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From Survival to Recovery and Renewal ?

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Education in Gaza Amid War: From Survival to Recovery and Renewal ?

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1. Background

Since the onset of the Israeli aggression in October 2023, the education sector in the Gaza Strip has undergone unprecedented transformations amid widespread destruction affecting all components of the education system. This devastation has compounded longstanding structural challenges resulting from the blockade, recurrent military incursions, and prolonged economic deterioration. Despite these prolonged constraints, Gaza's education system had, before the latest war, maintained high levels of school enrollment, strong literacy rates, and a broad network of higher education institutions, reflecting the central role of education in Palestinian society as a pillar of resilience and development and a fundamental foundation for human capital formation. However, the recent aggression has inflicted extensive damage on these achievements, plunging the sector into one of the most severe and complex educational crises in its modern history.

The effects of the aggression have extended across all levels of the education system. Schools, universities, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions have sustained extensive damage, with more than 95% of schools in the Gaza Strip affected. Over 625,000 school-age children have been affected by the disruption of schooling, while the studies of nearly 88,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions have been disrupted. At the same time, educational and academic personnel have suffered severe human and professional losses. The repercussions have not been confined to physical infrastructure damage; they have also included a widening learning loss, reduced access to education, and the erosion of academic and research capacities. These developments pose a serious threat to the continuity of knowledge production and the preparation of the skilled national workforce required to support future development and recovery efforts.

Against this backdrop, a range of initiatives and response measures emerged, supported by national institutions and international partners, demonstrating the capacity of educational institutions and local communities to adapt and sustain a minimum level of learning continuity.

Such initiatives encompassed e-learning, Temporary Learning Spaces (TLSs), community-based learning programs, and international academic partnerships. Despite resource constraints, ongoing displacement, and restrictions on movement and access, these interventions have helped prevent a complete interruption of education and underscored the importance of collaboration among government institutions, universities, civil society organizations, international agencies, and local communities in addressing crises, while generating practical experiences and lessons that can serve as building blocks for the recovery phase.

2. Policy Implications

What the education sector in Gaza experienced underscores that recovery cannot be understood merely as a return to pre-war conditions. Rather, it requires the development of an education system that is more resilient, adaptable, and capable of responding effectively to future crises. The aggression's consequences have exposed and exacerbated longstanding structural challenges within the education system, including fragile infrastructure, limited digital preparedness, inadequate

information systems, fragmented coordination among stakeholders, and a heavy reliance on short-term funding. In this context, the reconstruction phase presents a unique opportunity to address these vulnerabilities and build a more resilient and efficient education system, rather than focusing solely on the rehabilitation of damaged educational facilities.

The experience has also demonstrated that learning loss is not merely an educational challenge, but a development issue with profound social, economic, and psychological dimensions. Estimates by the Education Cluster indicate that learning loss among some age groups may be equivalent to two to three academic years, raising concerns about widening learning gaps, deepening inequalities, and constraining the ability of an entire generation to contribute to future development. This challenge is further compounded by the disproportionate impact of the war on the most vulnerable groups, including displaced children, people with disabilities (PwD), and poor households. As a result, learning recovery must be approached as part of a broader framework encompassing social protection, psychosocial support, inclusive education, and dropout prevention, rather than being confined to compensating for lost instructional time or missed academic years.

At the same time, the responses developed during the latest aggression under emergency conditions have generated valuable practical experiences that can serve as a foundation for more sustainable policies during the recovery phase. Community-based initiatives, blended learning approaches, academic partnerships, and TLS have demonstrated the importance of adopting more flexible models for educational service delivery. They have also highlighted the critical role of coordination among government institutions, universities, civil society organizations, and international partners. Building on and institutionalizing these experiences can strengthen the education system's capacity to withstand future crises and transform temporary initiatives into more sustainable components of education policy.

Accordingly, the success of the recovery phase should not be measured solely by the resumption of educational activities or the rehabilitation of educational infrastructure, but also by the extent to which public policies are capable of repositioning education as a national recovery priority. Education should not be treated merely as a sector that receives interventions within the framework of crisis response; rather, it should be recognized as a key pillar for restoring human capital, strengthening societal resilience, and supporting economic and social recovery. This requires recovery policies in the education sector to become more integrated, linking humanitarian response, institutional reform, and long-term development, and to be built upon effective partnerships among national institutions and international partners, thereby ensuring the development of an education system that is better equipped to withstand future crises.

3. Needed Interventions

The transition from emergency response to recovery requires the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), in coordination with educational institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners, to lead a phased integrated set of interventions that take into account the continuing uncertainty and restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip. Such interventions should balance immediate educational needs with the requirements for rebuilding the education system over the medium and long term.

In the short term, priority should be placed on ensuring that all students have access to safe and regular learning opportunities as much as possible. This requires rehabilitating educational facilities that are still usable, providing adequately equipped TLSs, and securing the minimum requirements for education and connectivity. Particular attention should be given to groups most susceptible to learning disruption and school dropout, especially displaced children, PwDs, and other highly vulnerable groups.

Recovery interventions should give due consideration to the differing needs and risks faced by students, including those related to gender, in order to ensure a more equitable response and avoid deepening existing inequalities. Furthermore, learning recovery efforts should be accompanied by systematic programs to assess and address learning loss, as well as by psychosocial support and protection services delivered in cooperation with specialized institutions and civil society organizations. This would ensure that the return to education responds to the cumulative impacts of the war on students and extends beyond merely bringing them back into classrooms.

At the level of educational personnel, empowering teachers and educational staff, as a fundamental pillar for restoring the quality of education and addressing learning loss, should constitute a central focus of the recovery process, under the leadership of MoEHE and with the support of international partners. This requires providing teachers with a minimum level of financial and professional stability, and developing training programs that respond to the new reality, particularly in areas of addressing learning loss, education in emergencies, the use of digital and blended learning tools, and primary psychosocial care for students and the referral of cases requiring specialized intervention. The Ministry should also, in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, assess the community-based and educational initiatives that emerged during the aggression, build on models that have proven effective, and regulate the engagement of participating teachers and volunteers within clear frameworks for training, supervision, and quality assurance. These initiatives should be linked to the formal education system in a manner that prevents the entrenchment of parallel and unregulated educational pathways, while at the same time preserving the local expertise and capacities that developed during the emergency period.

In the medium term, efforts should focus on strengthening the institutional foundations of recovery by developing a unified national framework, led by MoEHE and involving universities, CSOs, the private sector, and international partners. The framework should define the roles of stakeholders and link short-term interventions to recovery and reconstruction plans. It should also be based on regular assessments of the needs and gaps of different population groups to inform priorities, design interventions, and monitor implementation. This includes developing information systems that track student numbers and needs, levels of learning loss, and the condition of educational facilities and personnel, and that provide data disaggregated by gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics. Such systems would enable monitoring of disparities in access to education and in the benefits of interventions, while providing a more accurate evidence base for setting priorities, allocating resources, and tracking outcomes.

Reconstruction plans should also include the rehabilitation of damaged schools, universities, and educational facilities in accordance with standards that promote resilience, sustainability, and

emergency responsiveness. They should integrate digital infrastructure and alternative energy sources into rehabilitation projects and ensure coordination among the Ministry, implementing entities, and development partners in determining priorities and allocating resources.

The roles of the Ministry, educational institutions, the private sector, and international partners should also be integrated in leveraging the experience accumulated by the sector in e-learning and distance education during the aggression. Additionally, they should assess the tools, platforms, and digital content that proved effective and build upon them. To achieve this, we need to develop a digital infrastructure that can effectively function even during disruptions and instability. Additionally, we should provide educational materials that are accessible through various channels and work to expand access to devices, connectivity, and the energy sources necessary to maintain continuous learning. Distance and blended learning should complement in-person education and ensure its continuity during emergencies, rather than act as permanent substitutes.

At the higher education level, MoEHE and universities, with the support of national and international academic partnerships, bear responsibility for restoring universities' academic and research capacities and protecting their personnel, in light of the substantial losses sustained by the sector's human capital, which affected around 22% of employees in higher education institutions as a result of death, injury, or detention. Recovery efforts should not only focus on rehabilitating laboratories and facilities needed for applied disciplines, but also on restoring academic and research capacities and creating the necessary conditions for their ongoing continuity. Efforts should also be made to strengthen integration and cooperation among Palestinian universities and to build on the initiatives and academic partnerships that contributed to sustaining education during the aggression, while assessing experiences that are scalable and sustainable. In addition, the role of universities should be expanded in identifying needs, producing knowledge, and contributing to the development of plans and policies related to the recovery and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, rather than limiting their role to the restoration of educational provision.

Cooperation is required between the Ministry, vocational and technical education and training institutions, and the private sector to develop these pathways. This collaboration should align more closely with the anticipated needs of the labor market and reconstruction efforts. It is particularly important in the fields of construction, energy, communications and technology, and other technical skills that are expected to be in increasing demand during the recovery phase.

To ensure the sustainability of the recovery trajectory, the implementation of these interventions remains contingent upon the availability of sustainable financing arrangements and effective governance frameworks that enable the transition from short-term initiatives to a sustainable recovery process. This requires national institutions to establish clear priorities for educational recovery and develop actionable plans, matched by a commitment from partners and donors to provide flexible, sustainable, and priority-aligned financing. It also requires giving education significant weight in reconstruction funding allocations, strengthening coordination between national institutions and donors to avoid duplication of interventions, and directing resources based on actual needs and existing gaps, while taking into account disparities in the impacts of

the crisis and recovery needs among different population groups. Financing should also be linked to indicators that enable the assessment of the extent to which these groups are reached and benefit equitably from interventions.

Given the multiple possible recovery scenarios, educational plans should remain adaptable and subject to regular updating, allowing interventions to be expanded or adjusted in line with developments on the ground and the availability of resources. This also necessitates the establishment of clear mechanisms for coordination, monitoring, and accountability among national stakeholders and partners, thereby preserving national leadership of the recovery process while ensuring the coherence, complementarity, and sustainability of interventions.