

# EDUCATION DISRUPTED

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Impact of the conflict  
on **children's education**  
in Yemen





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Left: A student in Al-Jufainah Camp for displaced people in Marib.

# CHILDREN IN DISTRESS

**1.71 MILLION**

**Internally displaced children**



**3,336**

**Children killed between 26 March 2015 and 28 February 2021**

(verified United Nations figures)



**400,000**

**Children under 5 years with severe acute malnutrition**



**465**

**Attacks and military use of education facilities between 26 March 2015 and 28 February 2021**

(verified United Nations figures)



**2 MILLION**

**Children out of school**



**10.2 MILLION**

**Children in need of basic health care**



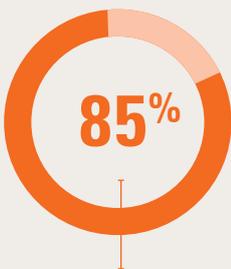
**9.58 million**

**Children without access to safe water, sanitation or hygiene**



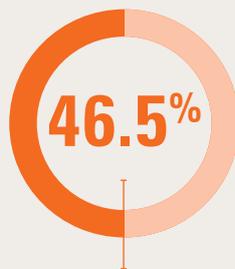
**8.1 million**

**Children in need of emergency education support**

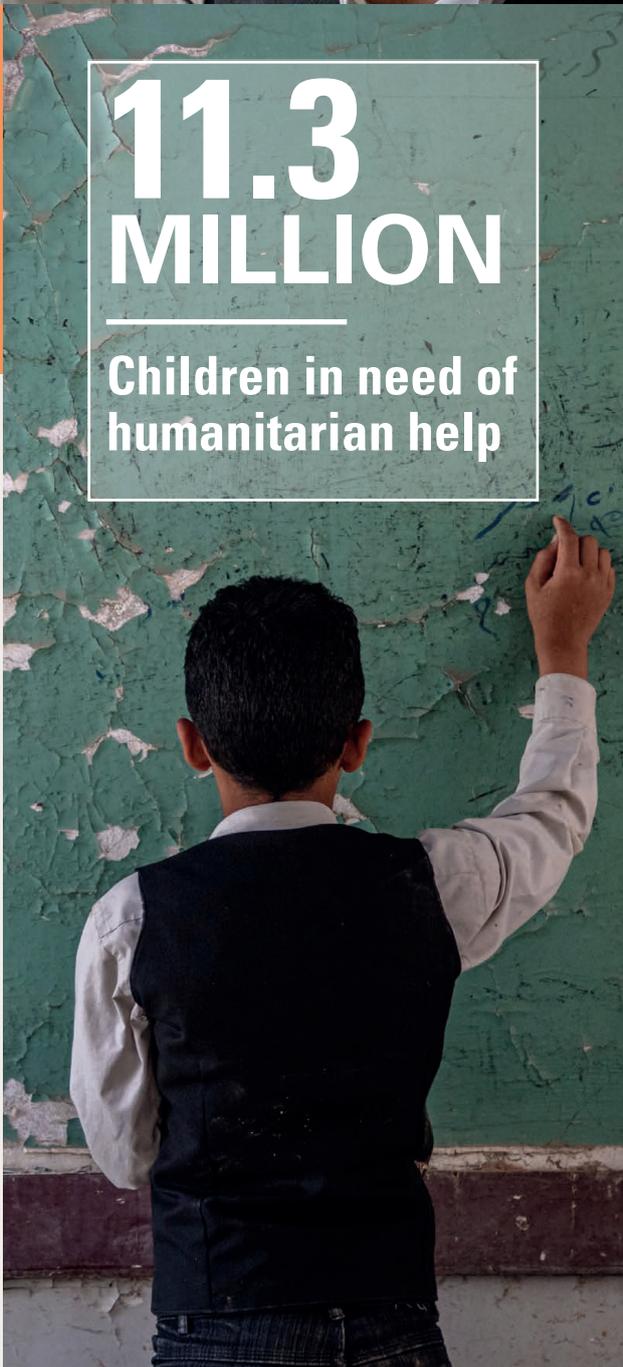


**Child poverty rate**

(Simulation based on 2014 Household Budget Survey)



**Prevalence of childhood stunting**



**11.3 MILLION**

**Children in need of humanitarian help**

# EDUCATION DISRUPTED

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*Anas is not the only child in Yemen that had to sacrifice his education. He is one of hundreds of thousands of children victims of devastation that years of brutal conflict and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have had on Yemen's education system.*



Children remain the primary victims of this terrible crisis, with 11.3 million requiring some form of humanitarian aid or protection assistance.



## ► Millions out of school

*Twelve-year-old Anas should be in school in Taizz city in southwestern Yemen. But he is not. Instead, he is working 11-hour shifts as a metalsmith, operating dangerous machinery that puts his health, safety and future at risk.*

It is grueling work but Anas does not have much choice. After his father died, he became the only breadwinner in his family, and from then on he took responsibility for his mother and brothers.

“I am an orphan and I am the big brother, working and looking after my family. I work from 6 a.m. until evening. I work on everything in the workshop, cutting iron, painting iron, engraving iron until 6 p.m. at night. I have four brothers. I had to quit school and work because there is no one to support us. I have to support my brothers and send them to school, and I do not have time to study. I dream of becoming independent, re-opening my father’s workshop and running my own business.”

Anas is not the only child in Yemen that had to sacrifice his education. He is one of hundreds of thousands of children victims of devastation that years of brutal conflict and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have had on Yemen’s education system.

Yemen remains the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Two thirds of the country’s population – 20.7 million<sup>1</sup> people in total – need urgent humanitarian assistance due to multiple emergencies such as conflict, pandemics and natural disasters.

Children remain the primary victims of this terrible crisis, with 11.3 million<sup>2</sup> requiring some form of humanitarian aid or protection assistance.

The conflict in Yemen keeps intensifying. There are currently more than 4 million displaced Yemenis living in over 1,500 unplanned and squalid camps who need urgent support for survival.<sup>3</sup> The security situation remains unpredictable and dire, with humanitarian access to vulnerable populations, including for the delivery of basic education services, severely constrained.

Poverty is also getting worse. According to the most recent data, nearly half of all Yemenis lived in poverty in 2014. National poverty rates are now estimated to have jumped to around 80 per cent. More than 8 in 10 children are thought to live in families that do not have enough income to meet their basic needs.

This already difficult situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding the poverty circle to include more and more people. In addition, the secondary impacts of the pandemic on children will be significant and require a longer-term response.



Left: Girls taking their exams at a school in Sana'a in August 2020.

With an already weakened public health system and very narrow fiscal space, Yemen's capacity to fight the spread of the virus and its wider impact is very limited. As the schooling system continues to be disrupted, the human capital impact cannot be underestimated.

Just over 2 million<sup>4</sup> school-age girls and boys in Yemen are now out of school because of poverty, conflict and lack of educational opportunities. This is more than twice the number in 2015, when 890,000 children were not in classrooms.

Of the children who are not attending school, more than 400,000 have been pushed out of

school directly by the war, which has also seen 2,507<sup>5</sup> schools damaged, used as shelter by internally displaced people or occupied by armed groups.

The humanitarian education cluster estimates that 8.1 million<sup>6</sup> children need emergency education assistance across Yemen – a significant increase from the 1.1 million reported pre-crisis in December 2014.

There is also growing concern that if out-of-school children or those who have dropped out recently are not properly supported, they may never return to school.

*Just over 2 million school-age girls and boys in Yemen are now out of school because of poverty, conflict and lack of educational opportunities.*



*Mohammed recalls with sadness how his students stopped waiting for him outside class when he started operating his tuk-tuk taxi.*

## ► Destroying pillars of education

*An estimated 171,600 teachers<sup>7</sup> – or two thirds of the teaching workforce – have not been paid a regular salary for four years. This puts nearly 4 million<sup>8</sup> additional children at risk of missing out on their education as unpaid teachers quit teaching to find other ways of providing for their families.*

Mohammed, 49, is one such teacher. For more than two decades, he thrived in his profession as an educator in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, where he was promoted to Deputy Head of Ibn Majed School. But the civil war turned his life upside down. Like thousands of public sector workers, Mohammed has not received a salary since 2016. He left teaching to become a tuk-tuk driver.

"Life needs have become very hard to meet. Teaching is no longer fulfilling the purpose, so I found myself forced to abandon teaching and find other work that can help my family keep afloat," says Mohammed.

Mohammed recalls with sadness how his students stopped waiting for him outside class when he started operating his tuk-tuk taxi.

"It hurts the students' souls when they find all teachers abandoning teaching. It will lead to the collapse of education, and when education collapses, values and fundamentals collapse. The nation also collapses.... I hope they [the authorities] focus on the conditions of the teacher. Teachers are the basis of any society, of progress."

Right: Mohammed Yahya in one of the empty classes in Ibn Majed School where he used to teach.





More than 523,000 school-aged displaced children struggle to access education because there is not enough space in existing classrooms. Schools have been damaged, used by the military or occupied by displaced families. Teachers and students have been killed, injured and traumatized.

## ► The most vulnerable children risk the most

*The dual crisis of war and COVID-19 is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children and adolescents to continue learning. This particularly affects children in rural areas, displaced communities and hard-to-reach areas of Yemen. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress, especially in girls' education.*

While an estimated 47 per cent of girls and 53 per cent of boys were enrolled in school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, secondary school girls were more likely to drop out for several reasons. Most of the time, they do not feel safe in schools or are not comfortable going to schools where there are no female teachers or separate toilets and washrooms to manage their periods.

Girls' access to education in 71 districts has also been negatively affected by the fact that many teachers and educational staff are no longer working because of non-payment of salaries.

More than 523,000 school-aged displaced children struggle to access education because there is not enough space in existing classrooms. And even where schooling is available, the conflict has a knock-on negative impact on learning and the quality of education. Schools have been damaged, used by the military or occupied by displaced families. Teachers and students have been killed, injured and traumatized.

In such an environment, it is very challenging to ensure quality teaching and learning.



Above: Kholood and her sisters walking to school.

Thirteen-year-old Kholood lost her home in Taizz five years ago. When fighting broke out in her neighbourhood, her family fled to a safer area in the city. It was very tough for everyone, especially for Kholood, who was 8 years old at the time, and had eight siblings. The family lived in a house that did not have any water, electricity or nearby school that was available for girls.

The closest school was occupied by military forces and the other available school, 45 minutes away, was for boys only. So Kholood was without an education for a whole year until a charitable man dedicated his building as a school for the children.

In collaboration with the education authorities in Taizz, the man converted the building into an official school and Kholood, who is in Grade 7 today, can get a certificate when she moves to the next year.

However, there are still many uncertainties and dangers. The school building is unfinished, and has no doors, windows, chairs, and bathrooms. During winter, many of the schoolchildren fell ill, including Kholood. The road to school is also treacherous and it takes an hour for Kholood and her sisters to go and come back from school. The area is also near a fighting zone and the school is often evacuated when fighting breaks out.

“I feel afraid when I walk to school because cars are speeding, and I’m scared of the shelling. I don’t know if I should go home when I hear bombing or if should stay at the school,” says Kholood.

“I hope that one day peace will prevail, and I will be able to go to a beautiful and safe school,” she adds.



“I love school. It brings me together with many friends, and we spend time with the teachers. Our teachers show us how to protect ourselves from COVID-19.”

## ► COVID-19: Locked out of school

*Yemen was not spared from the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the country in early 2020. Schools, universities and other learning institutions were closed on 16 March, disrupting the education of nearly 5.8 million primary and secondary school children, including 2.5 million girls. The pandemic also prevented students from taking their national exams at the scheduled time.*

Schools are where children feel some semblance of normalcy in their lives, a refuge from the chaos and trauma of war. When locked out of classrooms, children have to stay at home in communities that are buckling under the weight of conflict, food insecurity and poverty.

It is better to keep schools open so that children can continue learning. Evidence from across the world shows that schools are not the main drivers of this pandemic – yet children continue to suffer the devastating impacts of school closures on their learning, mental and physical well-being and safety.

This is what happened to 9-year-old Muhammad. Muhammad is a third grader at Raydan Basic Education School in Aden, in the south of Yemen. In 2020, all 138 schools in Aden closed their doors due to COVID-19 containment measures. Muhammad, like all his friends, was forced to stay at home and learn remotely.

*As the population grows, the education system will need to accommodate an ever-growing number of adolescents and young people.*



When Muhammad was able to return to school, he benefited from a catch-up learning programme.

“The school implemented a one-month educational programme at the beginning of the current school year as compensation for students for lessons missed last year when schools were closed due to COVID-19,” says Rajaa Qahtan, the principal of Raydan School.

Rajaa is worried that young children like Mohammed may be emotionally scarred by the pandemic and develop a chronic phobia of diseases.

“Children must get through this pandemic and we need to work to raise their spirits and health awareness,” she says.

Muhammad is worried that he might need to stay at home again, like last year, to protect himself from COVID-19, and not see his friends.

“I love school. It brings me together with many friends, and we spend time with the teachers. Our teachers show us how to protect ourselves from COVID-19,” he says.

The combined effects of the prolonged conflict and the latest assault on education in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic will have devastating and long-lasting effects on children and adolescents in Yemen. With this comes the very real risk of delayed realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education.

## The future lies with the youth

As the population grows, the education system will need to accommodate an ever-growing number of adolescents and young people. Yemen is a very youthful country with 40 per cent of its population under the age of 14. In 2007, Yemen’s population was estimated to be 22.3 million and it is projected to reach 47 million by 2040 (United Nations Development Programme, 2008).

If challenges to the education system are not adequately addressed today, as well as in the mid to longer term, there is a very real possibility that the potential of an entire generation of children will be lost.

*Yemen is a very youthful country with 40 per cent of its population under the age of 14. In 2007, Yemen’s population was estimated to be 22.3 million and it is projected to reach 47 million by 2040.*

In Yemen, over

**3,600**

children were recruited to armed forces and armed groups between March 2015 and February 2021

Children are at greater risk of exploitation

When schools shut down, children are more at risk of child labour or recruitment into armed groups. In Yemen, over 3,600 children were recruited to armed forces and armed groups between March 2015 and February 2021. In 2013, 17 per cent of Yemen's children between the ages of 5 and 17 – 1.3 million in total – were engaged in child labour.<sup>9</sup> Today, it is likely that there are many more due to Yemen's economic collapse.

# WHEN NOT IN SCHOOL

When children are not in school or do not have access to quality education, their development is severely compromised. The combined consequences of war, poverty and epidemics on children's education in Yemen are devastating.



More than

**2 million**

children are out of school in Yemen

Children's learning is interrupted

More than 2 million children are out of school in Yemen. Schooling provides essential learning and when schools close, children and youth are deprived of opportunities to fulfil their potential.

# 72.5%

of girls in Yemen get married while still children (under 18 years)

Children are exposed to harmful practices

72.5 per cent of girls in Yemen get married while still children (under 18 years). Early marriage makes it almost impossible for an adolescent girl to finish her education. It also leads girls to have children earlier, and to have more children over their lifetimes. This in turn reduces the ability of households to meet their basic needs and contributes to poverty.

Close to

# 2.3 million

children under 5 years of age – 2 out of every 5 children of that age – are now at risk of acute malnutrition

Children's nutrition deteriorates

Yemen is experiencing one of the world's worst food crises. Close to 2.3 million children under 5 years — 2 out of every 5 children of that age in Yemen — are now at risk of acute malnutrition, including about 400,000 at risk of severe acute malnutrition. Nearly 1 in 2 children under 5 is stunted, a situation that has not changed since 2011. Malnutrition causes irreversible damage to the physical, mental and social development of the child, and impacts learning.



# 84.5%

of children in Yemen live in monetary poverty

Children who do not finish their education are trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty

84.5 per cent of children in Yemen live in monetary poverty. In the long run, this situation will continue to perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Poor and vulnerable children and adolescents are also more likely to have never been to school, to drop out of school and to never return to school.



## Fighting for her right to education

Fifteen-year-old Asmaa was about to be another victim of child marriage – which effectively ends a girl’s childhood – and lose her hopes of an education. But fortunately, her family was dissuaded from giving her up as a child bride.

Asmaa lives with her parents and her five siblings in Rusba, a village in Dhamar governorate, in the north of Yemen. She and her family live in a modest house. Her father is a teacher, who, like thousands of other teachers, has not received a salary since 2016. Because of the loss of income, he struggles to provide for his family.

In late 2019, Asmaa’s cousin proposed to her. But her family believes that education is important, so they accepted the marriage proposal on the condition that the couple can get engaged now but only get married when

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*Asmaa was relieved, especially after seeing how many of her married friends, all under the age of 18, could not study properly with a husband and children to take care of at home.*

Asmaa turns 18 and finishes secondary school. Asmaa, on the other hand, wanted more. She dreamed of studying psychology at university.

Asmaa says that when her cousin proposed to her, she felt confused and scared but agreed to the marriage. When the engagement took place, the groom’s family paid part of the dowry.

“Everything was fine until my fiancé surprised us four months after the engagement, demanding that the wedding take place that same month,” says Asmaa.

Asmaa refused. Her father was under extreme financial pressure at the time but her parents both supported her decision. As a result of the family’s rejection of the wedding, they had to pay the dowry back to her fiancé’s family.

Thanks to the support of a UNICEF partner that works to prevent child marriage the family was able to secure the money from friends and neighbours, and the marriage was eventually cancelled. Asmaa was relieved, especially after seeing how many of her married friends, all under the age of 18, could not study properly with a husband and children to take care of at home.

“It is difficult for a young girl who is married to continue with her education. I see how my friends are not able to concentrate and understand what they are learning at school because they are busy with their other duties.”

Asmaa wishes that more parents could support their daughters’ desire to finish school and not force them into early marriage.

# UNICEF IN ACTION

*UNICEF continues to work tirelessly to help Yemen's children survive the conflict, recover from its crippling effects and continue growing, learning and playing.*

In 2020, UNICEF and its partners achieved significant results for children's education.

- More than 578,600 children were provided with individual learning materials. Access to formal and non-formal education was maintained for close to 60,000 children.
- To prevent the collapse of the education system, which has been mired by non-payment of teacher salaries for four years, UNICEF provided 117,554 teachers and school-based staff with incentives, enabling them to pay for transport to school and continue teaching and working.
- UNICEF supported the development of the National COVID-19 Response Plan for Education.
- UNICEF provided financial and technical support for conducting the Grade 9 and 12 national exams and delivered learning supplies and personal protective equipment to 4,250 examination rooms, allowing 427,650 students to take their exams.
- 1,200 teachers in 247 schools were trained on safe school protocols and 546,640 community members were sensitized on hygiene and disease prevention.

Left: A high school student having her temperature tested before entering her school to take her exam.



# WHAT THE CHILDREN NEED



*Education is a long-term investment in children's futures and the future of Yemen. There is no quick win. Support for education needs to be predictable and sustained. UNICEF is asking all stakeholders to:*

## ► Uphold children's right to an education

All parties to the conflict must stop attacks on schools and places of learning. Children and education staff must be kept out of harm's way and schools should be maintained as safe zones for learning.

Education authorities across Yemen should ensure that teachers and education personnel receive salaries so they can perform their essential tasks and children can continue to learn.

Access to quality education is a right for every child, including girls and the most vulnerable children, and it should be prioritized by all decision-makers.

The international community should support education programmes with immediate, flexible and long-term funding, including support for financial incentives for teachers, while searching for long-term solutions to the salary crisis.

## ► Work together to achieve lasting and inclusive peace

What Yemen needs the most today is an immediate and lasting peace. Until this is achieved, the children of Yemen will remain in dire need of assistance, including help to complete their education.

Left: Ahmed, aged 12 years, in a classroom in Al-Hamzi School that has been destroyed during the conflict.

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## Endnotes

1. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Humanitarian Needs Overview* – Yemen, February 2021.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Humanitarian Needs Overview* – Yemen, February 2021.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. In 13 of the 22 governorates, the 2017/2018 school year began with a setback in the education process due to the extended time of non-payment of salaries for teachers, crippling the education system (2018 Mid-Year UNICEF Humanitarian Situation report).
9. International Labour Organization data, 2013, accessed 19 April 2021, <[www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS\\_205232/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_205232/lang--en/index.htm)>.

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Right: A student at a makeshift school in Al-Jufainah Camp for displaced people in Marib.



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