

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief

ECCE for Internally Displaced Children in Ethiopia: Access to Holistic Quality Services, Child Learning and Development Outcomes and Policy Implication

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Executive summary

Objectives: Education of children is something that can't wait even in crisis settings. It is rather a basic necessity and rights of children. In humanitarian crises, education in the early years is believed to enhance resilience of children go through several distressful experiences. This study investigated experiences of internally displaced children (IDC) in accessing early childhood care and education (ECCE), the quality of the services, and learning and development outcomes.

Methods: Internally displaced persons (IDPs) based at Debre Birhan (located nearly 130 KMs from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) were the study targets. Parents, young children, and ECCE teachers were employed as samples. A mixed research design was employed in such a way that displacement experiences and present life conditions were explored through interviews with parents and teachers while the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) was conducted to generate quantitative data on holistic learning from a sample of 190 children in three types of ECCE centers (In-Camp, Hybrid and Host Community).

Results: Internally displaced children at Debre Birhan were exhibiting different psychological, behavioral and social problems because of the displacement experiences they went through. Yet, only few children accessed ECCE centers. The quality of ECCE centers in general, and the in-camp setting in particular, was low. However, the IDELA measures suggested that internally displaced children were in fact not significantly delayed in the early learning and developmental milestones from host community children. In fact, data from parents and teachers indicate some signs of resilience in the sense that children's learning and attitudes towards school was reported to be positive. It was also underscored that the ongoing conflict in Amhara region might expose host community children to similar negative impacts like those from displacement background.

Recommendations: The need for considering ECCE in displacement settings as part of emergency crises, for amplifying and extending holistic engagements, and for creating a hub for multisectoral coordination platform for stakeholders is highlighted. Above all, the Government is recommended to come up with improved roles in financing, coordinating and leading the sector. Furthermore, the need for operational, regulatory and policy tools was highlighted for ensuring collaborative, sustainable, quality, relevant and professional ECCE services in displacement settings. The need for psychosocial services to children and parents and capacity building of educators for such services was also recommended.

Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

Context

The study site of this research was IDPs in Debre Birhan in the Amhara area; a region that itself continues to harbor conflict. There were a total population of about 22,653 IDPs during data collection with the great majority living in a tent in segregated residential camps 15 kms away from the town. A very few of them were living integrated with the host communities by trying to manage life by themselves. Both groups were living under serious material deprivation, limited opportunities for employment, and serious security challenges. Furthermore, those in camps had concerns over relocation back to places of origin; once they managed to escape the brutal persecution because of their ethnic identities. Additionally, it is easy to imagine that the ongoing conflict in the Amhara region would pose a spillover effect on the IDPs as it drains the capacities of local communities in the region to support them.

Methodology

On top of secondary data secured from the IDP Management Office at Debre Birhan, a mixed-research design, of a convergent parallel variant (Creswell, 2012), was used to generate primary data from ECCE centers, teachers, children and parents. To secure some reference data about the impacts of displacement on children, a sample was taken from three types of ECCE centers, children and teachers: an ECCE center hosting a community children (HCC) alone, an In-Camp Center for internally displaced children (ICC) and a hybrid or integrated center hosting both types of children (IHDC). Qualitative data were secured from purposefully selected teachers (n=3; one from each center) and parents (9 IDPs). Quantitative data were collected through structured observation of the indoor and outdoor environments of ECCE centers (n= 3 centers); which was also recorded through still camera to encapsulate the structural layouts and resources. Children's learning and developmental outcomes were assessed employing a sample of 190 children (aged 5 to 7 years) through IDELA.

Key Findings

Displacement was traumatic

IDPs in Ethiopia experience poignant stories before, during and after displacements (Hirut and Belay, 2003). Interviews conducted with the present parents have also indicated that there was, at the onset of displacement, sudden, forceful, and disastrous attacks directed against them and their properties because of their ethnic identity. The journey to escape had added more pain as they were travelled through dangerous routes, in the nights, staying in jungles, walking on bare feet, with no ammunition. Early settlements at Debre Birhan were facilitated and welcoming but things took a different overtone over time. Hence, their current life conditions feature acute deprivations of basic necessities as many

of them were making a living with little aid from others. Job opportunities were critically low, limited to manual work when available and underpaying even then.

Displacement impacts children

As commonly noted in previous studies (Belay et al., 2022), interviewed parents indicated that children were exhibiting different psychological, behavioral and social problems because of their past experiences as well as current deprivation:

The displacement has had as severe impact on our children, making it difficult for them to adjust to their new reality... (IDP P6). The trauma of displacement is deeply ingrained in our children... Now, whenever they see armed... Forces, they panic, saying, "Those who chased us are coming..." (IDP P2) ... Many children experience disrupted sleep, often waking up suddenly... Some also suffer from hallucinations, believing that attackers are coming against them... (IDP P1) ... My child has developed deep anxiety and fear... has lost his appetite and struggles to eat ... (IDP P7). My child lacks interest in interacting with others or playing with her peers... (IDP P5).

Teachers told that conflicts sometimes arise among the children in the form of disputes and insults. One teacher particularly noted where some children cope with their trauma through play, "Some create toy guns out of paper, pretending to engage in gunfire, chasing each other and acting as if they have been shot and killed. Unlike previous generations who feared the sound of gunfire, these children imitate it, reflecting the distressing events they have witnessed..." (T4)

Few children access ECCE centers

Yet, only limited number of children were able to access education and care. According to office reports for IDP at Debir Birhan (Table 1), an insignificant number of children were accessing early childhood education centers at the time of data collection.

Table 1: Estimated IDC's Access of Pre-primary Education in the Camp

Individuals	Males	Females	Total
Total number of IDC in Debir Birhan aged 0 to 14 years	4,358	4,285	8,643
Number of children attending preprimary schools in IDP camp	76	64	140
Number of teachers in IDP preprimary school	0	4	4

Only few In-Camp ECCE centers were opened, even these few ones were closed and the one remaining center had very limited provisions where sustainability was again a challenge. IDP communities couldn't take their children to public ECCE centers because they were far and couldn't afford expenses.

IDP ECCE services are low quality

Evidence suggests that the quality of ECCE in Ethiopia at large is generally low (Belay et al., 2020; Belay et al., 2022). Yet, ECCE quality in humanitarian settings is alarmingly low (IDMC, 2022; UNICEF, 2019; MoE, 2021). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to note in our present case that the quality ratings of indoor and outdoor environments are generally low in all the three types of centers; but the HCC was relatively better. ECCE centers with IDC were rated the lowest in all the domains. Physical inspection of the centers has shown that while the indoor environment including teacher-child ratio was better in In-Camp centers, there was, however, a total absence of outdoor environment. In all the centers, play materials were limited and play-based learning utterly absent with teacher-and exam-centric practices taking strong hold.

IDP children were not significantly delayed

IDELA measures have suggested that children from IDP were in fact not significantly delayed in the early learning and developmental milestones from host community children. The average IDELA measures in Table 2 show performances that seem encouraging; except for early literacy and a little on the socio-emotional measures.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on IDELA measure

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Early Literacy	118	17.50	100.00	60.72	17.3
Early Numeracy	118	10.00	100.00	81.76	16.9
Social-emotional Skills	118	23.00	97.00	69.93	14.6
Executive Function	118	22.50	100.00	73.77	18.2
Motor Development	118	26.25	100.00	88.89	14.2
Approaches to Learning	118	41.67	100.00	92.82	12.1
IDELA Total	118	32.85	96.00	75.31	12.4

Children's background made little difference

Comparisons of children (by sex, age groups 5,6, and 7 years, and center types) on IDELA measures suggest that while significant differences were absent between sexes, age groups as well as center types on the total IDELA score, only one significant difference was observed by center type in motor development ($F_{2,187}=6.302$, $P<0.01$) where the HCC seemed to fair better.

Children showed resilience amidst challenges

The various challenges that children have experienced along with their parents would somehow compromise their learning and development profile (Kemei et al., 2023; World Bank, 2019). However, data from parents and teachers indicate some signs of resilience in the sense that children's learning and attitudes towards school was reported to be positive. For example, some parents have been empathically talking about the learning progress of their children suggesting some evidences of resilience against the odds: *"My younger child is*

currently in pre-primary school and has already developed strong reading and writing skills" (IDP, Father). Another parent holds: "Unlike in my own time when children enter school with little prior learning, my child now can already write his full name and recognize letters". (IDP P7)

Some parents have also articulated impressive positive attitudes of their children towards learning and the preprimary school: *"Beyond academics, attending school keeps my child engaged and refreshed. When he goes to school, he enjoys learning and interacting with others, but when he stays home all day, he quickly becomes bored. I would even be happy if there were classes on weekends..." (IDP P7).*

On another front, it was also underscored that the ongoing conflict in Amhara region might expose host community children (Gebeyaw et al., 2023) to similar negative impacts of children with displacement background; thus, instead of resilience of IDC, it could be the downsizing effect of conflict on HCC. Perhaps, it could also be the case that the IDELA tool might have not been able to capture the emotional difficulties that IDC might struggle with.

Key recommendations

Consider ECCE in displacement settings as part of the emergency crisis response

- Amplify and extend holistic engagements
- Create a multisectoral coordination platform for stakeholders
- Improve the government's role in financing, coordinating and leading the sector
- Create operational, regulatory and policy tools to ensure collaborative sustainable, quality, relevant and professional ECCE services in displacement settings.

Psychosocial services are needed for children and parents.

- Build capacity of educators for psychosocial services
- Develop policies that focus on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support and play-based pedagogy.
- Build the capacity of stakeholders (local leadership, education office holders, principals, teachers and communities) for the design, management and implementation of ECCE
- Initiate ECCE-based mental health educational interventions to extend services to families struggling with the emotional burden of displacement.

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Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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