EdData II: Education Data for Decision Making

Task Order 15, Data for Education Programming in Asia and the Middle East (DEP-AME)

BRIEF ON EDUCATION IN SYRIA

In the fall of 2016, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Middle East Bureau requested that RTI International produce an internal analysis and annotated bibliography on the educational situation in Syria. The report was developed through an analysis of key references and secondary sources as well as interviews with key informants at international agencies and organizations involved in education delivery in the opposition controlled areas (OCAs) of Syria. Analysis and review of the literature included a special focus on Dara'a, Aleppo, and Idlib regions. This brief is a summary of the report and of the key emerging issues that were identified as part of the effort.

When the crisis began in 2011, Syria had enjoyed several decades of universal K–12 education that reached the majority of Syrians, although educational quality varied. Five and a half years of conflict have dramatically reduced school enrollment and attendance rates and eroded the quality of education provided. A recent report issued by the UN states, "Since 2011, Syria's development situation has regressed by almost four decades; school attendance has dropped more than 50%, and Syria has witnessed reversals in all 12 recorded Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] indicators" (United Nations, 2016, p. 1). Preprimary school enrollment has decreased by 89%, basic (primary and lower secondary) education enrollment by 44%, upper general secondary enrollment by 23%, and technical vocational education and training (TVET) enrollment by 64% (United Nations, 2016).

While the initial donor response to the Syria crisis was understandably ad hoc, ***the international community has moved to organize relief and development efforts*** so that they are better coordinated and organized around external delivery points. The UN Security Council passed resolutions that allowed cross-border operations from Jordan and Turkey for millions of in-need Syrians. The Whole of Syria (WoS) response, launched in 2014, has helped to ensure coordination and information sharing across borders inside Syria and across donors and implementing NGOs. Three hubs are delivering the WoS response, including support for the education sector (London 2016 Conference):

- Damascus for government-controlled areas;

- Gaziantep, Turkey for relief efforts and support for northern Syria, including Aleppo and Idlib;

- Amman, Jordan for support to the south of Syria including Dara'a.

The nature of the war in Syria has meant that ***up-to-date, reliable data are hard to come by***. The research team identified some 150 documents, organizational reports, media reports, press releases, and material from websites in English and Arabic—and a few in French— as a preliminary step to preparing the report. Approximately 40 of these items were of interest and use, with a few providing relatively recent data from the government of Syria's Education Management Information System (EMIS) and from surveys and other direct data collection

efforts. Key among these documents are reports from the Whole of Syria (WoS) initiative and from the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution. UNICEF's MENA Regional Office in Damascus leveraged the government's EMIS data and its existing education delivery structure to conduct surveys and produced reports and studies under the Whole of Syria (WoS) umbrella initiative. The ACU, established in December 2012 by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and opposition forces, is the coordinating body for relief efforts from the Gaziantep, Turkey hub including for education. The ACU's Information Management Unit (IMU) applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods that included key informant interviews with local council members in Syrian Interim Government (SIG) - managed areas, review of school registers and available secondary data from previous assessments, and direct field observation. Data and information in reports produced by ACU were useful primarily in corroborating the findings of reports commissioned through the WoS umbrella. The IMU seems able to conduct surveys in OCAs, but at a much smaller scale and with clearly limited analytical capacity than the WoS team. In addition, the Syria Untold website http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/olive-branch/ provides a variety of reports and stories focused on education in OCAs and covering civil activism and civil society.

Broadly speaking, **Syria now presents three types of areas controlled by different actors** and with varying levels of insecurity.

- *Areas under Syrian Government Control.* Schools in Syrian government-controlled areas follow the official government of Syria curriculum and their students take the official exams. In some of these areas, public services continue to function well enough to deliver needed health and education services. But in other areas, systems are burdened by the large numbers of IDPs with displaced children unable to access education services because of lack of space in schools or lack of official documentation.

In overcrowded areas, schools have moved to double shifts with reduced hours of learning for each shift and the removal of a few subjects, such as history, from the curriculum to accommodate the shortened school day (UNICEF, 2015).

- *Areas under SIG Control.* These areas are not governed homogenously in terms of the delivery of education although efforts are underway to bring about some standardization. As several actors within the SIG umbrella provide direct oversight at the sub-district level, the availability of teachers, classrooms, and materials is not consistent. Schools in these areas use either government of Syria or SIG curricula in classrooms and, for the most part, their teachers receive a stipend from donor-funded initiatives. Students need to take the grade 9 and 12 national examinations to graduate out of the system (UNICEF, 2015).

- *Other Areas.* Many sub-districts in these areas have heavily damaged infrastructure, including schools. Schools have been converted into shelters or barracks for local groups. In ISIS-controlled areas, a revised version of the curriculum is taught; chemistry and physics have been removed and the hours dedicated to math learning have been reduced. References in curricula to the Syrian Arab Republic have been banned and pictures deemed inappropriate have been removed from textbooks (UNICEF, 2015). Data and information on the state of education in areas falling under this last category are the most difficult to find.

Key issues that emerged from reviewing the available literature are:

- *Access to Education.* Across Syria, factors that are increasingly hindering access to education include child labor because of intense poverty, child marriage for girls from larger families with constrained resources, financial barriers to schooling when fees or other costs have to be paid to schools, lack of psychosocial support to children who are traumatized by the conflict, and lack of

protection and child safety. Regulations on school and class size sometimes also hinder access, particularly in overcrowded areas where children are turned away due to the regulations that stipulate class configuration. Furthermore, there is currently no mechanism by which prior learning can be "recognized" for students who have attended schools that are not sanctioned by the government of Syria. Certificates issued by these schools are not accepted by education representatives (No Lost Generation (NLG) 2016; London 2016 Conference, 2016).

- *Quality of Education.* Educational quality in pre-crisis Syria was in need of significant improvement even before the conflict. But the education system during and post-conflict will have to address even more complex issues including integrating life skills that help children cope and survive into all grade levels. Improving the quality of education requires strong coordination and partnerships between international development agencies, government ministries and communities to minimize duplication and fragmentation (UNICEF, 2015).

- *Curricula, Certification, and Accreditation.* These differ from area to area in OCAs based very much on which group controls the area. Resolving the certification challenge in SIG-managed areas would go a long way to quieting the concerns of parents around the utility and recognition of the education received. The system would also benefit if a unified curriculum could be agreed on and implemented in all areas that are under the control of the opposition.

- *Psychosocial Support.* The scale and intensity of the political conflict in Syria, and especially its impact on school-age children, require psychosocial support programs in schools, and teachers trained to integrate psychosocial support into their daily work. Attention is particularly needed for disadvantaged children such as those with disabilities—who are unfortunately likely to increase in number as a result of the ongoing conflict.

- *Teachers.* Displacement, loss of life, emigration outside of Syria, and especially the inability of the government of Syria as well as the SIG to provide appropriate or sufficient remuneration has affected teacher availability and recruitment (Whole of Syria Education Focal Point, 2016). Management of the teacher workforce is relatively fragmented in SIG-controlled areas. Teachers may report to one type of authority, be paid by another, and teach a curriculum from yet another source. Any effort to improve the education system effectively requires professional development support for teachers. Standardizing teacher training, teaching, and remuneration in OCAs are key inputs to creating a well-functioning education system where children are able to learn basic competencies.

- *Relief versus Education:* Most current education interventions in Syria are delivered within a relief context. Very few programs are focused on teaching and learning, and learning outcomes are for the most part not being measured. Given the inherent risks children, teachers, and parents are taking in even going to school, the assessment of learning may seem a low priority. But in order to best design and adapt programs that will address system weaknesses and build on strengths, the development community does need to understand what children are gaining from school attendance. With such little attention being focused on education and learning and limited donor investment in the sector, in another two or three years, a full generation of Syrian children may well be left behind.

Map of Syria
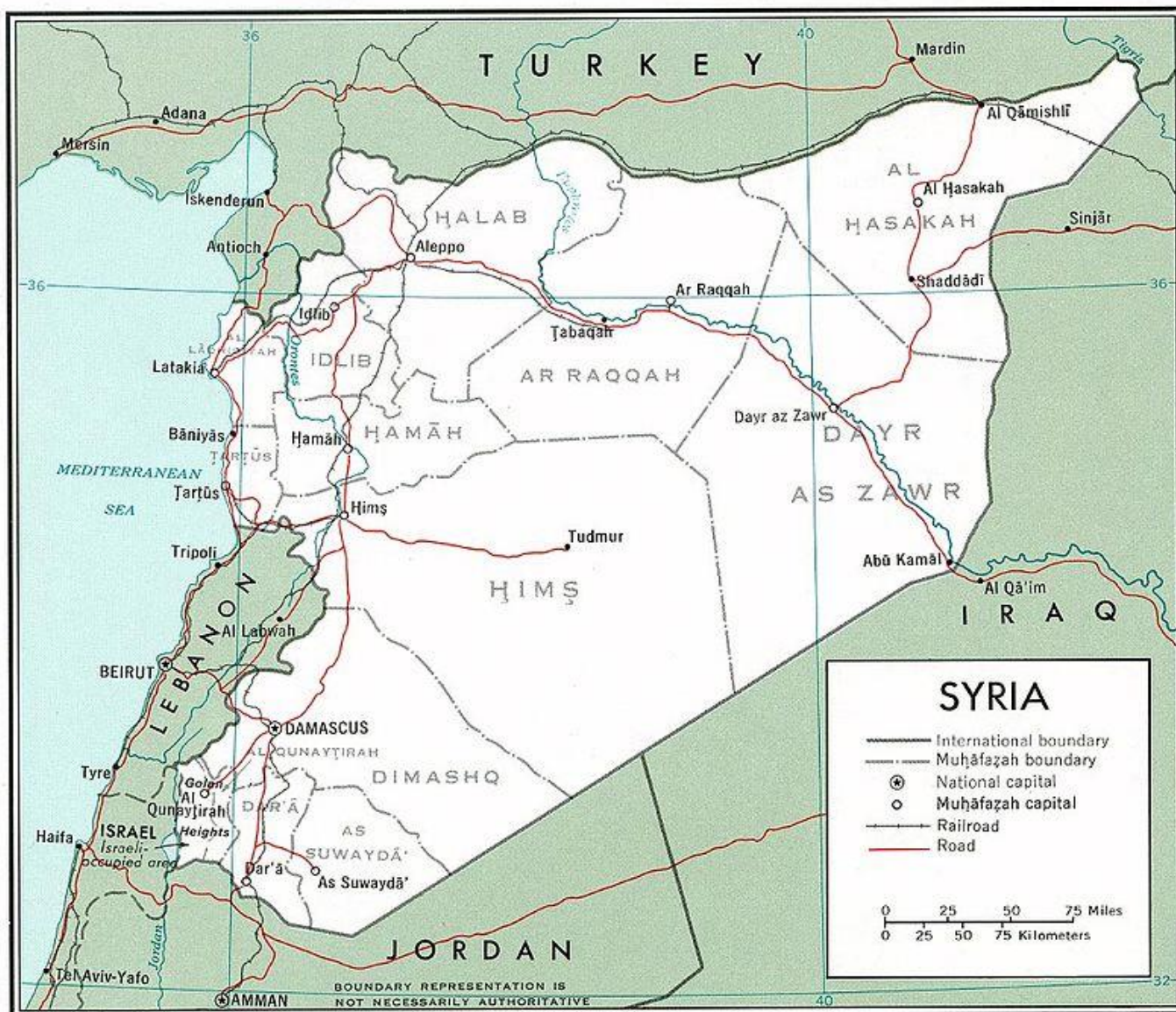
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