

# Education: A Transformative Solution in Times of Disaster – The Somalia Case

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the critical role of education in disaster recovery and resilience, with a specific focus on Somalia's experience with conflict, political instability, and natural disasters. Education is presented as a transformative tool, essential not only for immediate relief but also for fostering long-term societal change and resilience. In Somalia, prolonged periods of political fragility, including the collapse of the state in 1991, led to the disruption of formal education systems and left an entire generation without access to schooling. Despite this, the country has witnessed significant progress in rebuilding its education system, driven by local communities, NGOs, and grassroots efforts. The introduction of free modern education in the 1970s, along with literacy campaigns, led to improvements in literacy rates, although challenges such as nomadic lifestyles and a shortage of teachers and classrooms persisted. The collapse of the state and civil war created immense barriers to education, but local initiatives, such as the establishment of private schools and "Education Umbrellas," helped maintain educational access. The paper discusses how education not only serves as a tool for survival and recovery but also empowers individuals, fosters social inclusion, and promotes peace, particularly during crises. It concludes with recommendations for strengthening education systems in crisis situations, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, flexible, and resilient educational frameworks for ensuring sustainable development and peace in post-conflict regions. The study also highlights Somalia's progress towards achieving near-universal enrollment by 2030, emphasizing the potential of education to break the cycle of poverty and contribute to long-term stability.

**Keywords:** *Education in Emergencies, Disaster Resilience, Somalia, Post-Disaster Recovery, Disaster Risk Reduction, Conflict and Drought, Transformative Education, Vulnerability and Empowerment, School Safety, Humanitarian Education.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Contextualizing Education in Times of Disaster

In Somalia, disasters are often caused by a combination of natural and man-made factors, including extended droughts, widespread famine, and persistent conflict (Brookings Institution, n.d.). These events have enduring consequences for the population, worsening existing vulnerabilities and destabilizing the social fabric. As Somalia grapples with the aftermath of these disasters, it is essential to understand their impact on communities to address both immediate and long-term needs.

Education is a vital component of recovery and resilience in post-disaster contexts. Educo (2023) emphasizes that the right to accessible and quality education must be upheld during emergencies, covering both formal and informal education systems, regardless of individuals' legal status, location, or circumstances. Coates (2019) categorizes disaster education into two main approaches: the behaviorist approach, which focuses on preparedness and awareness of external hazards, and the transformative approach, which tackles socio-environmental vulnerabilities and promotes political empowerment and societal change. Education plays a key role in overcoming disaster-related challenges, offering immediate relief and enhancing long-term resilience (Özer, Şensoy, & Suna, 2023).

Shah (2019) highlights that the failure of education systems to provide equitable access to quality education during crises can lead to widespread disruption, prolonged school dropout rates, and long-lasting psychosocial effects. These challenges hinder recovery and can prevent the transformation of affected regions. Kitagawa (2021) outlines three key aspects of disaster education: differentiating between normal and extraordinary times, categorizing learning modes (formal, non-formal, informal), and recognizing disaster education as a specialized sub-discipline. Petal (2008) stresses the importance of safeguarding educational spaces during disasters, as the destruction of schools leads to the loss of educational opportunities, interrupted learning, and decreased educational quality.

Mukherjee (2015) notes that disasters have a multifaceted impact, including psychological, physical, and socioeconomic consequences. Emergency education helps restore normalcy and provides opportunities for recovery and knowledge acquisition in areas such as health, hygiene, and income generation. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2013) underscores disaster risk reduction as a critical process that involves reducing hazard exposure, mitigating vulnerabilities, and enhancing preparedness. Save the Children (2003) stresses the importance of prioritizing education during emergencies, as it addresses both immediate needs and long-term vulnerabilities, contributing to the rebuilding of society. Ferdinand and

Badenock (2020) argue that both contingency and continuity planning are essential to ensure education systems can endure through all phases of an emergency, advocating for a resilient approach that incorporates a comprehensive curriculum for all hazards.

The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2007) highlights the role of schools in promoting collective values and disaster preparedness. Through its World Campaign, the initiative encourages safer school infrastructure and integrates disaster risk reduction into educational curricula, leading to positive, measurable outcomes worldwide.

This paper explores the role of education as a transformative tool in disaster situations, with a particular focus on Somalia. By reviewing literature and analyzing relevant documents, it investigates how education can support recovery, build resilience, and foster long-term societal change in disaster-prone areas. It also examines how education has been pivotal in addressing challenges and fostering innovation in response to ongoing crises, including conflict, drought, and other disasters.

## II. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN DISASTERS: A TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTION

### A. Theoretical Framework:

It is widely acknowledged that education is a critical factor in reducing disaster risks. In the aftermath of emergencies, affected populations require more than basic necessities like food, shelter, and medical care—they also need continuous access to education. This is essential because recovery efforts can take years and impact multiple generations. Poorly planned mitigation strategies risk creating an intergenerational cycle of poverty, which can negatively affect overall societal development<sup>1</sup>. UNICEF & UNISDR (2011) emphasize that knowledge and education are vital to disaster risk management, prioritized in the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015. Goal 2 of the Millennium Development Goals highlights primary education's role in reducing poverty, while Priority 3 of the HFA focuses on enhancing resilience through education and innovation.

Cameron et al. (2024) emphasize that as education systems recover from past or present shocks, policymakers and stakeholders must plan for future challenges and incorporate adaptability into the education system to ensure continued learning and well-being. The concept of "education system resilience" is increasingly used to describe efforts to strengthen systems to endure and adapt to various disruptions. Vaughter (2016) suggests that the focus of education regarding disasters should shift from responding to disasters as they occur to managing risks before they happen.

While schools generally lead in developing educational materials, these policy recommendations are also important for governments, businesses, and civil society organizations involved in disaster response and disaster risk reduction (DRR) education and training. Amaratunga, D., Haigh, R., Malalgoda, C., & Keraminiyage, K. (Eds.) (2017) demonstrate the increasing recognition of the construction industry and built environment professions as crucial for disaster capacity. These sectors must be active before and after hazards strike, as effective mitigation and preparedness can reduce risks, while timely post-disaster response and reconstruction can minimize loss of life and economic/social damage.

The school curriculum should be designed to be flexible and responsive, adapting to both disaster situations and normal settings. Parijat, R., Kaur, U., & Hasija, A. M. (2022) argue that teaching materials created for societal welfare should be focused on people and scientifically assessed. In the research field, much of the output fails to be practically applied and stays confined within academic institutions.

Institutions themselves must also encourage students to engage beyond their curriculum for social involvement and community outreach. Masocha et al. (2025) demonstrate the global consensus on the necessity of integrating disaster risk reduction (DRR) into school curricula due to the increasing frequency of natural disasters. Education and knowledge are essential not only for personal safety but also for developing strategies and innovations to minimize disaster risks and prevent them effectively. Thayaparan et al. (2014) argue that addressing disaster risks varies based on the type and scale of disasters, and continuous knowledge provision for built environment professionals is more effective than one-time engagements with students.

Despite regulations and decisions being made, there are delays in implementing education in emergencies. Nicolai, S., Hine, S., & Wales, J. (2015) point out that while the right to education for those in emergencies is established in UN declarations, it is often not upheld in crisis situations. Although many resolutions and standards outline specific obligations, these commitments are rarely put into practice. The lack of action from governments and humanitarian organizations hampers coordination and resource flow, highlighting the need for increased awareness and accountability to ensure quality education in crisis contexts. Education Cannot Wait (2017) underscores the growing challenge of achieving the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 75 million children and youth in crisis-affected areas currently denied quality education. This number is expected to rise, as natural disaster-affected populations are projected to increase by 50% by 2030, and violent conflicts have surged since 2011.

### B. Short-term vs. Long-term Benefits of Education:

In emergency situations, children and others are at risk of death or suffering severe violations of their dignity. According Price P. (2011), education in emergencies is crucial for saving lives. Conflict and disasters disrupt normal life, particularly for children, who are thrust into hostile environments without the safety of school or family. Early educational interventions can provide survival skills, such as landmine awareness, health information, self-protection, and psychological support, helping children navigate these challenges. Countries and

<sup>1</sup> Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development. (n.d.). Transforming pedagogies: Emerging contexts and texts of teaching and learning policy brief. Funding support by the Department for International Development, UK. Retrieved from <https://www.aku.edu/iedpk/research/conferences/Documents/education-in-emergencies.pdf>

governments have integrated education in emergencies into their policies and response strategies as a tool to address aid-related challenges during crises. DG ECHO (2019) explains that the European Commission released the 2018 Communication to establish the EU's policy framework for education in emergencies (EiE) and address the increasing challenges in protracted crises. This initiative followed the EU's commitment at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to enhance access to quality education for host communities, refugees, and displaced children and youth. Education holds significant value for affected communities as it not only helps restore normalcy but also fosters a peaceful environment. Nicolai and Hine (2015) note that evidence reveals that, particularly in emergencies, communities—especially children—place education as a top priority over other concerns. Across various emergency contexts, education consistently emerges as a high priority for affected communities. UNHCR (2024) declares that ensuring access to education, especially during emergencies, helps protect children and young people and fosters resilience at both the individual and community levels. Educo (2023) states that education is a fundamental human right, essential throughout life, and serves as a tool for protection, prevention, and prosperity for individuals, communities, and nations affected by or recovering from humanitarian crises. It also plays a key role in supporting the realization of other human rights, well-being, and a dignified life. Save the Children Fund (2015) underlines that crises affect children's mental well-being, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Education provides psychosocial support, stability, and security, reducing the risks of child labor, sexual violence, early marriage, and recruitment. Schools also offer crucial safety information and access to health services during emergencies.

#### C. *Education as a Tool for Empowerment and Change:*

Education plays a crucial role in fostering social empowerment, equity, and the reduction of social inequalities by ensuring marginalized groups have equal opportunities. It promotes social inclusion, allowing individuals to participate fully in society and exercise their rights. Abdi, M. I., & Funwie, A. D. (2022) state that education is not just an investment in the social sector; it also plays a crucial role in driving economic growth and prosperity. In today's world, having a sustainable education system is both a reality and an essential prerequisite for a country's socio-economic development.

Furthermore, education fosters a sense of community and responsibility, encouraging individuals to work for the collective good. In particular, gender equality benefits greatly from education, as educating women and girls leads to improved health, economic, and social outcomes for entire communities (Mahanta, 2024). The empowerment of women is closely linked to education, with women acting as change agents for societal development. 'Educating girls not only benefits them but also uplifts their families, communities, and nations', contributing to broader social progress (Pachaiyappan, 2014). Education is widely recognized as an essential tool for empowerment. It is the primary means by which marginalized individuals can escape poverty and gain the resources to fully engage in society. It also plays a vital role in empowering women, protecting children from exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy,

safeguarding the environment, and controlling population growth (Muigua, 2020). Education has been identified as one of the most significant influences on societal development. Governments and institutions recognize its importance, prioritizing education as a key driver of development. However, providing quality education requires substantial support and investment to meet societal needs. Throughout history, different societies have had varying demands for education based on their unique contexts. Education enables individuals to face challenges, contribute to their communities, and lead meaningful lives as active, responsible citizens (Ferit Hysa et al., 2024). Socio-economic background plays a crucial role in shaping student performance, with parental involvement being a significant factor. Successful educational interventions often include strategies to engage parents, and this focus is growing among policymakers and evaluators (Aizawa, 2016).

### III. THE SOMALIA CASE: CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS

#### A. *Historical and Societal Context:*

Since Somalia's independence, the changes that have occurred have had a significant impact on social services, including education. Since becoming a united republic in 1960, Somalia has experienced extended periods of political instability and violent conflict. In 1969, a military coup led to the rise of Mohamed Siad Barre to power (ALNAP, 2017).

The failure of the state in 1991 and its centrally planned economy led to the privatization of economic activities. Forchhammer (2009) indicates that despite being characterized by anarchy, informal structures persist, and reports suggest that the Somali economy is not as devastated as previously thought. By the mid-1990s, the economy began to grow, especially in international trade and local services. This growth was driven by private entrepreneurs who, despite the challenging environment, often collaborated with influential politico-military groups (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). When armed groups toppled the military government in early 1991, schools, colleges, and universities were swiftly closed. During this time of unrest, no children were able to attend formal schools, with the exception of those enrolled in Quranic madrasah.

Nelson (1982) states that in the 1970s, modern education in Somalia was provided free at all levels, which led to a rapid increase in school attendance. However, in more stable areas, the shortage of classrooms and teachers remained a significant constraint at the post-primary level. The nomadic lifestyle also hindered the establishment of schools and limited attendance. Despite these challenges, the introduction of a new Somali script and widespread literacy campaigns resulted in a substantial increase in literacy rates during the 1970s, though the increase fell slightly short of the government's projected 60 percent.

The collapse of the Somali state resulted in the loss of organized learning, causing an entire generation to miss out on education (Cassanelli & Abdikadir, 2007). With low enrollment rates, limited access, and the prohibitive cost of education, many school-age children were left without educational opportunities (Mohamud, 2023). UNICEF (2023) reports that 4.8 million children in Somalia, aged 5 to 17, are

not in school, one of the highest rates of out-of-school children globally.

Since 1995, education has emerged as a transformative solution, and Somalia is now on track to meet its 2030 goal of enrolling nearly 96% of school-age children. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education, Federal Government of Somalia (2022), affirms the country's commitment to achieving SDG 4 by providing inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education that creates lifelong opportunities for all. Additionally, the planned education programs aim to meet the growing demand driven by the country's young population.

#### *B. Impact of Education on Somali Communities During Disasters:*

After experiencing complete disruption from 1991 to 1994 due to government collapse and civil war, which resulted in virtually no school enrollment, Somalia has made notable progress. In early 1991, the overthrow of the military government in Somalia led to the immediate closure of schools, colleges, and universities, leaving the country in a state of turmoil (Abdi, 1998). Despite these challenges, the Somali education system gradually transitioned from destruction to recovery. While some progress was made, the ongoing insecurity continued to disrupt socio-economic life, hindering further development (Faqih, 2021).

The collapse of the state from 1993 to 2012 is considered one of the most profound cases of state failure in modern history. Education, along with other essential services, came to a halt. However, in a remarkable example of community resilience, local groups, supported by NGOs such as UNICEF, began providing education and other critical services once fighting ceased in some areas (Williams & Cummings, 2013). Due to the prolonged civil war, Somalia's education system collapsed, resulting in the closure of most public schools. In response to the growing demand for education, a group of Somali intellectuals with educational backgrounds established privately owned schools. Over time, these schools merged to form what are now known as "Education Umbrellas". Each umbrella operated with its own curriculum and issued its own certificates (Ministry of Human Development and Public Services, 2013).

However, non-government controlled education has not been hindered by the diversity of the curriculum, which often leads to significant social and ideological differences. Instead, it has been instrumental in safeguarding many children from recruitment or being forced into soldiering, especially during times of war.

In Somalia, despite the absence of a functioning national government, education systems emerged through the initiative of local groups, NGOs, and private citizens, filling the void left by state collapse (World Bank, 2018). This situation shows that education can still thrive in the absence of formal state structures when communities and organizations work together to support learning. Ladan K. (2020) highlighted the phrase "Drop the gun, pick up the pen" ("Qoriga Dhig qalinka Qaado") as a call for peace amidst the violence in Mogadishu. Elman Ali Ahmed, a courageous peace advocate, promoted this message at great personal risk. Elman's slogan, "Put down the gun, pick up the pen" symbolized his call for peace through education (Fidow, 2015).

This case study illustrates a unique historical example of how education can continue without a central government, relying instead on the efforts of local communities and the support of NGOs.

## **IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### *A. Summary of Key Findings:*

This study examined the vital role of education in times of disaster, with a particular focus on Somalia's historical and ongoing challenges. The findings underscore education's transformative power in fostering resilience, recovery, and long-term societal change in crisis-prone contexts. Education remains a critical tool for promoting recovery and resilience during emergencies. It is not just a basic need but a right that must be protected in all situations, including during crises. Education helps communities recover, rebuild, and prepare for future challenges, thus contributing to long-term stability and development (Educo, 2023; Coates, 2019).

Education in post-disaster settings is crucial for restoring normalcy and preventing the intergenerational cycles of poverty. It equips individuals with life-saving knowledge and skills, facilitates the rebuilding of social structures, and provides essential psychosocial support, particularly to vulnerable populations such as children and women (Shah, 2019; Save the Children, 2003). Somalia's education system has faced significant challenges due to prolonged conflict, state collapse, and natural disasters.

Despite these obstacles, local communities, NGOs, and private citizens have played a pivotal role in keeping education alive, highlighting the resilience of communities even in the absence of formal state structures (World Bank, 2018; Williams & Cummings, 2013). Despite being heavily disrupted by civil war and state collapse, Somalia's education system has made substantial progress since 1995.

The country is committed to providing inclusive and equitable education, and projections suggest it is on track to reach nearly full enrollment of school-age children by 2030. This progress is supported by both governmental initiatives and grassroots efforts, along with ongoing investments in education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, 2022). Projections based on the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) indicate that Somalia will continue to expand its educational coverage, potentially enrolling the majority of school-age children by 2030.

### *B. Recommendations for Strengthening Education in Crisis Situations:*

The Somali case highlights the importance of both local and international efforts in maintaining education during times of crisis. Moving forward, continued emphasis on inclusive, flexible, and resilient educational frameworks will be key to achieving sustainable development and lasting peace in post-conflict and disaster-affected regions.

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