Initiative Africa

Reviving Education in Tigray: A Path to Recovery and Resilience

Policy Brief

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Reviving Education in Tigray: A Path to Recovery and Resilience

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Executive Summary

The Tigray region of Ethiopia is grappling with a profound educational crisis resulting from the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a devastating conflict that has spanned two years. The education system has faced near-collapse due to prolonged disruptions. The Pretoria Peace Agreement, signed in November 2022, offers a critical opportunity to address these challenges and restore educational services. However, despite this peace agreement, significant issues remain that hinders the return to normalcy in education.

The purpose of this policy brief is to present a comprehensive analysis of the current state of education in Tigray, highlighting the severe impacts of the conflict and the pandemic, with the intention of informing and influencing the action of civil societies, NGOs and IGOs working in the education sector and regional and federal government officials. The data reveals that a substantial portion of students remains out of school, and many schools are either severely damaged or occupied by internally displaced persons (IDPs). The recommendations outlined herein aim to restore and improve the education system, focusing on infrastructure repair, provision of scholastic materials, support for Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP), and addressing security and human resource challenges.

Key points

- **Severe Educational Disruption:** The Tigray region's education system has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and a devastating two-year conflict, leading to extensive damage to school infrastructure and significant drops in student enrollment.
- **Low Student Enrollment:** Only 40% of the targeted students were enrolled in the 2023/24 academic year, leaving 1,487,600 students, including 729,267 girls, out of school. The Central and North Western zones are particularly affected by high rates of out-of-school children.
- **Widespread Infrastructure Damage:** The conflict has resulted in extensive damage to educational infrastructure, with 74.9% of schools partially damaged and 19.1% completely destroyed. Many students are forced to learn in temporary or unsafe conditions, severely impairing their educational experience.
- **Teacher and Human Resource Shortages:** The region faces a critical shortage of teachers, with 16.1% (2,434) more teachers needed. The conflict has also left many teachers demotivated due to prolonged unpaid salaries, further exacerbating the educational crisis.
- **Psychological Trauma:** The war has caused widespread psychological trauma among students and teachers, with significant learning loss and evidence of substantial psychological distress, including high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among teachers.
- **School Feeding Programs as a Solution:** School feeding programs are identified as a critical intervention to mitigate the effects of drought and famine, enhance students' ability to attend school, improve their health and concentration, and incentivize parents to send their children to school.
- **Crowd-funding as a Strategic Policy Option:** Crowd-funding is proposed as an innovative mechanism for raising funds for school feeding programs, engaging NGOs, IGOs, the private sector, and the diaspora to expand and sustain these initiatives effectively.
- **Increased Focus on Female Students:** The educational crisis disproportionately affects female students, necessitating targeted interventions to address their specific needs and challenges, particularly in the aftermath of the conflict.
- **Need for Comprehensive Psychosocial Support:** Comprehensive psychosocial support for both students and teachers is essential to address the widespread trauma, reduce learning loss, and promote mental well-being, which are critical for restoring the education system in Tigray.
- **Call for Collaborative Efforts:** The policy brief emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including the government, NGOs, international organizations, and the private sector, to rebuild the education system in Tigray and ensure long-term resilience and sustainability.

1. BACKGROUND AND CURRENT SITUATION

The Tigray region, encompassing seven zones, has experienced unprecedented disruptions in its education sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent conflict. The pandemic initially interrupted the education system, and the ensuing conflict further devastated it, leading to extensive damage to school infrastructure and significant disruptions in educational services.

The Pretoria Peace Agreement, signed in November 2022, marked a pivotal moment, offering a pathway to peace and an opportunity to address the severe disruptions in education. Despite this, the recovery process has been slow, and the educational landscape remains dire. The region's education system is struggling to cope with the aftermath of these crises, with many schools still occupied by IDPs, extensive damage to educational infrastructure, and a critical shortage of teaching materials and staff.

The conflict has left lasting scars on the education sector, affecting both the physical infrastructure of schools and the psychological well-being of students and teachers. According to the Tigray Regional Education Bureau out of 2492 schools in Tigray, 4.2% (105) of schools are currently occupied by IDPs, leading to overcrowded and unsafe learning environments. Many students are forced to attend classes in temporary structures or damaged facilities, which significantly impairs their learning experience. Moreover, the schools occupied by IDPs are creating a challenge for the host community as their kids are prevented from going to school due to lack of space or are forced to learn in a very large class size that is greatly affecting the quality learning of the students.

2. EDUCATIONAL IMPACT AND CURRENT STATISTICS

The data provided by the Tigray Regional Education Bureau highlights the severe impact of the crisis on student enrollment and attendance. In the 2023/24 academic year, Tigray had set an ambitious goal to enroll 2,481,969 students. However, only 994,369 students were enrolled, representing a mere 40% of the target enrollment. Consequently, 60% of students, or 1,487,600, remain out of school. Of this number, 729,267 are female students.

The central and North Western zones of Tigray are particularly affected, with 40.7% of eligible students in the Central zone and 65.8% in the North Western zone out of school. This represents a significant gap in educational access, particularly for female students, with 74,225 of the out-of-school children being girls. School directors and teachers have reported several reasons for these low enrollment rates and high dropout rates.

3. KEY CHALLENGES

The challenges facing the education system in Tigray are multifaceted and require a comprehensive response:

Educational Infrastructure Damage: Before the war, as Kiros (2023) argued Tigray had: about 40,000 classrooms across almost 2,500 schools; two teacher training colleges; 30,000 different electronic devices, including computers, printers, plasma TVs, and heavy-duty photocopying machines; and 300,000 pieces of laboratory equipment and teaching aids. Unfortunately, much of this has been destroyed, damaged or looted. This damage included the theft, tear down, and burning of 96.5% of student desks, 95.9% of blackboards, 63.5% of student textbooks as well as the vandalism or destruction of 85.1% of computers, 79.9% of plasma screens, 84.5% of science laboratory equipment, 92.5% of educational models, and more than 48% of toilets (Africa Up Close, 2023). The extensive damage to school facilities has severely impacted the learning environment.

Assessment in 22 Weredas by the Ministry of Education and Tigray regional State Interim-Government also indicate that, 595 (74.9 %) of the schools are partially damaged and 152 (19.1%) of them are with completely damaged classrooms, broken furniture, and destroyed educational materials. It was also observed that the learners were attending classes sitting on stones under makeshift or temporary classrooms and damaged classrooms. Furthermore 61 schools (7.03%) of the schools are closed due to the drought, famine and emergency.

Photo Credit: Global Time

The Tigray Education Bureau's rough calculation of the student-section ratio revealed that the number of undamaged classrooms to the existing number of primary school students in grades one to eight reached 1:434 in 2021 (Mistir, 2022). As Amy (2021) argued on top of the physical damage, about 2,146 members of the school community have been killed in the war, of whom 1,911 were students and 84 percent were female.

Human Resource Shortages: The conflict has led to a shortage of teachers and other educational personnel. Dou to the conflict many teachers have been physically injured and displaced. In most of the assessed schools by the Tigray Education Bureau, there was a high number of workload (class load), which negatively impacts their ability to closely monitor students' progress. As data shows there is a need for 16.1% (2,434) additional teachers to address this gap. As the workshop report by Initiative Africa shows school directors and teachers in Tigray are de-motivated due to prolonged unpaid salaries (17 months).

Psycho-social Support: The lack of adequate psychosocial support has further impeded the recovery of the education sector. Though the different schools have provided psychosocial support for their learners through the support of different none governmental organizations, the schools as well as the Wereda education offices haven't documented the support they provided in terms of the aggregated data. This entails for the need to provide refreshment training.

Drought and Famine: Tigray has been facing severe famine and famine-like conditions, reported to affect 90% of the population as a result of the war, which have exacerbated the educational crisis (Kiros, 2023). As OCHA`s situation report (January 2024) indicates, nearly 1.4 million people in Tigray need immediate emergency food because of the drought, which is the worst in40 years. Students and teachers alike are suffering from food shortages, impacting their ability to attend school regularly.

Psychological Impact of the War: The conflict has caused widespread trauma among students and teachers, including displacement, loss of parents, and psychological distress. A study by the Luminos Fund (2023) examined the levels of learning loss, trauma, and resilience in children, parents, and teachers in Tigray. The study indicated significant learning loss and evidence of substantial psychological trauma. According to the survey 44% of students saw a dead body and 29% of children saw someone being killed, while 62% of student expects that they would be killed. Furthermore 4 out of 5 teachers experienced Post-Traumatic stress disorder. This has significantly affected students' ability to focus on their education. School communities are traumatized, with many students having witnessed violence at a very young age.

Lack of Scholastic Materials: There is a critical shortage of essential educational materials, including textbooks, desks, and other supplies. Students often attend classes without the necessary materials for effective learning. As data from the education bureau indicate out of 340,709 students 88,998 (26.5%) of the learners have received scholastic materials in 2023/24 education year.

Insecurity: The presence of unexploded ordnances and other weapons around schools poses a significant threat to the safety of students and teachers (Kiros, 2023). Some schools are also located in areas that remain insecure due to the presence of armed groups, preventing children from attending school and creating additional safety concerns.

Migration and Displacement: The ongoing displacement crisis has disrupted students' education, with many children being forced to migrate or relocate, further hindering their access to schooling.

Gap in Implementation of Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP): Following the end of the war in Tigray, the Regional Education Bureau has introduced the ALP (Accelerated learning Program) to compensate for the loss of education/curriculum and students ages for nearly four years. Accordingly, Condensed Curriculum and a guide line of AEP was prepared and distributed to Weredas and Schools. The program was supported by training. However, as the survey by education bureau and finding from workshop by Initiative Africa's on launching its Accelerated learning program which is supported by Malala Fund, there are wide gaps in the implementation of the program. Mainly, students were unable to attend their lessons properly due to lack of textbooks.

As Directors from selected school in Central and North West Tigray Zone indicated there is Significant skill gaps among school leaders and teachers in implementing ALP. There is also Inflexibility of Curriculum and Lack of ALP curriculum for grades 9-12 in war-affected areas are the main challenge.

Policy Option

The following policy options offer alternative approaches to implementing the recommended actions for rebuilding education in Tigray.

Policy Option 1: Immediate Implementation of School Feeding Programs in Tigray

Pros:

- Improved Student Attendance and Enrollment: School feeding programs have been shown to increase student attendance and enrollment, as they address food insecurity, a significant barrier to education in conflict-affected areas.
- Enhanced Student Health and Concentration: Providing at least one nutritious meal per day improves students' overall health and ability to concentrate on their studies.
- Parental Incentive: These programs encourage parents to send their children to school, especially in areas where education is not prioritized due to the dire post-war situation.
- Community Involvement: Engaging local communities in the food supply and meal preparation can reduce costs and strengthen community ties to the education system.

Cons:

- **High Economic Cost:** The implementation of widespread school feeding programs can be expensive, requiring substantial financial resources that may be difficult to secure.
- **Feasibility Challenges:** Given the high cost and logistical challenges, especially in a post-conflict setting, the widespread implementation of these programs may be difficult.
- **Dependency Risk:** There is a risk of creating dependency on external aid, which could undermine the sustainability of the program in the long term.

POLICY OPTION 2: COMMUNITY-LED SCHOOL FEEDING INITIATIVES

Pros:

- **Cost Reduction:** Leveraging local resources, such as contributions from local farmers and community participation in meal preparation, can significantly reduce the costs of the program.
- **Strengthened Community Engagement**: Involving the community in the school feeding process fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, which can enhance the sustainability of the program.
- **Support for Out-of-School Children:** Community-led initiatives can be more responsive to local needs, potentially helping to re-enroll out-of-school children.

Cons:

Variable Quality and Coverage: The success of community-led initiatives may vary depending on the resources and commitment of the local community, leading to inconsistent quality and coverage.

- **Resource Limitations:** Communities in conflict-affected areas may already be strained, and expecting them to support additional initiatives could be unrealistic.
- **Dependence on External Support**: While community-led, these programs may still require significant support from NGOs and IGOs, which could limit their sustainability.

POLICY OPTION 3. CROWD-FUNDING AS A FUNDING MECHANISM FOR SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMS

Pros:

- **Broad Reach and Engagement:** Crowdfunding campaigns can reach a wide audience, including individuals who might not otherwise be engaged in traditional funding processes.
- **Community Involvement:** It fosters a sense of community ownership and involvement, as people contribute directly to a cause they care about.
- **Flexibility:** Crowdfunding offers flexibility in setting funding targets and timelines, allowing for incremental progress.

Cons:

- **Uncertainty of Fundraising:** Crowd-funding campaigns may not always reach their targets, leading to uncertainty in securing the necessary funds.
- **Resource Intensive:** Successfully running a crowd-funding campaign requires significant time and effort in marketing, outreach, and engagement with potential donors.
- **Limited Large-Scale Funding:** Crowd-funding might not always generate the large-scale funds needed for widespread implementation, making it more suitable as a supplementary funding source rather than the primary one.

POLICY OPTION 4: INTEGRATION OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOL GARDENS

Pros:

- **Dual Benefit:** School gardens can provide fresh produce for meals while also offering practical agricultural education, which is particularly relevant in rural areas.
- **Sustainability:** This approach promotes self-sufficiency, as schools can produce some of the food required for their feeding programs.
- **Educational Value:** Integrating agricultural education into the curriculum provides students with valuable life skills and knowledge.

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Cons:

- **Initial Investment:** Establishing and maintaining school gardens requires initial investment in tools, seeds, and training, which could be a barrier in resource-limited settings.
- **Maintenance Challenges:** The success of school gardens depends on continuous care and maintenance, which may be challenging in schools with limited resources or in areas with harsh climates.
- **Limited Impact:** While beneficial, school gardens alone may not be sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of all students, especially in areas with large student populations.

POLICY OPTION 5: CONDITIONAL CASH OR FOOD TRANSFERS

Pros:

- **Targeted Support:** Conditional transfers ensure that families receive financial or food support while also incentivizing school attendance, directly addressing both educational and nutritional needs.
- **Flexibility:** This approach can be more flexible and easier to implement than full-scale feeding programs, especially in areas where logistics are challenging.
- **Immediate Impact:** Transfers can have an immediate positive impact on both school attendance and household food security.

Photo Credit: African News

Cons:

- **Monitoring and Enforcement:** Ensuring that conditions are met (e.g., regular school attendance) requires robust monitoring systems, which can be difficult to establish and maintain in conflict-affected areas.
- **Potential for Misuse:** There is a risk that cash transfers may be used for purposes other than education or nutrition, reducing the program's effectiveness.
- **Limited Reach:** If not carefully managed, these programs may not reach the most vulnerable populations, particularly in remote or highly insecure areas.

POLICY OPTION 6: ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR ACCELERATED EDUCATION PROGRAMS (AEP)

Pros:

- **Addressing Educational Gaps:** AEPs help students who have missed years of education catch up with their peers, reducing long-term educational disparities caused by the conflict.
- **Comprehensive Support:** By providing textbooks, technical support, and teacher training, AEPs can offer high-quality education tailored to the needs of conflict-affected children.
- **Trauma-Informed Education:** Training teachers in trauma-informed pedagogy can create a supportive learning environment that addresses the specific needs of students who have experienced war-related trauma.

Cons:

- **Resource-Intensive:** Implementing and maintaining high-quality AEPs requires significant resources, including funding, trained personnel, and educational materials.
- **Sustainability Challenges:** Ensuring the long-term sustainability of AEPs may be difficult without continued external support, particularly in a post-conflict context.
- **Community Awareness:** Low community awareness and engagement in AEPs can hinder their success, requiring additional efforts to build local support and participation.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the educational crisis in Tigray, the following recommendations are proposed:
Immediate Provision of School Feeding Programs: According to school directors and teachers in the region, launching school feeding programs is essential to mitigate the effects of drought and famine on students' ability to attend school. These programs would provide at least one nutritious meal per day, helping students concentrate on their studies and improving their overall health. Additionally, such programs could incentivize parents to send their children to school, especially in areas where education is not prioritized due to the dire post-war situation. Assessments by the regional government indicated that schools with feeding programs report improved attendance compared to those without such support.

This recommendation is primarily directed at NGOs, IGOs, and the international community, but it also calls on federal and regional governments to consider implementing these programs. Engaging the private sector and the diaspora could also contribute to the success of these initiatives. Despite the high economic cost and potential constraints that could hinder widespread implementation, collaborative efforts could make school feeding programs feasible, given the urgency and necessity of addressing this issue. Expanding existing school feeding programs is crucial, and various mechanisms could be employed to integrate these programs into the education system.

Local communities could play a significant role in school feeding programs by leveraging existing resources. For instance, local farmers and community groups could contribute to the food supply, while parents could participate in meal preparation on a rotational basis. This approach would reduce program costs and strengthen community involvement in education. NGOs and IGOs could support community-led feeding initiatives, helping to address the issue of out-of-school children in the region. Given the high number of out-of-school students, such initiatives could have a substantial positive impact.

Integrating small-scale school gardens, where students and teachers can grow vegetables and fruits, would serve dual purposes, providing fresh produce for meals and offering practical agricultural education. This initiative could be supported by local agricultural extension services and NGOs, enhancing both the nutritional and educational outcomes for students. If a full-scale feeding program is not feasible, conditional cash or food transfers could be provided to families. These transfers would be contingent on school attendance, ensuring that children receive necessary nutrition while also attending school. Currently, in the Central and North Western zones of Tigray, only 4.8% and 12.4% of students benefit from existing school feeding programs, highlighting the need for expanded efforts.

To address the financial constraint crowd-funding can be leveraged as an innovative funding mechanism to support school feeding programs. By tapping into the collective power of communities, diaspora members, and global supporters, crowd-funding platforms can raise the necessary funds to sustain and expand school feeding initiatives. This approach allows for greater public participation and ownership, encouraging contributions from individuals and organizations that are passionate about education and child welfare

Infrastructure Repair and Improvement: Prioritize the repair and reconstruction of damaged school facilities. This includes providing necessary learning materials and ensuring that schools are safe and conducive to learning.

Enhanced Support for Accelerated Education Programs (AEP): Rebuilding education in Tigray requires more than just physical reconstruction; it demands comprehensive support for students who have lost crucial years of education due to the conflict. Accelerated learning programs (ALPs) are vital to help these students catch up with their peers and prevent further educational setbacks. To strengthen the implementation of ALPs, it is essential to provide necessary textbooks, professional and technical support, and targeted capacity-building training for teachers. This will increase student enrollment and attendance in ALPs while ensuring the quality of education.

Equipping teachers with the right tools is equally important. Training in trauma-informed pedagogy can empower educators to address the unique needs of students who have experienced the trauma of war, fostering a supportive learning environment where children can heal and thrive.

Community engagement is another critical aspect, as awareness of ALPs within the community has been a significant challenge during implementation. Improving the economic capacity of mothers should be prioritized as an intervention measure to enhance participation. Effective resource allocation, guided by thorough needs assessments, is crucial to prevent duplication of efforts and optimize the use of available resources.

Combining in-person teaching with digital tools, such as tablets or simple e-learning platforms, can help bridge educational gaps without incurring the full cost of traditional ALPs. This approach allows students to engage with digital content at their own pace while still receiving guidance from educators.

Developing and distributing self-learning modules (SLMs) that students can use independently or with minimal teacher guidance offers a cost-effective alternative. These modules can cover basic literacy, numeracy, and other subjects, allowing students to learn at their own pace and reducing the need for a full-time teacher presence.

Establishing peer tutoring systems, where older or more advanced students help younger or less advanced peers, can be an effective and low-cost method to boost learning. This approach not only accelerates the learning process for those who are behind but also reinforces knowledge for the peer tutors.

Community-Based Enrollment Campaigns: Conduct targeted campaigns to re-enroll out-of-school children, focusing on communities and schools to raise awareness and encourage participation. Building strong community support systems is another critical element of this process. Local committees composed of parents, teachers, and community leaders can play a pivotal role. These committees can oversee school reconstruction efforts, monitor student progress, and identify and address challenges faced by girls in particular. Their local knowledge and understanding will be invaluable in ensuring a successful and inclusive education system.

Empowering communities to advocate for girls' education at the local and national levels can lead to long-term, sustainable change. By giving voice to these crucial concerns, communities can ensure that girls' education is prioritized and that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. This local advocacy will pave the way for a brighter future for Tigray's education system.

As we work towards reopening schools in Tigray, it is important to address this trauma, which will require significant resources to ensure that students and teachers, and their extended families, feel safe and supported as they return to school.

I**ncrease Human Resource Support:** Address the shortage of teachers and education personnel by recruiting additional staff and resolving issues related to unpaid salaries. Provide psychological support and motivation to current staff.
Expand Partnership and Funding: Enhance collaboration with international NGOs and government bodies to secure additional resources and support for education in emergencies.

Comprehensive Psychosocial Support: Students and teachers require psychological support to cope with the trauma and stress caused by the conflict. Providing Psychosocial Support services for children, their families, and teachers to address emotional and psychological needs Is a must.

CONCLUSION

The educational crisis in Tigray is profound and requires urgent, comprehensive action. Addressing the immediate needs for food security, infrastructure repair, and educational materials is crucial for restoring and enhancing the education system. Tackling human resource and security challenges is also essential. Collaborative efforts from government bodies, international partners, and local communities are critical to overcoming these challenges. A united approach will ensure that Tigray's education system can recover and thrive, providing a brighter future for its children. Comprehensive strategies, including addressing trauma and supporting community-based initiatives, will be vital for long-term success and sustainability.

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