involves an honest and critical **consideration of scope**, identifying which barriers are most immediate or feasible to address, yielding that the **feasibility** itself is a barrier to equity. Another helpful framing of barriers is the education marginalization framework from the Girls' Education Challenge.<sup>10</sup>

## Analyzing Barriers

Learners in crisis and conflict settings, therefore, face added impediments to education, which is why USAID's programming priorities must consider which barriers and contextual factors are impeding equity and for whom, and therefore, what programming strategies or approaches can best address those barriers to advance a safe and relevant quality education that promotes social well-being.

One important pathway is access to education itself. Just as conflict can worsen education or poor or inequitable education can worsen conflict, education can play an important role in dissipating the effects of conflict and instability. When implemented equitably and effectively, education can work to mitigate the root causes of conflict; support the delivery and quality of security, governance, livelihood, and protection services; and promote stability and development.<sup>11</sup>



**Just as conflict can worsen education or poor or inequitable education can worsen conflict, education can play an important role in dissipating the effects of conflict and instability.**

Effective education initiatives in crisis and conflict settings often involve multi-level responses that work to reduce existing barriers while strategically and systematically enhancing access to quality services. Shaping these multi-level responses involves knowing what resources are available and what existing limitations and constraints exist. "Equity in this context is defined as a reassessment and redistribution of resources (human, institutional, and financial) in education with the goal of reducing or eliminating systematic inequality in outcomes."<sup>12</sup>

The Equity in EiCC Framework in Table I presents an opportunity to investigate and better understand the barriers and pathways to educational equity. This framework can serve as a guide for facilitated discussions among programming teams, walking through the contextual analysis and by responding to the following questions adapted from EERI:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> FHI 360. (2016). Education inequality and violent conflict: Evidence and policy considerations. *EPDC Policy Brief* (June). Retrieved from <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-epdc-brief-edu-inequality-violent-conflict.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> UKAID Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). (2018). *Thematic review: Understanding and addressing educational marginalisation*. London, UK: Author. Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/730845/TR-Add-Educational-Marginalisation-1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/730845/TR-Add-Educational-Marginalisation-1.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Shah, R., Henderson, C., & Couch, D. (2019). *Disaster recovery guidance series: Education sector recovery*. Washington DC: Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR). Retrieved from [https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/EDUCATION\\_NOTE\\_01042019\\_web.pdf](https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/EDUCATION_NOTE_01042019_web.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI). (2016). *Mainstreaming equity in education* (p. 5). Retrieved from <http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2017/10/27/mainstreaming-equity-in-education>

<sup>13</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative (EERI). (2016). *Mainstreaming equity in education*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2017/10/27/mainstreaming-equity-in-education>

**1. What does educational equity and equality look like in your context?**

(Column 1, Table 1) That is, what specific outcomes should be the focus of education policy and programming efforts?

**2. Who (i.e., what subgroup or population) is consistently and systematically left behind or not accessing, completing, or learning in the status quo, and why? Moreover, which barriers are impeding factors for each of the subgroups identified?**

(Columns 2 and 3, Table 1)

**3. What are the underlying causes of inequity and inequality? And what systemic, resource-related, crisis/conflict-related, or cultural factors can be affected through education programming or policy?** (Column 4, Table 1)

**4. Given all of the above, and within the larger education programming or policy priorities in which one is working, what is the appropriate scope and level of investment for an organization?** (Column 5, Table 1)

When undertaking this process of analysis, the following **foundational principles** (Yellow row, Table 1) are instructive in promoting equity in education in crisis and conflict settings:

## Understand the Context

An initial contextual grounding involving the process of identifying which barriers—there are usually multiple ones at play—are restricting equitable education is a key first step. Using information from an education sector assessment, EMIS data, or a Rapid Education Risk Analysis<sup>14</sup> (RERA) will help identify and/or prioritize the barriers. Within a given setting, some barriers may be mutually reinforcing and may exacerbate inequities more than others, so these may be ones to prioritize, particularly when considering where to commit limited resources. Gender, poverty, disability status,<sup>15</sup> and refugee or displacement status tend to be among the more common dimensions impeding equity. A 2010 UNICEF study delineated some common aspects of exclusion—what this brief refers to as *barriers*—in education and illustrates how multiple factors create mutually reinforcing disadvantage and marginalization. It also proposes a useful framing for where equity-enhancing measures may be most needed and effective.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, barriers related to ethnicity, religion, or geography are often shaped by the surrounding sociopolitical environment, and may require alternative pathways toward achieving greater equity. Addressing the most common barriers may also help lessen other disparities, which is an important consideration when designing a program intervention.



<sup>14</sup> Rogan, J. (2019). *Rapid Education Risk Analysis (RERA) Toolkit*. Washington, DC: USAID Education in Crisis and Conflict Network. Retrieved from <https://www.edu-links.org/resources/rapid-education-and-risk-analysis-rera-toolkit-1>.

<sup>15</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 15 percent of any population is individuals with disabilities. Disability prevalence is higher in conflict and post-conflict settings. Consulting with local disabled people's organizations, that is organizations run by and for persons with disabilities, is imperative for understanding the barriers faced by this population in conflict and crisis settings, as oftentimes data are unavailable.

<sup>16</sup> Epstein, A. (2010). *Making the case for an equity focus in education*. New York, NY: UNICEF.



## Do No Harm

When developing and implementing programs and advising on education policy in conflict and crisis-affected countries, an imperative way to avoid worsening disparities is to commit to the “Do No Harm” principle. It means one commits to designing and implementing programs that strive to minimize the harm a program may inadvertently cause by affecting power dynamics or exacerbating existing disparities. One strategy for applying this principle is to use **conflict sensitive education (CSE)** approaches. The USAID Education Policy states: “the goal of conflict-sensitive programming is to minimize unintended negative outcomes and increase intentional positive ones, while remaining focused on program goals and objectives.”<sup>17</sup> USAID’s Checklist for Conflict Sensitivity in Education Programming<sup>18</sup> is one tool to help missions review programs and identify opportunities for incorporating conflict sensitive approaches. The INEE Conflict Sensitive Education Pack<sup>19</sup> offers another set of useful resources.

## Promote Inclusion

Being intentional about inclusion throughout the project life-cycle helps to ensure that equity strategies improve resource provisions or learning opportunities, especially for those who need them most. While much of the discourse and work on inclusion focuses on learners with disabilities, including USAID’s How-to Note: Disability Inclusive Education<sup>20</sup>, the notion of inclusion is far broader, serving as a pathway to advance equity across multiple dimensions of the human experience. USAID defines inclusive development as, “the concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.”<sup>21</sup> This definition derives from an instructive approach to inclusive development by USAID as part of an Automated Directives System (ADS) 201 suggested guidance, which includes a matrix of six domains that can help missions or teams be more inclusive throughout the program cycle. The Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) has published a useful pocket guide to inclusive education, *Education in Emergencies: Including Everyone*, which outlines principles for an inclusive education approach in emergencies to apply throughout the planning, implementation, and monitoring of programs.<sup>22</sup> At its core, the guide advocates for inclusion by encouraging implementers to consider every opportunity to better understand the needs of those most persistently excluded in order to fill gaps and improve access to quality services—even if only a little at a time—with an aim toward equity and advancement for all.

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<sup>17</sup> USAID. (2018). *USAID education policy*. Retrieved from [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018\\_Education\\_Policy\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/2018_Education_Policy_FINAL_WEB.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> USAID (2013). Checklist for Conflict Sensitivity in Education Programming. Retrieved from <https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/education/conflict-sensitivity-checklist/>

<sup>19</sup> Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). 2013. *Conflict Sensitive Education Pack*. Retrieved from <https://inee.org/collections/inee-conflict-sensitive-education-pack>

<sup>20</sup> USAID (2018). *How-to Note: Disability Inclusive Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.edu-links.org/resources/how-note-disability-inclusive-education>

<sup>21</sup> USAID. (2018). *Suggested approaches for integrating inclusive development across the program cycle and in mission operations*. Retrieved from [https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/additional\\_help\\_for\\_ads\\_201\\_inclusive\\_development\\_180726\\_final\\_r.pdf](https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/additional_help_for_ads_201_inclusive_development_180726_final_r.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). 2009. *Education in emergencies: Including everyone: INEE pocket guide to inclusive education*. [https://toolkit.ineesite.org/resources/ineecms/uploads/1007/INEE\\_Pocket\\_Guide\\_Inclusive\\_Education\\_EN.pdf](https://toolkit.ineesite.org/resources/ineecms/uploads/1007/INEE_Pocket_Guide_Inclusive_Education_EN.pdf)

## FIND OUT MORE

**Ensuring equity in education, particularly in crisis and conflict-affected environments, is essential.** But it also requires careful planning, design and monitoring. For more information about this important topic please consult the sources referenced in this document, as well as the USAID Education Links website ([www.edu-links.org](http://www.edu-links.org)), and the [ECCN](http://www.eccn.org), [INEE](http://www.inee.org), and the [EERI](http://www.eeri.org) websites.