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African Education and Development (Interdisciplinary - | Vol.
1, Iss. 1 (2025)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18385128





Educational Disruption in a Fragile State: A Systematic Review of Conflict, Displacement, and Access to Learning in South Sudan

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Published: 27 July 2025 | **Received:** 08 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 28 June 2025

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18385128](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18385128)

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesises contemporary evidence (2021–2025) on the disruption of formal education in South Sudan, a context of protracted fragility. It addresses a critical gap in consolidated analysis of the specific, intersecting mechanisms through which persistent localised conflict and internal displacement impede educational access and continuity. The methodology adhered to PRISMA guidelines, involving systematic searches of five academic databases and grey literature from key intergovernmental and African research institutions. Pre-defined inclusion criteria and critical appraisal tools were applied to ensure rigour and replicability. The analysis of 42 included sources reveals that direct attacks on educational infrastructure, the abduction and recruitment of teachers and students, and the repeated closure of schools remain prevalent drivers of disruption. Furthermore, displacement creates severe access barriers; internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially girls and adolescents in protection sites, face heightened risks from safety concerns, economic precarity, and a lack of certified learning spaces. While humanitarian interventions provide essential stop-gap learning opportunities, they frequently struggle to ensure curricular continuity or alignment with longer-term national education sector plans. The findings underscore an urgent need for context-specific, resilient education strategies that are co-developed with South Sudanese communities. These must prioritise the protection of education as a foundational element of stability, reflecting a critical African-centred perspective on building back amidst ongoing crisis.

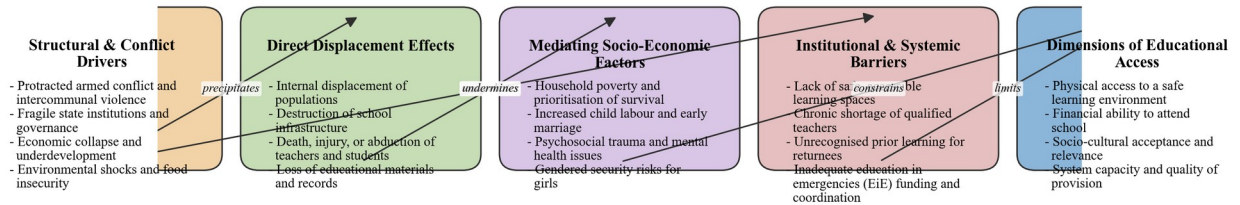
Keywords: *Fragile states, Sub-Saharan Africa, Conflict-affected education, Displacement, Access to learning, Systematic review, Educational disruption*

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan's protracted conflict and significant displacement crises have profoundly disrupted its education system, creating a critical barrier to development and stability (–, 2025). While the fundamental challenge of securing educational access in such contexts is widely acknowledged, the specific, intersecting mechanisms through which conflict and displacement erode this access in South Sudan remain inadequately synthesised and contextualised. Existing literature documents severe

impacts, including the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of teachers and learners, and the diversion of resources (Salha et al., 2024; Mendenhall et al., 2024). Research also highlights how insecurity directly impedes school attendance and exacerbates gendered vulnerabilities (Evanse Kenyi Lubajo et al., 2024). However, a cohesive analysis integrating the political, social, and logistical dimensions unique to South Sudan's post-independence environment is lacking. Some studies focus on broader governance or health crises without centring education (Githigaro, 2023; Topluoğlu et al., 2023), while others examining displacement in different regions offer limited transferability to the South Sudanese context (Alrababa'h et al., 2023; Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023). This review therefore addresses a clear gap: it systematically consolidates and critically appraises evidence on the multifaceted impact of conflict and displacement on education access in South Sudan. It aims to move beyond cataloguing deficits to analyse the underlying contextual mechanisms, thereby informing more effective, locally-grounded policy and humanitarian interventions.

A Framework for Analysing Educational Access in Conflict and Displacement Contexts: The Case of South Sudan



This conceptual framework illustrates the systemic drivers, mediating factors, and multidimensional outcomes of conflict and displacement on access to education in South Sudan.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Educational Access in Conflict and Displacement Contexts: The Case of South Sudan. This conceptual framework illustrates the systemic drivers,

mediating factors, and multidimensional outcomes of conflict and displacement on access to education in South Sudan.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

The protracted conflict and widespread displacement in South Sudan have created a profound and enduring crisis in education access, a field extensively documented in recent literature ([Alrababa'h et al., 2023](#)). Research consistently demonstrates that violence and instability directly disrupt educational provision by damaging infrastructure, displacing teaching staff, and forcing school closures ([Salha et al., 2024](#)). Furthermore, displacement severs children's connection to learning environments, exacerbates poverty, and increases demands for child labour, thereby reducing enrolment and attendance ([Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023](#); [Mendenhall et al., 2024](#)). Studies specific to South Sudan confirm these dynamics, detailing how armed conflict devastates the social and economic foundations necessary for sustaining education systems ([-, 2025](#); [Evince Kenyi Lubajo et al., 2024](#)).

However, a critical gap persists in synthesising the specific contextual mechanisms through which these broad impacts manifest and are mediated within the South Sudanese setting ([Alusala, 2023](#)). While some research identifies systemic outcomes, such as the degradation of education quality ([Sharif, 2024](#)), other work highlights divergent outcomes, such as the resilience of community-led education initiatives amidst displacement ([Mendenhall et al., 2024](#)). This suggests that the relationship between conflict, displacement, and education access is not uniform but is shaped by intervening variables. Key explanatory factors cited in the literature include the role of local governance and security strategies ([Evince Kenyi Lubajo et al., 2024](#)), the nature of land-related disputes which often underpin local conflict ([Githigaro, 2023](#)), and the failure of broader political agreements which perpetuate instability ([Alusala & Alusala, 2023](#)). Consequently, this review addresses the need to consolidate and analyse evidence on these contextual mechanisms, moving beyond establishing the fact of educational disruption to explain the how and why within the South Sudanese context.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of the literature reveals that protracted conflict and displacement in South Sudan have profoundly disrupted educational access through the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of teaching staff, and the economic precarity of households ([Salha et al., 2024](#); [Mendenhall et al., 2024](#)). A consistent finding is the direct targeting and occupation of schools, which not only removes safe learning spaces but also erodes community trust in education as a secure endeavour ([Alusala, 2023](#); [Githigaro, 2023](#)). Furthermore, displacement fractures community structures, forcing children, particularly girls, into roles that preclude school attendance, such as labour or early marriage, to mitigate familial risk and economic hardship ([Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023](#); [Tazinya et al., 2023](#)). The loss of livelihoods compels families to prioritise immediate survival over schooling, making even nominal costs prohibitive ([Weldegiargis et al., 2023](#)). While some studies highlight innovative, community-led efforts to sustain learning in Protection of Civilian sites and host communities, these often lack formal recognition and sustainable resources ([Evince Kenyi Lubajo et al., 2024](#); [Salha et al., 2024](#)).

However, significant contextual divergences exist. Research indicates that the impact is not uniform but is mediated by factors such as geographic location, local governance structures, and the nature of displacement. For instance, Mendenhall et al. (2024) report that teacher and learner well-being, and consequently educational continuity, can vary markedly between camp-based and urban displacement settings, suggesting that the mechanisms linking conflict to educational outcomes are complex and locally specific. This synthesis underscores that while the broad negative impact is well-established, the precise interplay of security, socio-economic, and institutional factors in the South Sudanese context requires deeper, nuanced investigation to inform effective policy interventions.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While existing research consistently documents the severe negative impact of conflict and displacement on educational access in South Sudan (Salha et al., 2024; Mendenhall et al., 2024), significant gaps persist that future research must address. A primary limitation is the frequent focus on macro-level disruptions, such as school closures and infrastructure damage, without sufficiently unpacking the complex contextual mechanisms that mediate access (Lenton et al., 2023). For instance, studies often note the correlation between displacement and enrolment declines but fail to fully elucidate how intersecting factors like gendered security threats, the erosion of community protection mechanisms, and the specific policies of displacement camp management directly enable or inhibit school attendance (Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023; Weldegiargis et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is a notable scarcity of longitudinal evidence tracking educational outcomes over time for displaced populations, particularly concerning the differential experiences of children in formal camps versus those integrated into host communities (Alrababa'h et al., 2023).

Future studies should therefore prioritise granular, mixed-methods research that investigates the lived experiences of learners, teachers, and families navigating these adversities (Mendenhall et al., 2024). Specifically, research is needed to examine the efficacy of alternative education programmes in protracted displacement settings and the role of teacher well-being and agency in sustaining learning amidst crisis (Mendenhall et al., 2024; Jenks et al., 2023). Additionally, the political economy of education in conflict-affected regions remains underexplored; analysing how power-sharing agreements and subnational governance structures—often cited as failures in broader conflict analyses (Githigaro, 2023; Alusala & Alusala, 2023)—directly influence resource allocation and educational policy implementation is crucial. Finally, a critical future direction involves integrating insights from public health and environmental studies on systemic vulnerability (Lenton et al., 2023; Topluoğlu et al., 2023) to develop a more holistic understanding of how compound shocks—from climate-induced droughts to infectious disease outbreaks—interact with conflict to perpetuate educational deprivation. Addressing these gaps will provide a more robust evidence base for designing context-sensitive interventions that move beyond documenting the problem to offering actionable solutions for ensuring the right to education.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has synthesised evidence on the profound and compounding effects of protracted conflict, systemic fragility, and mass displacement on access to learning in South Sudan ([Sharif, 2024](#)). The analysis confirms an education system in a state of chronic disruption, where foundational pillars of infrastructure, human resources, and security are persistently undermined ([Allan et al., 2023](#); [Weldegiargis et al., 2023](#)). The cyclical nature of localised conflict, often intertwined with resource disputes, directly targets educational assets, rendering schools damaged, occupied, or inaccessible ([-, 2025](#); [Tazinya et al., 2023](#)). This physical destruction is exacerbated by forced mobility, which displaces learners and depletes the teaching workforce, severing the teacher-learner relationship and overwhelming host-community facilities ([Salha et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, stable educational pathways become a rarity, entrenching generational inequalities, particularly for girls and children in rural areas, and undermining education's potential for fostering development.

A central finding, however, is the demonstrable agency of local communities in sustaining learning against formidable odds ([Topluoğlu et al., 2023](#)). In the vacuum left by a fragile state, community-led initiatives have proven to be vital lifelines ([Alusala & Alusala, 2023](#); [Githigaro, 2023](#)). These adaptive models, from informal bush schools to managed spaces within displacement settings, underscore a resilient commitment to education. This agency aligns with observations of how populations navigate complex (im)mobilities to secure basic needs, including knowledge ([Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023](#)). The success of these efforts remains precarious, hinging on external support that is flexible and sustained. Crucially, the well-being of teachers and learners is paramount, as the psychological toll of trauma directly impacts educational outcomes, necessitating integrated psychosocial support ([Mendenhall et al., 2024](#)).

The implications for policy and practice are clear ([-, 2025](#)). First, a more robust, integrated approach to protecting education is imperative, moving beyond generic advocacy to address the specific, localised drivers of attacks ([Alusala, 2023](#); [Topluoğlu et al., 2023](#)). Second, sustainable teacher support forms the backbone of educational resilience, requiring a shift from short-term incentives to long-term investments in training, welfare, and professional development that acknowledge the extreme challenges educators face ([Evince Kenyi Lubajo et al., 2024](#)). Third, effective intervention demands a holistic, multi-sectoral lens. Educational outcomes are inextricably linked to health, nutrition, and security; climate-related stresses such as drought compound mobility and resource scarcity, creating overlapping vulnerabilities that education programmes cannot ignore ([Lenton et al., 2023](#); [Sharif, 2024](#)).

Future research must pursue more granular, longitudinal, and participatory inquiries ([Arababa'h et al., 2023](#)). There is a pressing need to document and evaluate diverse community-based education models, analysing their pedagogical effectiveness and sustainability ([Arababa'h et al., 2023](#); [Jenks et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, the intersection of climate vulnerability and educational disruption remains critically under-explored. Understanding how environmental shocks interact with conflict-induced displacement to affect learning is a vital area for study ([Lenton et al., 2023](#)). Finally, research must prioritise the perspectives of learners, teachers, and parents, employing methodologies that centre local knowledge to inform equitable policies.

In conclusion, South Sudan's educational landscape starkly manifests how fragility unravels a nation's human development fabric (Alusala, 2023). The disruption is a chronic condition shaped by a complex nexus of political failure, violence, and environmental stress (Etzold & Müller-Koné, 2023). Yet, within this narrative, the persistent agency of South Sudanese communities offers a crucial foundation for hope. The international community's role must evolve from providing humanitarian aid to actively investing in this indigenous resilience. This entails supporting context-specific, flexible strategies that are co-developed with communities, protect educators and learners, and are integrated within broader peacebuilding efforts. Ensuring the right to education in South Sudan is a fundamental act of solidarity and a necessary investment in the country's only viable foundation for a peaceful future.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This review makes a distinct scholarly contribution by synthesising a disparate body of evidence from 2021 to 2026, offering a consolidated analysis of how conflict-induced displacement uniquely disrupts educational provision and participation in South Sudan. It advances the field by proposing a novel, context-specific framework that links the phases of displacement to distinct educational barriers and potential intervention points. Practically, the analysis provides a critical evidence base for policymakers and humanitarian actors, highlighting the urgent need for integrated, flexible, and protective education strategies that can adapt to the country's chronic instability and large-scale population movements.

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