

# A New Way of Thinking About Education in Emergencies Data

 **Elizabeth Buckner**, PhD, Assistant Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada  
 elizabeth.buckner@utoronto.ca

 **Anne Smiley**, EdD, Associate Director of Research and Evaluation, FHI 360  
 asmiley@fhi360.org

 **Sean Cremin**, Research Associate, FHI 360  
 scremin@fhi360.org

## Summary

This article summarizes findings from 35 interviews with key stakeholders working in the Middle East on their data needs. It argues that one potential entry point for transcending the humanitarian-development divide in data systems is to focus on data usage and concludes with an analytic framework for education in emergencies data that discusses the needs and challenges associated with different data uses.

## Keywords

Data  
Data Usage  
Middle East

## A New Way of Thinking About Education in Emergencies Data

In conflict-affected contexts, timely and accurate data can be difficult to access. A lack of data poses challenges for educational organizations providing programs to children in need. Publicly available data are often fragmented or difficult to navigate online, as the humanitarian-development divide is reflected and reproduced by data systems that differ in process and structure.

This article draws on 35 stakeholder interviews to understand the data needs of organizations working in Education in Emergencies (EiE) in the Middle East, spanning both humanitarian and development sectors. We found that different actors produce and use data for different purposes, which complicates data sharing and navigation. We argue that one potential entry point for transcending the humanitarian-development divide in EiE data is to focus on data usage as a starting point for promoting data sharing and developing tools for data collection and dissemination.

## The Humanitarian-Development Divide in Data for Education in Emergencies

Differences between the humanitarian and development sectors are long-standing and seemingly intractable due to the sectors' distinct mandates, time frames, funding mechanisms, and relationships with political actors (Mendenhall, 2014). However, the division of labor between humanitarian and development programming seems increasingly unsustainable due to a dramatic rise in protracted conflict.

A new framework for strengthening humanitarian-development coherence was adopted at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, in which global leaders called for a “new way of working” that transcends the long-standing divide between

humanitarian and development actors (CIC, 2016). The “New Way of Working” (NWOW) is based on the idea of achieving collective outcomes, building on the comparative advantages of a diverse range of actors over multi-year timeframes (CIC, 2016). The NWOW begins by defining collective outcomes, or shared results, to reduce risk and vulnerability (UNOCHA, 2018). It then draws on the concept of comparative advantage to outline how humanitarian and development actors can work to deliver on outcomes together. Although the NWOW is still in its early stages of implementation and subject to debate, there is optimism over the potential of the NWOW to bridge seemingly intractable divisions between sectors.

However, what the NWOW means for questions of data collection and dissemination has received less attention. Addressing the NWOW for EiE data is an important issue, given the fact that the humanitarian-development divide is reflected and reproduced by data systems that differ in terms of data collection purposes, processes, dissemination structures, relevant indicators, and time frames. In this article, we suggest that the focus on collective outcomes advocated by NWOW indicates a need for “A New Way of Thinking About Data,” that can facilitate a NWOW for education in conflict-affected settings. Below, we present findings from a stakeholder consultation and present a new framework for thinking about data in EiE, which foregrounds data usage.

## Data and Methods

This article draws on 35 interviews with key stakeholders working in EiE in the Middle East on their major data needs and challenges. The data was collected as part of a USAID-funded project, the Middle East Education Research, Training and Support project (MEERS), whose implementation is led by Social Impact and supported by FHI 360, two international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in the United States.

Stakeholders were identified for participation based on their experience in humanitarian, development, and donor organizations working on educational programming in conflict-affected areas of the Middle East, and we used snowball sampling to find new stakeholders. The consultation process was phased and iterative; after each round of interviews, we revisited and tweaked interview questions as needed. In the first round, 10 consultations were conducted with those working in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the World Bank, and other multilateral organizations and agencies. In the second phase, we conducted seven individual interviews and one group consultation with international and national humanitarian and development organizations involved in implementing education programs at the local level. Finally, at the request of the donor, in the last phase, we conducted 13 consultations with United States Government stakeholders representing the

USAID Middle East Bureau, the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM), USAID Missions, and others. The findings below summarize major themes from these interviews.

## Findings and Discussion

The overarching finding from interviews was that different actors produce and use data for different purposes, which presents challenges for data sharing and dissemination. Below, we categorize respondents’ primary uses of data into five categories.

*Sector Coordination:* Within the global humanitarian sector, interviews pointed to an extensive network of organizations supporting data collection at the global level, and strong partnerships among various actors working in EiE. United Nations (UN) agencies, through the OCHA Cluster System, and UNICEF as the lead in education, have systematized data collection and dissemination by partners through an online platform called ActivityInfo, where data on the humanitarian response are collected and reported directly by partners related to their own programming and beneficiaries. Relevant indicators include the total number of beneficiaries receiving programs; children receiving education grants; children enrolled in formal or non-formal education, etc.

However, partners’ participation is voluntary and definitions of educational programming can vary tremendously, meaning that current mechanisms do not capture the full picture of the educational programming youth receive. Moreover, there are more data on the supply of educational services than on demand for education, including total number of children in need. In some cases, educational targets are set very crudely — multiplying the total number of refugees or internally displaced people by proportion of the population that is school-aged. Stakeholders stressed that there is a need for more accurate and localized data on children in need of education.

*Program Design and Evaluation:* The key finding from consultations with NGOs is that educational program providers working in EiE use data to inform program design and implementation. These actors want data for needs assessments and they seek validated tools to determine program effectiveness. When faced with a lack of data, educational providers often depend on other partners’ data to inform understandings of context and capacity. Despite using data in similar ways, stakeholders emphasized that the conflict dynamics matter, and dramatically affect the types of possible programming, and therefore shape data needs and uses. Interestingly, stakeholders explained that contexts of protracted conflict have forced actors to re-think their historic distinctions. Some humanitarian actors are increasingly adopting long-term perspectives; for example, stakeholders in the BPRM stated that they wanted to collect data on students’ learning outcomes. Meanwhile, in Yemen, USAID is funding humanitarian organizations and interventions through recent programs and are directing

funding to UNICEF to fund the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children to do remedial educational programming. These shifts suggest changes in programming. Measuring student learning outcomes was typically viewed as in line with the capacity-building mandate of the development sector, while humanitarian funding was typically short-term and focused on access to schooling to restore normalcy to children’s lives.

*Policy and Decision-Making:* In our interviews with a diverse range of U.S. government actors, we found that donors need data to be able to make strategic decisions about where and what to fund. Actors in these settings wanted more timely data. For example, we found that the USAID team in Yemen was feeding indicators on education to mission staff in order to facilitate scenario-based planning that is flexible to the changing conflict dynamics and humanitarian crisis.

*Advocacy:* Finally, another important usage of data in EiE is advocacy. Humanitarian organizations and governments are using data to advocate for certain policies or to seek funding. Stakeholders said that advocacy often relies on narrative; both aggregated statistics are needed to present the scale of a crisis, but stakeholders stressed that personalized narratives of individual students and impact are also powerful.

Table 1 summarizes the primary data uses and audiences for EiE data. They are not meant to be representative of all uses, however. Moreover, we emphasize that within these overarching categories, data needs and uses are adapted to what is possible and desirable in a given conflict context and to the capacities and needs of specific users.

**Table 1: Primary Data Uses and Audiences in EiE**

Data Usage	Typical Data Audiences
Sector coordination	UN agencies; humanitarian organizations
Guiding program design	Education specialists; technical officers in implementing partners
Evaluating effectiveness	Monitoring and evaluation officers; program officers in implementing partners; researchers
Guiding policy and decision-making	Funding agencies and donors; national governments
Advocacy	Advocacy organizations (UN agencies; Human Rights Watch); national governments advocating for funding

## Conclusion

The well-established humanitarian/development divide in EiE is reproduced by data systems that collect different types of indicators, at different intervals, and disseminate them on distinct platforms. This article argues that we must foreground data usage in conversations about educational data in conflict-affected areas, moving away from talking about data in EiE in the abstract to specifying *data for what, where, and for what purpose*. More broadly, the findings point to a need to improve the navigability of EiE data for data consumers by curating education data sources via a data usage approach. Our ongoing work on data for EiE in the Middle East points to the fact that there are many disparate forms of data and various dissemination venues for EiE data, making it difficult for non-specialists to find up-to-date and relevant data needed to answer specific questions. New initiatives to improve the accessibility, reliability, accuracy, and consistency of data collection and dissemination of EiE data are needed, but these new initiatives must also account for the varied data needs of different actors and must consider how data needs and uses vary by conflict context, existing infrastructure, and the experience and capacity of users.

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