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Beyond Emergency Response: Gender, Displacement, and School Retention in Protracted Crises in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses school retention trends in two protracted crisis situations, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), between 2015 and 2023, focusing on the intersection of gender and displacement to determine educational outcomes. Based on systematic documentary analysis of data provided by UNESCO, UNHCR, Education Cannot Wait, and national education sector reports, this paper identifies critical differences between access-oriented interventions and retention-specific issues in the context of prolonged political instability and armed conflict. In Burundi, there is a gender reversal in primary completion with girls performing better, whereas in the DRC, gender differences are still high with secondary completion at 51.4% among girls and 63.5% among boys. In both settings, displacement exacerbates educational vulnerability, as more than 300,000 Burundian refugees and 8.2 million displaced individuals in DRC experience compounding barriers to long-term schooling. The results dispute linear emergency-transition-development models, showing that protracted crises demand different analytical and programmatic strategies. This study not only provides theoretical understanding of the gender-displacement nexus in education, but also presents evidence-based suggestions to humanitarian and development actors operating at the nexus between crisis and education.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts, political instability, and forced displacement are putting increasing pressures on education systems throughout the world, far beyond the acute emergencies. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 8.2 million individuals were displaced in the Democratic Republic of Congo by September 2025, which is one of the largest and most protracted displacement crises in the world (UNHCR, 2025a). Likewise, Burundi has been a land of political turmoil since 2015, displacing more than 300,000 refugees to neighbouring nations and hosting a population of around 87,000

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refugees (ODP, 2023). These numbers reflect what conflict scholars are increasingly referring to as protracted crises, or situations marked by prolonged political instability, repeated acts of violence, and structural state weakness that cannot be addressed through traditional humanitarian response models.

The magnitude of the educational disruption in these settings is astounding. According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics data, 3.2 million children aged 6-11 are out of school in DRC, with only one in ten having the ability to read basic information (IICBA, 2024b). In Burundi, even with comparatively high primary education enrolment, 96 percent of children aged 10 experience learning poverty (IICBA, 2024a). These statistics demonstrate a core issue: protracted crises do not merely cause education to be disrupted temporarily but instead fundamentally to limit the ability of educational systems to provide enduring learning outcomes.

However, current studies and software tend to mix long-term crises with acute crises or post-conflict recovery, not identifying their specific traits. In Burundi and the DRC alone, Education Cannot Wait, the global fund to fund education in emergencies, has allocated more than US12 million and US35 million respectively to meet the educational needs of crisis-affected populations (Education Cannot Wait, 2021, 2024). Nonetheless, the mechanisms of humanitarian funding that are structured to respond quickly fail to meet the multi-year, systemic challenges inherent in protracted contexts.

Research Problem and Objectives

The gap in the research on education in emergencies that the present paper addresses is a lack of understanding of school retention patterns, not access, in protracted crisis contexts, specifically how gender and displacement status interplay to determine educational paths. Access-oriented measures like enrolment rates are often given a lot of attention, but retention is a more challenging measure of how the education system performs when put to the test. Children can have early access to schooling and drop out because of economic pressures, safety issues, early marriage, or psychosocial trauma-factors that become more severe in the prolonged crises.

Furthermore, the intersection of displacement and gender is still theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. The literature on gendered obstacles to education in conflict contexts and on displacement-related education issues exist independently, but little is known about how the two dimensions interplay to produce compounded vulnerabilities or, in other instances, counterintuitive protective outcomes. This analytical gap has practical consequences: interventions that are developed without comprehending intersectional dynamics may either fail to reach the most marginalized learners or may unwittingly perpetuate gender inequalities.

The research objectives of this study are:

i) To examine the impact that political instability and prolonged crises have had on school retention trends in Burundi and DRC between 2015 and 2023, trends by education levels and geographic factors.

ii) To examine the intersection of gender and displacement status in influencing retention outcomes, it is important to examine both compounded vulnerabilities and possible deviations of anticipated trends.

iii) To generate comparative lessons about how education systems are responding to protracted crises, by using two divergent case situations Burundi centralized political crisis and DRC fragmented armed conflicts.

Why Burundi and DRC?

The choice of Burundi and DRC as comparative cases provides significant analytical value. The two nations are close neighbours in the Great Lakes area, have a common colonial past of Belgian governance, and are listed among the weakest nations in the world. They both have had protracted displacement crises with bilateral refugee movements between them. They are both priority countries of Education Cannot Wait and are struggling to reach Sustainable Development

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Goal 4 targets of quality education (Education Cannot Wait, 2021, 2022a).

However, they are typologies that are fundamentally different crises. The 2015 onward crisis in Burundi is mostly due to political repression led by the controversial third-term bid by President Nkurunziza, which was marked by targeted violence, media suppression, and authoritarian consolidation in a relatively small, densely populated nation with a population of about 12 million (ECOI, 2016). Conversely, the crisis situation in DRC includes disjointed armed conflicts over expansive eastern provinces, the presence of multiple armed groups with fluctuating loyalties, structural state weakness, and a population of over 95 million people within a territory the size of Western Europe (Serwat, 2024). This difference in crisis type, state capacity, and scale offers natural points of comparison in understanding the impacts of various types of protracted instability on education systems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theorizing Education in Protracted Crises

The idea of protracted crisis complicates traditional humanitarian and development models that presuppose distinct divisions between emergency, transition, and development periods. Macrae and others described protracted crises as situations whereby large proportions of populations experience acute life and livelihood threats over prolonged durations, caused by destruction of livelihoods, state control, and social order (Avis, 2016; Harvey & Lind, 2005; Macrae et al., 2002). In more recent terms, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development describes protracted crises as manifested across several simultaneous dimensions: prolonged duration, repetitive shocks, chronic vulnerability, and the co-occurrence of humanitarian imperatives and development challenges (OECD, 2016).

Prolonged crisis brings unique pressures to education systems. In contrast to emergency situations where temporary learning environments and emergency education may be appropriate, long-term contexts necessitate long-term functioning of education systems in circumstances of chronic resource inadequacy, repeated displacement, systemic insecurity, and deteriorating infrastructure (Education Cannot Wait, 2022b; Nicolai, 2016). The humanitarian-development nexus comes into focus in a particularly acute way: education interventions should address both short-term protection needs and enhance system-wide capacity to deliver services in the long term. In both Burundi and DRC, Education Cannot Wait explicitly uses Multi-Year Resilience Programmes to operationalize this nexus approach, offering three years of funding to bridge emergency response and development programming (Education Cannot Wait, 2021, 2022a).

Nevertheless, as the work of Novelli and others suggests, a significant amount of education in emergencies programming focuses on restoring pre-crisis normalcy instead of tackling the underlying structural inequalities and governance failures that frequently fuel and solidify crises (Novelli et al., 2014). Pre-crisis education systems in Burundi and DRC were already characterized by gross inefficiencies, including gender gaps, urban-rural disparities, poor infrastructure, and low learning outcomes. Long-term crisis exacerbates these existing inequities and generates new vulnerabilities, especially among displaced populations and girls in conflict-impacted settings.

Retention vs. Access: A Critical Distinction

Most literacy and programming around education in emergencies focus on access measures, enrolment rates, number of children served, learning spaces created. Access is one of the foundational domains of the Minimum Standards of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024). Access is a required initial step, but retention is a more challenging test

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of the functionality of the education system. Retention needs not only that children are admitted to school but that they stay in school, advance through grades, and finish education cycles even when there are crisis-related disruptions.

Survival in prolonged crisis situations is particularly problematic. According to UNESCO IICBA, dropout rates in Burundi are 8% in basic education, and 12% in the first year of schooling, with the highest rates of repetition being approximately 20% (IICBA, 2024b, 2024a). The patterns indicate that the early access is not an automatic mirror of the long-term engagement with education. Drops are due to economic shocks, security incidents, displacement, psychosocial trauma, teacher absenteeism, and poor learning quality.

Furthermore, retention indicators indicate disparate susceptibilities that are frequently obscured by aggregate access data. In DRC, 66.7% of primary students finish their year of schooling countrywide, whereas this ratio decreases to 48 in rural environments versus 79 in urban settings (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). Further stratification is evident in the gender disaggregation: girls have lower secondary completion rates of 51.4 percent compared to 63.5 percent of boys (IICBA, 2024b). These retention gaps highlight how crisis exacerbates existing inequalities.

The Gender-Displacement Nexus in Education

The impact of conflicts and crises on gender inequalities in education has been recorded by gender scholars in many ways: heightened domestic burdens, early marriage, risk of sexual violence, gendered economic demands, and discriminatory cultural practices that favour the education of boys when resources are limited (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013). But the interaction between gender and education outcomes during crisis is not as straightforward as simple regression stories would have it to be. According to some studies, gender-specific interventions with girls in crisis situations can yield surprising benefits because humanitarian actors are more interested in girl-oriented programming (Burde et al., 2017).

Dislocation introduces further layers of complexity. Forced migration breaks social networks, subjects children to protection risks, presents difficulties in documentation to enrol in schools, and in many instances, it has led to repeated relocations that disrupt education. According to UNHCR data, more than 300,000 Burundian refugees who fled since April 2015 are scattered across Tanzania, Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda, with over 500,000 refugees in DRC, 60% of whom are under 18 years old (IICBA, 2024b; UNHCR, 2025a). Every displacement context, such as refugee camps, urban settlements, host communities, offers unique educational access and retention issues.

The interplay between gender and displacement is still hypothetically and empirically underdeveloped. Analytical purchase is provided by intersectionality frameworks, which Crenshaw developed to comprehend the interaction of various forms of marginalization (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). Applied to educational systems during prolonged crises, intersectionality guides the focus on how displaced girls can experience compounded disadvantages that surpass the combination of gender-based and displacement-based disadvantages. However, the intersectionality also admits of unforeseen patterns: in certain displacement contexts, high-density humanitarianism can offer educational opportunities in excess of those offered to host community children or to non-displaced children in remote regions. To answer the question: Do displaced girls have multiplicative disadvantages in retention? this paper analyses empirical evidence in Burundi and DRC. What is the role of various displacement settings in mediating gender effects? Where do patterns deviate beyond theoretical expectations, and how do we explain such deviations?

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METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The methodological approach of this study is systematic documentary analysis. Documentary analysis is the systematic study of written sources that include facts about phenomena being studied (Bowen, 2009; Saunders et al., 2024). In education research where protracted crises are a reality, several benefits are attributed to documentary analysis: it offers access to environments in which primary data collection suffers security, ethical, and practical limitations; it facilitates triangulation of a multiplicity of independent data sources; and it permits longitudinal analysis over long durations. This study design is a contrastual case study and not a rigid parallel comparison approach. Burundi and DRC are alternative versions of unresolved crisis: centralized political repression versus fragmented armed conflict, small versus vast scale, higher versus lower baseline education capacity. This contrast facilitates analytical leverage: the study of how various types of crises and contextual circumstances influence education outcomes, in terms of retention patterns and gender-displacement nexus. The temporal scope spans 2015 to 2023. This timeframe marks the beginning of the Burundi political crisis in April 2015 up to the latest data release, and includes major intensifications of the DRC eastern conflicts. This eight years window gives enough time to see slow-moving, not acute, crisis dynamics.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The systematic data collection protocols promoted rigor and reproducibility. Quantitative datasets, policy documents, reports of humanitarian programs, and peer-reviewed literature were used as sources. Primary data sources and quality measurements are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Primary data sources and quality assessment

Source Type	Specific Sources	Data Coverage	Quality Rating	Limitations
International Statistical Databases	UNESCO Institute for Statistics; World Bank EdStats	Enrolment, completion, gender parity indices (1997-2023, with gaps)	High – internationally standardized	Gaps during peak crisis periods; rural underrepresentation
Displacement Data	UNHCR Operational Data Portal; UNHCR Population Dashboards	Refugee and IDP figures by country, year, demographic breakdown	High – authoritative source	Undercounting in inaccessible areas; definitional variations
Humanitarian Programming	Education Cannot Wait grants and reports; UNICEF Burundi/DRC country programs	Funding amounts, beneficiary targets, intervention descriptions	Medium-High – verified program data	Self-reported outcomes; limited independent evaluation
Conflict Data	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)	Geocoded conflict events, fatalities, actor types (1997-present for Africa)	High – rigorous coding protocols	Media bias toward accessible areas; event verification challenges
National Policy Documents	Burundi Education Sector Development Plan; DRC Education Sector Strategy	Policy priorities, government commitments, system data	Medium – official sources but reliability concerns	Contested statistics; political reporting incentives
NGO Reports	Save the Children, Norwegian Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee assessments	Qualitative insights, localized data, program evaluations	Medium – context-rich but variable methodology	Sample bias; advocacy orientation

Selection criteria for inclusion emphasized: temporal relevance (covering 2015-2023), geographic specificity (Burundi and/or DRC data), thematic alignment (education retention, gender, displacement), and source credibility (peer-reviewed, established international organizations, or transparent methodology).

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Analytical Strategy

The analysis was conducted in four stages. Quantitative data was first analysed through descriptive trend analysis, which examined enrolment and retention data over time, education level, gender, and, where possible, displacement status. This fixed baseline trends and defined significant inflection points that aligned with crisis events. Second, qualitative documents such as policy reports, humanitarian assessments, program evaluations were coded thematically around retention barriers, gender-specific challenges, impacts of displacement, and system response mechanisms. Coding utilized deductive categories based on the conceptual framework and inductive themes based on document review. Third, triangulation compared results systematically across sources. As an example, UNESCO enrolment records were compared to UNHCR displacement estimates and Education Cannot Wait beneficiary goals to determine consistency and identify gaps that need clarification. Fourth, comparative synthesis contrasted patterns between Burundi and DRC, finding convergences indicating generalizable dynamics and divergences indicating context-specific factors. The resulting comparative lens created theoretical knowledge about the mediation of education outcomes by crisis type, state capacity, and scale.

Quality and Rigor Measures

A number of actions improved the quality of research. Key claims were triangulated using several independent data sources. As an illustration, displacement figures were based on UNHCR official statistics, supported by humanitarian response plans and NGO reports. Temporal triangulation compared data over several years to differentiate between persistent trends and anomalies. Clear recognition of data constraints is a central element of robust documentary analysis during periods of crisis. The main limitations are: systematic underrepresentation of rural and conflict-affected regions by access constraints; temporal gaps in data collection during periods of peak violence; possible political bias in government-reported statistics; and differences in definitions between data sources in terms of concepts such as completion rate or displaced person.

Ethical Considerations

This study does not imply any direct interaction with human subjects; nevertheless, the ethical considerations are crucial despite the fact that the study is based on secondary data. First, researcher positionality: this study being a desk-based analysis lacks the situated knowledge that field-based researchers acquire. This constraint guides prudent interpretation, especially when it comes to lived experiences of displaced learners. Second, transparency of data sources: any assertions can be traced to publicly verifiable sources, allowing readers to evaluate the quality of evidence themselves. Third, representation: the study does not essentialize populations in crisis but acknowledges structural vulnerability. Fourth, utility: results should be used to guide more useful, fair programming, not just academic contribution.

COUNTRY CONTEXTS: BURUNDI AND DRC IN PROTRACTED CRISIS (2015–2023)

Burundi: Political Crisis and Authoritarian Consolidation

The modern crisis in Burundi dates back to April 2015, when President Pierre Nkurunziza declared he would run a third term, which breaches constitutional term limits, as opposed by opposition groups and civil society. This ruling sparked mass protests, a failed coup attempt in May 2015, and the subsequent government crackdown, which was marked by targeted assassinations, arbitrary arrests, and suppression of media and civil society (ECOI, 2016). The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reported widespread violence against civilians, especially those of the opposition party and suspected dissidents.

The crisis triggered massive displacement. According to UNHCR, more than 300,000 refugees fled Burundi to neighbouring countries between April 2015 and 2023 in Tanzania,

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Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda (ODP, 2023). Violence patterns and climate-related disasters caused shifts in the displacement figures internally, with a total of 75,300 IDPs as of April 2023. At the same time, Burundi was home to around 87,000 refugees, mainly of eastern provinces of the DRC, which complicated humanitarian relations (ODP, 2023; UNHCR, 2025b).

The education system in Burundi was in crisis with a relatively robust standing among regional neighbours. With the implementation of free primary education in 2005, the enrolment in primary had increased dramatically, with gross enrolment standing at 119.6% in 2018, the over-100% mark indicating overage enrolment (IICBA, 2024a). Nevertheless, the quality was highly questionable, with 96 percent of children experiencing learning poverty and repetition rates almost 20 percent (IICBA, 2024a). The political crisis had direct effects on education in several ways. Government spending on education, reaching its highest point of 27.5% of the total government spending in 2015, fell to 15.7% in 2023 as funds were redirected to security and crisis management (CEIC, 2025). Delays in teacher payments became systemic, leading to strikes and absenteeism. Both political violence and frequent climate disasters, such as floods, landslides, and storms, damaged infrastructure, destroying classrooms and displacing communities.

DRC: Fragmented Conflicts and State Fragility

The Democratic Republic of Congo offers a completely different crisis profile. Instead of a single political crisis with an identifiable beginning and end, DRC undergoes multi-layered, inter-twined conflicts over decades, with acute manifestations in eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika. ACLED data records persistent violence by government forces, the March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group supported by Rwanda, the Allied Democratic Forces with alleged ties to the Islamic State, and dozens of local militias that struggle over resources, territory, and political influence (Serwat, 2024).

Humanitarian implications are orders of magnitude greater than in Burundi. As of September 2025, displacement in DRC had reached 8.2 million individuals, with 5.8 million internally displaced- the highest population of internally displaced people in Africa (UNHCR, 2025a). Moreover, there were more than 1.2 million Congolese refugees in the neighbouring states, approximately 50 percent of whom lived in Uganda. At the same time, more than 500,000 refugees of Central African Republic, Burundi, and other nations resided in the DRC, of whom 60 per cent were below 18 (UNHCR, 2025a). The education system in DRC is plagued by structural underdevelopment and dysfunction exacerbated by the crisis. UNESCO statistics show that 3.2 million children aged 6-11 are out of school, and only one in ten has basic reading skills (IICBA, 2024b).

The system is characterized by severe gender inequalities: primary completion is 79% among girls and 86% among boys, and lower secondary completion is reduced to 51.4% among girls and 63.5% among boys (IICBA, 2024b). Geographic inequality is near extreme--primary completion is 79% in urban and 48% in rural settings (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). The system is rife with structural weaknesses. Female teachers constitute only 28.6% of primary teachers, which is the fourth lowest percentage in Sub-Saharan Africa (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). Only 38% of primary schools have water access. Payment anomalies among teachers compel a large number of teachers to impose informal charges in the face of officially free primary education, providing financial obstacles that are especially severe in crisis-impacted regions.

Comparative Context Summary

synthesizes key contextual differences and similarities between Burundi and DRC relevant to education outcomes. This comparative overview reveals that while both countries experience protracted crisis and massive educational

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disruption, they represent distinct crisis typologies. Burundi's smaller scale, higher baseline enrolment, and more centralized authority create different challenges and opportunities compared to DRC's vast territory, extreme fragmentation, and deeper systemic weaknesses. These contextual variations inform interpretation of retention patterns examined in the following section.

Table 2: Comparative context – Burundi and DRC

Dimension	Burundi	DRC
Population	~12 million	~95 million
Crisis Type	Political crisis; authoritarian repression (2015-present)	Multiple armed conflicts; state fragility (decades-long)
Displacement (2015-2023)	300,000+ refugees outflow; 75,000-150,000 IDPs	8.2M total displaced (5.8M IDPs, 1.2M+ refugees abroad)
Pre-Crisis Education Baseline	Higher primary enrolment; lower quality	Lower enrolment; severe gender/geographic gaps
Government Education Expenditure	27.5% (2015) → 15.7% (2023) of total spending	Chronically low; irregular teacher payments
Primary Completion Gender Pattern	Girls 57%, Boys 49% (reverse gap)	Girls 79%, Boys 86% (conventional gap)
Geographic Scale	Small, dense (28,000 km²)	Vast, dispersed (2.3M km²)
State Capacity	Weak but centralized	Extremely fragmented
ECW Investment (2015-2023)	US$12M Multi-Year Resilience Programme	US$35M+ (multiple grants)

FINDINGS: RETENTION PATTERNS IN PROTRACTED CRISIS

Overall Retention Trends (2015-2023)

The data analysis on the UNESCO Institute of Statistics shows that the retention patterns in Burundi and DRC shift in opposite ways throughout the analysis period, yet both situations are characterized by the extreme difficulties in keeping children educationally engaged to completion. In Burundi, recent UNESCO statistics indicate that 57% of girls and 49% of boys have completed primary school despite political emergency, with primary enrolment remaining robust (IICBA, 2024a). This gender reversal, in favour of girls, is an odd trend in conflict-prone settings and cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, retention declines sharply at lower secondary level, where out-of-school adolescents stood at 33.3% in 2020 and is lower than 38.6 in 2019, nevertheless representing more than one in every three secondary-age youth not engaged in education (CEIC, 2025). The dropout rate is highest at 12 percent in the first year of primary education, which shows that even within the primary cycle, there are early retention crises (IICBA, 2024a).

Democratic Republic of Congo offers a different retention pattern with enduring gender gaps and severe urban-rural polarization. UNESCO figures project primary completion at 79 percent among girls and 86 percent among boys, and lower secondary completion at 51.4 percent among girls versus 63.5 percent among boys, or a 12-percentage-point sex disparity (IICBA, 2024b). Geographic stratification is more striking: only 79% of primary school years are completed in urban regions, compared to 48% in rural regions (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). This 31-percentage-point rural-urban difference highlights the role of crisis in intensifying preexisting spatial disparities. Geographic variation in crisis impact emerges as a consistent theme. In DRC, conflict concentration in eastern provinces creates localized education emergencies while western regions maintain relatively more functional systems, though still severely challenged. Education Cannot Wait programming targets specifically Tanganyika, Ituri, and Kasaï Central provinces where displacement and violence most severely disrupt education (Education Cannot Wait, 2020). In Burundi, the crisis's political nature created more geographically diffuse impacts, though provinces like Cibitoke and

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Makamba hosting significant refugee and returnee populations face particular pressures (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). Table 3 provides central retention data in both countries illustrating significant disparities in completion trends.

Geographic variation in crisis impact emerges as a consistent theme. In DRC, conflict concentration in eastern provinces creates localized education emergencies while western regions maintain relatively more functional systems, though still severely challenged. Education Cannot Wait programming targets specifically Tanganyika, Ituri, and Kasaï Central provinces where displacement and violence most severely disrupt education (Education Cannot Wait, 2020). In Burundi, the crisis's political nature created more geographically diffuse impacts, though provinces like Cibitoke and Makamba hosting significant refugee and returnee populations face particular pressures (Education Cannot Wait, 2021).

Table 3: Education retention indicators - Burundi and DRC

Indicator	Burundi	DRC	Source
Primary Completion Rate (Girls)	57%	79%	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Primary Completion Rate (Boys)	49%	86%	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Gender Gap (Primary)	+8 pp (favouring girls)	-7 pp (favouring boys)	Calculated from (IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Lower Secondary Completion (Girls)	Data limited	51.4%	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Lower Secondary Completion (Boys)	Data limited	63.5%	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Out-of-School Adolescents (Lower Secondary)	33.3% (2020)	Data limited	(CEIC, 2025)
Primary Completion (Rural)	Data limited	48%	(Education Cannot Wait, 2022a)
Primary Completion (Urban)	Data limited	79%	Education Cannot Wait, 2022
Primary Dropout Rate	8% (peaks 12% in first year)	Data limited	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)
Repetition Rate (Primary)	~20%	Data limited	(IICBA, 2024b, 2024a)

The Gendered Dimensions of Retention

Gender patterns in retention diverge notably between Burundi and DRC, challenging simplistic assumptions about girls' education in conflict settings.

Burundi's Reverse Gender Gap

The discovery that primary completion of girls is higher by 8 percentage points than that of boys in Burundi is a remarkable break with regional and conflict-specific patterns. UNESCO IICBA partly attributes this to specific interventions: UNICEF Burundi and partners have provided girls with education programs such as the provision of solar lamps to do homework in electricity-deprived households, a barrier that disproportionately impacted girls who were responsible for domestic labour (UNICEF Burundi, 2019). Burundi education sector has been supported by the Global Partnership for Education, with emphasis on gender equity (Global Partnership for Education, 2012).

Yet, this aggregate number conceals worrying dynamics. Early pregnancies continue to be a significant cause of girls dropout, and it has been reported that 8% of girls aged 15-19 have already started to bear children (UNICEF Burundi, 2019, 2025). Girls who get pregnant are usually unable to resume schooling because of societal stigma and policy restrictions. Moreover, in 2023, the Gender Parity Index in tertiary enrolment was merely 0.777, meaning that although primary enrolment may be biased toward girls, higher education enrolment indicates a male advantage (CEIC, 2025). The retention of boys seems to have been influenced by the political crisis in different ways. After 2015, economic shocks led to higher child labour demand, where boys were more likely to be pulled out of school to work in the agricultural sector or informally. Violence

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against opposition supporters, who were predominantly male, could have caused psychosocial trauma and family disruption in a disproportionately male-dominated way, but direct data is scarce in existing records.

DRC's Persistent Gender Gaps

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, gender gaps that disadvantage girls are more conventional, but they can vary by education level and geographic area. The 7-percentage-point disparity in primary education increases significantly at the lower secondary level, with girls showing a 12.1-percentage point behind boys in completion (IICBA, 2024b). The disparity in gross secondary enrolment is even more dramatic: 44 percent among females versus 70 percent among males, a gap of 26 percentage points (IICBA, 2024b). Several processes contribute to the poor retention of girls in DRC. Conflict zone sexual and gender-based violence poses safety risks that discourage families to send their daughters to school, especially where school trips involve passing through unsafe regions. According to Education Cannot Wait reports, only 28.6% of primary teachers are female, which may decrease female role models and establish gender-insensitive learning conditions (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). Economic tensions take gender forms: as resources are scarce, families are inclined to withdraw girls first because of cultural norms that value the education of boys.

Child marriage and pregnancy are key retention inhibitors. Although particular DRC-wide statistics regarding school-related pregnancy are scarce in the reviewed documents, Education Cannot Wait program designs specifically discuss early marriage and pregnancy as severe risks to be addressed (Education Cannot Wait, 2020). The rates of child marriage are higher in displacement contexts where families are economically desperate and have lower prospects of daughters.

Gender and Quality of Learning

Beyond retention metrics, gender dimensions of learning quality emerge as critical concerns. In Burundi, while girls may complete primary at higher rates than boys, the 96% learning poverty rate affects both genders (IICBA, 2024a). This suggests retention without learning children progress through grades without acquiring foundational skills. In DRC, with only one in ten children possessing basic reading skills, the quality crisis equally devastating to both genders may obscure retention gaps' true significance (IICBA, 2024b).

Displacement and Education Retention

Displacement constitutes perhaps the most direct mechanism through which protracted crisis disrupts education retention, yet its effects prove complex and mediated by multiple contextual factors.

Internally Displaced Populations

In Burundi, UNHCR data indicates that 75,300 to 150,000 IDPs have been recorded within the study period, and the changes are influenced by patterns of violence and climate disasters (ODP, 2023). The Multi-Year Resilience Programme by Education Cannot Wait specifically focuses on children displaced and returning, which suggests their increased vulnerability (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). Displacement interferes with education by direct means: destruction of schools, school interruption, loss of educational resources, and indirect means: psychosocial trauma, family separation, and economic destitution. The internal displacement is vast in DRC: 5.8 million IDPs as of September 2025 (UNHCR, 2025a). Education Cannot Wait reports that displacement is commonly accompanied by repeated moves, each initiating educational disruptions cycles (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). Displaced children experience difficulties in documentations when joining new schools, age-grade imbalances due to long absences, language barriers in cases of displacement across language areas, and host community discrimination.

Retention is highly sensitive to displacement duration. The short-term displacement can include a temporary break in learning and a subsequent re-entry into home schools. Both Burundi and DRC contexts involve protracted displacement, necessitating long-term educational delivery in

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displacement environments. However, the response to humanitarian education usually offers minimal, non-formal education in camps, introducing quality gaps and issues with credential recognition when children later resume or pursue further education elsewhere.

Refugee Education

Burundian refugees who escaped to Tanzania, Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda encounter varied educational environments influenced by host country policies and humanitarian capacities. The response to the situation in Burundi by UNHCR prioritizes education as a protection need, but considerable gaps remain (ODP, 2023). In Tanzania, where the largest population of Burundian refugees is found, encampment policies restrict refugees to designated camps where education provision relies on humanitarian funding subject to shortfalls.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is at once a country of production and a country of refuge. The number of Congolese refugees living in their neighbouring nations has reached over 1.2 million, approximately half in Uganda (UNHCR, 2025a). The comparatively liberal refugee policy in Uganda with freedom of movement and economic involvement provides enhanced educational prospects compared to encampment models, but quality and progression issues persist. At the same time, DRC accommodates more than half a million refugees, 60 percent of whom are under 18, with the majority being of Central African Republic origin (UNHCR, 2025a). Education Cannot Wait investments are aimed at both refugee and host community children, acknowledging that the influx of refugees puts stress on already vulnerable education systems (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a).

Reintegration and Returnees

Burundi has witnessed large-scale returns of refugees, with 220,834 returning refugees as of August 2023, predominantly Tanzania, Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda (ODP, 2023). The reintegration of education presents unique challenges. Returnee kids are frequently out of proper grade levels because the displacement halted their education. Credential recognition is problematized when refugees studied under alternative curriculum systems in host countries. The psychosocial needs associated with displacement trauma necessitate special care that is not easily accessible in under-resourced schools. The Burundi Multi-Year Resilience Programme explicitly speaks of returnee children as priority beneficiaries of Education Cannot Wait, aiming to cover 130,000 girls and boys: displaced, returnees, and vulnerable host community children (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). This combined approach acknowledges that returnees, IDPs and host communities are linked in ways that demand integrated solutions.

The Gender-Displacement Intersection

The intersection of gender and displacement creates compounded vulnerabilities while also revealing unexpected patterns requiring nuanced interpretation.

Compounded Vulnerabilities for Displaced Girls

Data show that displaced girls encounter compounding education retention issues. When social protection systems break down in displacement settings, individuals become more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. There is a sharp rise in early marriage rates when families in destitution view marriage as economic policy or insurance to daughters. In displacement camps, access to water, fuel, and food also compounds domestic tasks, and time and effort spent on these tasks are disproportionate to girls and women. Burundi and DRC Education Cannot Wait program reports indicate that displaced girls face vulnerability to specific interventions, such as safe learning spaces, female educators, menstrual hygiene management facilities, and psychosocial support (Education Cannot Wait, 2020, 2021). The particularity of these interventions suggests that the barriers to education among displaced girls are qualitatively distinct compared to those among displaced boys or non-displaced girls.

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Displaced Boys and Retention

Although much programmatic emphasis is placed on displaced girls, displaced boys also encounter unique retention issues that are often ignored in gender-based programming. Displacement settings are characterized by higher child labour demand as families lose livelihoods, and boys have higher chances of being pulled out of school to work. Forced recruitment of armed forces in conflict zones attacks adolescent boys disproportionately, taking them right out of school and instilling so much fear that families no longer send their sons to school. ACLED data records widespread enlistment and deployment of children in DRC eastern provinces by armed groups (Serwat, 2024). The DRC Multi-Year Resilience Programme by Education Cannot Wait encompasses former child soldiers and at-risk youth programming, highlighting this gendered aspect of educational effects of conflict (Education Cannot Wait, 2020). In Burundi, the Imbonerakure youth militia linked to the ruling party has been involved in violence and coercion against young men (ECOI, 2016).

Context-Dependent Patterns

Gender and displacement intersect in ways that are not uniform in all environments. In other refugee camp settings, the presence of concentrated humanitarian efforts offers educational access that surpasses that offered by origin communities or rural under-served areas. UNHCR education work in camps can provide a more regular teacher presence, better learning resources, and school feeding schemes not available in under-resourced government schools. This leads to paradoxical scenarios in which displacement, despite its harsh conditions, can decrease instead of increase educational disadvantage among certain groups. Nonetheless, these relative advantages should be framed with regard to general deprivation: the quality of camp education often is significantly lower than that of international standards, career opportunities are limited, and psychosocial consequences of displacement become barriers to learning despite physical access.

Education System Responses and Resilience

State Responses and Capacity Constraints

Government responses to education crises in Burundi and DRC reveal the tensions between policy commitments and capacity realities in protracted crisis contexts. The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research in Burundi remains formally committed to providing education to everyone, collaborating with Education Cannot Wait and other participants (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). Nonetheless, the reduction of government education spending to 15.7% of total spending in 2023 compared to 27.5% of total spending in 2015 suggests acute fiscal limitations (CEIC, 2025). Strikes have become common in response to teacher payment crises, which have a direct impact on retention when schools shut down. The consequences of violence and climate disasters on infrastructure are not fixed because of a lack of resources.

State capacity shortfalls in the Democratic Republic of Congo are even deeper. Although DRC has proclaimed free primary education policy, the practical implementation is badly undermined with inconsistent teacher payments pushing educators to collect informal fees (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). The basic infrastructural gaps are recorded with only 38% of primary schools having access to water (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). The functioning of government coordination in conflict-affected eastern provinces is rudimentary, and humanitarian actors essentially replace the role of state activity in most areas.

Humanitarian and Development Actor Responses

Education Cannot Wait is the main coordinated humanitarian response system supporting education in the two nations, specifically aimed at bridging the approaches of emergency and development through multi-year programs. In Burundi, Education Cannot Wait has announced US$12 million in seed funding a three-year Multi-Year Resilience Programme (2022-2024), implemented by consortia led by World Vision

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International and UNICEF, and benefiting more than 130,000 children and adolescents, including displaced and returnee groups, and those at high risk (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). The programme seeks to increase access to safe and protective spaces, enhance learning outcomes, and enhance the resilience of education systems to crisis situations. It prioritizes Makamba and Cibitoke provinces, which are highly set-out and climate-disaster-impacted.

In DRC, Education Cannot Wait has invested more than US$35 million in several awards through 2020-2024 (Education Cannot Wait, 2024). Multi-Year Resilience Programme 2021-2023 targets 200,000 children in the Tanganyika, Ituri, and Kasaï central provinces, with 61% of those directly impacted being girls (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a). The emergence of additional intervention in 2021 (Central African refugee response), 2022 (Nord Ubangi province), and 2024 (eastern DRC emergency) through grants of US2 million, US2 million, and US2.1 million, respectively, illustrates responsive funding mechanisms (Education Cannot Wait, 2021, 2022a, 2024). These programmes prioritize retention-target interventions: school-based feeding in response to food insecurity attendance barriers, psychosocial support in response to traumas, conditional cash transfer in response to overage economic dropout pressures, overage promotion, and gender-responsive teacher training.

Community and Non-State Responses.

In both nations, community-based responses offer essential continuity of education despite state and humanitarian capabilities faults. Religious groups run institutions of learning especially where governmental presence is compromised. Parent-teacher associations raise funds locally to maintain schools and to incentivize teachers. In displacement contexts and marginal locations, community schools are formed where teachers are volunteered or receive minimum wage. Nonetheless, community responses are challenged by sustainability. Volunteer teachers do not receive professional growth, credentials, or job security, which leads to high turnover, which negatively impacts the quality of education. The financing machinery imposed on communities puts additional strain on already-poor families, which may exacerbate dropout in poorest households. Community schools independent of national systems might offer education without credential applications, restricting advancement opportunities.

What Worked: Evidence on Retention-Focused Interventions

Although detailed outcome assessments are still under-documented, programme descriptions and reports of implementation indicate that multiple types of interventions have potential to enhance retention in protracted crisis settings. Conditional cash transfers targeting economic dropout barriers have been found to be effective when properly covered. School feeding programmes play retention and nutrition roles, especially useful in food-insecure displacement and crisis situations. Supply of school materials-uniforms, books, supplies-eliminates financial barriers to attendance. Girls are especially likely to remain in their studies when infrastructure is improved to provide safe, gender-separate sanitation. Gender-specific programming such as mentorship by female teachers, girls' clubs to offer peer support, and community mobilization that address cultural barriers to girls' education demonstrate positive effects were reported. In the case of displaced populations, accelerated education programmes assist overage learners to catch-up, and bridging programmes bridge the gap between two curriculum systems when returnees and refugees move between differing systems. But sustainability issues infuse humanitarian programming. Three-year Education Cannot Wait rounds are longer than usual emergency grants, but still inadequate to fund education system strengthening in decades-long crises. The relying on external resources makes it susceptible to changes in donor funding models, as seen through the systematic underfunding of refugee education worldwide.

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DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Rethinking the Emergency-Development Continuum

The results of Burundi and DRC dispute linear emergency-transition-development models that assume explicit temporal stages with distinct intervention modalities. Both nations show that a prolonged crisis introduces sustained ambiguity in which humanitarian demands coexist with long-term system building needs. The Multi-Year Resilience Programme model by Education Cannot Wait tries to operationalize hybrid solutions by funding over three years, which allows them to respond to crises promptly and build system capacity (Education Cannot Wait, 2020, 2021). But three years is too short when crises span decades, as in DRC, or when political conditions display weak improvement patterns, as in Burundi. The US$12 million Burundi programme and US$35 million DRC investment, though significant in humanitarianism, is a drop in oceans of need compared to education system needs.

Protracted crisis theoretical frameworks need to conceptualize these contexts not as intermediary states between emergency and development but as potentially permanent conditions that require specific analytical and programmatic strategies. The implications of this shift are significant: no longer to anticipate temporary humanitarian replacement of state functions; no longer to anticipate short-term project cycles; no longer to anticipate siloed humanitarian-development actors but to anticipate integrated planning.

The Gender-Displacement Nexus: Theoretical Contributions.

The gender trends of Burundi and DRC distinguish the differential nature of crisis type, prior gender norms, and humanitarian intervention to influence gendered educational achievement in a manner that challenges naive assumptions. The gender gap in primary completion in Burundi is reversed in favour of the girls, a fact that contradicts the narrative that conflict uniformly harms the education of girls. This result indicates that when educational programming targeting girls obtains systematic attention, and economic shocks impact girls disproportionately in the form of child labour demands, gendered retention patterns might change. But this has to be put in context in terms of overall system failure across the sexes and in terms of continuation of obstacles such as early pregnancy.

The traditional gender disparities in DRC, especially those that increase at the secondary level, are more in keeping with common conflict-context trends. The large 26-percentage-point disparity in gross secondary enrolment between female and male students reflects the presence of long-standing gender inequalities exacerbated by crisis circumstances (IICBA, 2024b). But even here, detail counts: cities may have other gender distributions than rural areas; displacement contexts may produce other dynamics than local communities. The fundamental insight of intersectionality theory, that social categories interact in a manner that is more than additive, is supported by evidence of displaced girls experiencing multiplied barriers. But the structure needs to support non-linear relationships: humanitarian presence in certain displacement environments may alleviate rather than exacerbate disadvantage. This implies that intersectionality frameworks are required that acknowledge multiplicative vulnerability and contextual protective factors.

Retention as Distinct Policy Target

The retention-access difference is empirically and programmatically consequential. Humanitarian reporting primarily emphasizes access-oriented measures, such as enrolment rates, which can obscure severe failures in retention. The gross primary enrolment of 119.6% in Burundi exists alongside a dropout rate of 8% and a repetition rate of 20% (IICBA, 2024a). The 31-percentage-point urban-rural achievement disparity is obscured by DRC national primary completion figures (Education Cannot Wait, 2022a).

Retention-specific programming involves different types of interventions: responding to

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economic dropout pressures by cash transfer or fee removal; offering psychosocial support to children with trauma; designing accelerated programmes to cater to overage learners; making the curriculum relevant and of high quality that encourages continued enrolment; and planning progression routes between primary and secondary and beyond. Measurement implications also appear. Retention is more effectively measured by completion rates, inter-level transition rates, and cohort-tracking data than enrolment snapshots. However, this data are exactly the most difficult to gather during a prolonged crisis when population movement, system breakdown, and lack of state capacity erode the data infrastructure.

Comparative Insights: Type of Crisis and Response by Education System.

Comparing Burundi and DRC sheds light on how features of crisis mediate educational effects and inform plausible responses. Scale effects become apparent. The relative compact size of Burundi allows it to have a broader humanitarian coverage, with Education Cannot Wait aiming to include 130,000 beneficiaries in a country of 12 million where 1.9 million children were out of school at the start of the programme (Education Cannot Wait, 2021). USD35 million covering 200,000 children in DRC constitutes marginal coverage considering 3.2 million out-of-school children (Education Cannot Wait, 2020; IICBA, 2024b).

Crisis type matters. Centralized political repression in Burundi results in comparatively homogeneous policy environment, although dysfunctional, which makes it possible to implement coordinated national strategies. The decentralized nature of conflicts in DRC that spans a large area necessitates localized approaches that suit security, governance, and cultural settings. This fragmentation makes national policy implementation more difficult and requires increasing dependence on community and humanitarian actors. Crisis impacts and recovery trajectories are influenced by pre-crisis base conditions. The increased pre-crisis enrolment in Burundi implied that crisis interrupted rather than blocked initial enrolment. Weak DRC baseline implies that the crisis enhances chronic exclusion and may necessitate deeper system transformation instead of restoration of previous functionality.

Limitations and Gaps

Several constraints limit claims that this study can support. Cautious interpretation is necessary with data quality and availability problems, especially temporal lapses in times of peak violence, geographic bias to available regions, and uneven definitions of indicators across sources. Although the desk-based methodology is suitable due to the limitations of access, it lacks the grounded knowledge of the lived experiences that qualitative fieldwork offers.

Importantly, the reviewed documents shed a constrained direct evidence on displacement-education interconnections, especially in terms of the ways in which particular displacement contexts, such as those in camps versus urban settlement versus host communities, vary in their impacts on retention. Gender-displacement intersectionality is theoretically compelling and empirically skin deep in accessible data, which rarely cross-tabulates retention indicators by both gender and displacement status simultaneously. Causal inference proves challenging. While temporal correlation exists between crisis onset and retention decline, attribution to specific mechanisms versus broader economic or social disruptions remains uncertain. Programme evaluation data from Education Cannot Wait and implementing partners focus on reach rather than rigorous outcome measurement, limiting ability to assess intervention effectiveness definitively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings Summary

This systematic documentary study of education retention in Burundi and DRC between 2015 and 2023 produces several notable answers to the research questions.

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RQ1: To what extent have political instability and prolonged crises influenced school retention patterns? Retention challenges are severe in both countries, albeit differently. Burundi demonstrates 57 percent primary completion among girls and 49 percent among boys, and 33.3 percent out of school at lower secondary school. DRC shows 79 percent girls and 86 percent boys primary enrolment but 51.4 percent girls and 63.5 percent boys' lower secondary enrolment, with rural-urban discrepancies of 31 percentage points. Crisis interferes with retention by causing teacher payment failures, infrastructure destruction, displacement, economic shocks that heighten dropout, and psychosocial trauma.

RQ2: In what ways does gender interact with displacement to influence retention? Gender trends differ significantly: Burundi has reversed gaps in favour of girls at primary level, whereas DRC has traditional gaps against girls, which get bigger in further education. In DRC, 300,000+ Burundian refugees and 8.2 million displaced individuals are affected by displacement. Dislocated populations experience compounded obstacles such as difficulties in documentation, repeated movements that disrupt continuity, psychosocial trauma, and economic poverty. The displaced girls face multiplicative vulnerabilities due to enhanced risks of gender-based violence, early marriage pressures, and domestic labour burdens, although humanitarian programming in certain locations may offer relative benefits compared to under-served non-displaced populations.

RQ3: What are contrasting cases telling us about responses in education systems? Feasible responses depend on crisis type, scale, and baseline capacity. Burundi and DRC investments of US12 million and US35 million respectively, reflect a substantial humanitarian commitment but inadequate compared to need. Multi-Year Resilience Programmes seek humanitarian-development nexus strategies, but three-year cycles are insufficient in decades-long crises. In both nations, state capacity constraints, especially in DRC, are acute enough to require humanitarian and community actors to emerge with sustainability concerns.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to knowledge in various areas. First, it challenges linear emergency-transition-development concepts, showing that prolonged crises may be long-term states that need different conceptualizations and responses. Second, it deepens gender-displacement intersectionality in education studies by reporting on both compounded vulnerabilities and context-specific protective influences. Third, it raises retention as analytically and programmatically separate to access, exposing the ways access centred measures can conceal retention failures. Fourth, it offers comparative evidence on the mediation of educational effects by crisis characteristics: centralized versus fragmented, political versus armed conflict.

Policy Recommendations

To Humanitarian and Development Actors

First, embrace retention-specific programming that goes beyond access measures. These involve conditional cash transfers to drivers of economic dropouts, psychosocial assistance to trauma-impacted learners, accelerated education to overage children, school feeding programmes that integrate retention with nutrition, and learning quality enhancements that encourage further enrolment. Second, adopt truly gender-responsive and displacement-sensitive interventions that acknowledge intersectional vulnerabilities. The multiplicative barriers affecting displaced girls should be tackled through programming without overlooking the unique challenges facing displaced boys such as child labour and forced recruitment risks. The context analysis should guide whether traditional gender gaps or surprising trends such as the reverse gap in Burundi deserve alternative intervention. Third, focus on data gathering of retention indicators disaggregated by gender, displacement status, geographic location, and education level. In the absence of such data, programmes cannot effectively target interventions or measure impact. Investment in education management information

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systems adjusted to crisis situations - accommodating population mobility, multiple relocations, and various providers - becomes a necessity.

For National Governments

First, preserve policy coherence and investment in education amidst crisis pressures. The loss of education expenditure in Burundi, which dropped to 15.7% of government spending, is an example of how crises divert resources (CEIC, 2025). Nevertheless, education is both an immediate safeguard requirement and a long-term recovery base, and it should be given continuous priority. Second, secure teacher wellbeing by paying regularly and supporting their professional growth. Teacher pay crises directly lead to school shutdown and quality degradation that undermines retention. In extreme fiscal constraint, it becomes crucial to prioritize teacher remuneration to ensure system functionality. Third, embrace inclusive policies that acknowledge the right of displaced populations to education. Legal provisions that allow enrolment of displaced children without discrimination, recognition of credentials across systems that allow reintegration of returnees, and fair allocation of resources to areas hosting displacement all demand clear policy focus.

To Donors and Coordination Mechanisms

First, offer long-term, flexible funding that acknowledges the long-term nature of protracted crises. Three-year Education Cannot Wait cycles, and the improvement over shorter humanitarian grants, are insufficient when crises cut across decades. Donors ought to establish mechanisms allowing 5–10-year commitments with periodic review instead of strict cycles. Second, reinforce national systems and humanitarian supply. Parallel systems-humanitarian actors providing education outside national structures- generate sustainability vulnerability and fragmentation. Hybrid models that develop government capacity and offer direct services are more feasible in protracted contexts. Third, finance broad strategies instead of vertical interventions. Retention needs comprehensive support: economic, psychosocial, infrastructural, pedagogical. Single-dimension siloed programming is less effective than integrated responses.

Research Agenda

This work identifies significant research gaps that need to be addressed in future research. First, a primary research involving displaced learners, specifically exploring lived experiences within various displacement contexts, such as camps, urban settlements, and host communities, would offer grounded insight that would be beyond the ability of documentary analysis. Second, longitudinal cohort designs that trace the educational pathways of crisis-impacted children across time may be able to clarify determinants of retention and effects of interventions (where cross-sectional data are inadequate). Third, an intensive review of retention-oriented interventions, such as conditional cash transfers, psychosocial support, accelerated education, with randomized or quasi-experimental design, would enhance evidence base on effective programming. Fourth, generalizability of findings regarding gender-displacement intersections, retention challenges, and effective responses could be tested through comparative research extending beyond Burundi and DRC to other protracted crisis settings. Fifth, this study would be supplemented by political economy analysis of how governance structures, power relations, and resource flows influence education outcomes in protracted crises.

Concluding Reflection

One of the defining challenges to modern humanitarian and development actors is education in protracted crises. The example of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo displays both the scale of need, millions of children out of school or in school but not learning, and the insufficiency of the existing responses scaled to a fraction of needs. But these examples also reveal resilience: communities building schools in the face of state failure, parents choosing education for their children in face of extreme poverty, and girls finishing primary education at greater rates

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than boys in face of extreme gender-based violence threats.

Going beyond emergency response necessitates the redefinition of protracted crises not as a condition of exception but rather as a long-lasting reality of large global populations. Education interventions should not rest on temporary humanitarian replacements, but on long-term supports to hybrid governance, flexible funding to cross-cutting humanitarian-development lines, and multi-faceted interventions that acknowledge retention as a mult-faceted outcome that needs economic, social, psychosocial, and pedagogical services. Above all, it involves making the 8 million displaced people in DRC, 300,000 Burundian refugees and millions of crisis-affected children in both nations the subjects of rights and not the objects of charity- right to schooling, right to develop potential, right to futures not limited by the accidents of birth into crisis zones.

The information above illustrates that education can be maintained even during the hardest protracted crises, yet it needs political will, sustained resources, and programmatic strategies that align with the realities of these settings. The other option- letting generations of people grow up without education- has a cost many times higher than the cost of crisis-responsive education systems. This study will serve to inform evidence-based policy and practice that could close the gap between need and response.

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