

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Bridging the Governance Gap: Protecting the Education Rights of Climate Displaced Persons in South and Southeast Asia

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### Highlights

South Asia is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, with millions of displacements recorded every year. Yet issues of climate-induced displacement and migration remain underrepresented in policy discourse, advocacy, and research. As a result, students in disaster-prone areas are often kept out of school during and after disasters.

#### Recommendations:

- Protect the rights of climate displaced persons through an intersectoral and integrated approach to education, disaster management, and climate change adaptation policies.
- Support research and policy development, including by scaling up existing safe-school initiatives to enhance local adaptive capacity.
- Prioritise marginalised learners and educational support that meets the physical and psychological needs of climate displaced persons, such as basic study materials, counseling support, and multilingual learning toolkits.

### The Rising Challenge of Climate-induced Displacement and Migration

The IPCC has warned that climate-induced displacement and migration will become a serious threat to global security and human rights (Adger et al. 2014; IPCC 2022). Specifically, displacement caused by sudden-onset disasters will increase the financial burden of humanitarian assistance and emergency response. Migration induced by slow-burning environmental crises is likely to exacerbate challenges such as food insecurity, water scarcity, and large-scale resettlement, placing strain on both physical infrastructure and social systems (Bharadwaj et al. 2022).

The increase in climate-induced displacement has been evident in the past few years. Global records show that at least 30 million new displacements were brought on by weather-related disasters in 2020, outnumbering new displacement associated with conflict and violence by three times (IDMC 2021). South Asia accounted for almost a third of the world's new disaster displacements. Tropical cyclones, monsoon rains, and floods affected the whole region — particularly Bangladesh, where displacement figures were the highest since data had become available in 2008. Population growth and rapid urbanisation in coastal areas are heightening the vulnerability of people in the region (Buchori et al. 2018; UNDRR 2019).

## A Growing Threat to Education for All

Education is one of the rights that are most frequently subject to compromise throughout scenarios of displacement. In South Asia, school closures due to flooding and other natural hazards (e.g., landslides and typhoons) are a massive disruption to education.

Despite the overall progress made in South Asia to achieve the goals of Education For All, learning disruptions caused by weather-related extremes disproportionately impact those already marginalised by ethnic, economic, gender, and spatial inequality. In disaster-prone areas, frequent displacement erodes the capacity of households to recover between one disaster and the next. Affected families often cannot afford their children's education-related expenses, including school uniforms and transportation costs. Studies reveal that some displaced households are denied school access due to the loss of civil identification documents during evacuation, or forced to send their children to private schools at a higher cost (Kataoka et al. 2020) because the public schools in the destination areas do not have sufficient capacity to accept more students. When people are forced to move across national borders by climate-induced circumstances, their legal rights are not currently recognised and they are often deemed ineligible to receive international protection.

Moreover, as rainfall and storms become more severe and frequent, residents are left with little time to recover between disasters. In 2020, for example, the central region of Viet Nam was hit by seven consecutive tropical storms and cyclones within a period of six weeks. Sustained heavy rain resulted in devastating landslides and historical floods, with 243 people reported dead and missing, 7.7 million people affected — including 2.5 million children — and 862 schools damaged (UNICEF Viet Nam 2021). Due to the recurring storms, only 7.84% of the school-age children who required education assistance were reached. A similar situation arose during the 2022 Pakistan floods, in which more than 18,000 schools

were damaged or destroyed, leaving millions of students outside of classrooms (Save the Children 2022). There is thus an urgent need to address the critical gap in providing timely and quality learning support for displaced persons.

## Governance Gaps in Protecting the Education Rights of Internally Displaced Persons

The issue of learning disruption is faced by all countries, regardless of their experience in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and/or climate change adaptation (CCA). Viet Nam, for example, has a long DRR history. With the support of various multilateral development institutions and international humanitarian aid organisations, the government has led several relocation programmes in response to climate change since the 1960s. Experts thus regard Viet Nam as “a role model for responding to climate displacement” (Benet 2021, 1). The country leads the rankings in several adaptation readiness indexes of less developed countries (e.g., the ND-GAIN index). Yet weeks of learning disruption after disasters remain common, especially for ethnic minorities living in remote, mountainous areas (Le 2021). There are complex reasons for the persistence of these learning disruptions despite the policies adopted. This policy brief highlights the common governance gaps in protecting the right to education for displaced persons in South and Southeast Asia, and provides policy recommendations for addressing them.

**The right of internally displaced persons to quality education is largely overlooked in national education systems.** Thus far, education policies have paid little attention to the impact of climate change on human movement in South and Southeast Asia. As a result, the challenges faced by internally displaced persons, especially those migrating due to slow-onset disasters, have been largely overlooked by decision-makers.

**The education sector is marginalised in national disaster management and climate adaptation efforts.** Although the right to education is broadly protected by law, the unique challenges faced by displaced persons are rarely recognised in education policies. The importance of education in strengthening adaptive capacity and resilience is largely undermined. In Viet Nam, for example, state management and disaster preparedness measures only engage the Ministry of Education and Training to integrate knowledge of natural disasters into the curriculum. National adaptation policies in both Viet Nam and Indonesia only involve the education ministry in awareness raising. This narrow view of education has resulted in coordination gaps

### Disrupted Education in Viet Nam

Having been absent from school for nearly 2 weeks now, for little Van, the obsession with the recent storm is still intact. [...] Van's seemingly simple dream [of returning to school], like that of many children living in flood areas, is quite distant. As long as storms still hit, the road to school remains rocky.

*News article in Chuyển động 24h, 31 October 2020*

between emergency responses and educational support — especially for teachers and pupils in remote areas. In many cases, pupils are not given the necessary educational support, such as basic study materials (e.g., textbooks, pens, and desks); counselling support; and assistance to rebuild damaged infrastructure (e.g., school roofs, electricity shortages, and transportation systems).

**Complex administrative procedures are a barrier to school admissions.** Receiving social benefits and submitting school applications often requires households to update their residential status in government records. When the system is not digitised, this process can be particularly difficult for displaced persons who have lost their physical documents when fleeing their homes due to a disaster (e.g., OCHA 2019). Disparities in access to critical infrastructure also constitute a significant challenge — for example in Indonesia, some students have to delay applications for months due to power outages, unstable connectivity, and lack of access to printers in government buildings.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on the challenges identified above, the following actionable steps are recommended for ministries of education, researchers, and educators to bridge these governance gaps.

**1. Place education at the centre of national adaptation plans and inter-sectoral climate governance.** The 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report emphasised the need to include migrants and refugees in national education systems, and called for more planning to respond to the needs of these populations. Education ministries must take the lead in developing appropriate measures and coordination mechanisms to ensure timely and quality educational support for displaced learners. There is also a need to integrate expertise from diverse sectors, including education, DRR, and CCA, to develop adaptive capacity and enhance preparedness for schools in high-risk areas.

**2. Scale up existing safe-school initiatives.** In many disaster-prone areas, especially those that are economically disadvantaged, classrooms are often fragile and unsustainable because school buildings are constructed using materials other than concrete (e.g., BANBEIS 2015). Thus, efforts such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Safe Schools Initiative (ASSI) should be further promoted. ASSI provides direct capacity and financial support to schools to construct a safe learning environment. It also strengthens the capacity of students, teachers, and parents in developing local DRR plans, assessing risks, and creating standard operating procedures for emergencies.

### INEE Minimum Standards Handbook (2010)

This handbook is designed for humanitarian workers and governments to ensure education initiatives in emergency situations provide a solid and sound basis. The standards highlight preparedness, emphasising the need to harness the efforts of both government and non-government actors through coordination structures. An inter-agency coordination committee is also recommended to ensure access to and continuity of quality education in times of emergency and crisis.

**3. Contribute to the mental well-being of displaced pupils.** The challenges that climate displaced persons face go beyond basic physical needs. For many children and youth, being displaced is a traumatic experience that can affect their educational attainment, resulting in disengagement, difficulties completing certain tasks, and a lack of motivation to learn — all of which may lead to dropping out or failing to complete full cycles of education. Being separated from their families and social networks can also significantly impact their mental health. It is thus imperative that decision-makers and educators prioritise the well-being of climate displaced persons when developing related policies and recovery plans, including resources and knowledge for teachers and school heads to deal with the emotional impacts.

**4. Create locally relevant curriculums to enhance adaptive capacity.** It is vital to teach locally relevant issues to enhance people's understanding of the climate risks affecting them. Linguistic and cultural diversity may also affect displaced populations' ability to adapt to the areas in which they settle, and hence education institutions must strengthen their adaptive capacity to withstand the adverse effects of climate change while continuing to protect this diversity.

**5. Promote research and data-informed policy that prioritises marginalised learners.** In most South and Southeast Asian countries there remains little research on climate-induced displacement and migration; data on displaced populations are essentially absent or fragmented. This poses tremendous challenges for decision-making to predict displacement patterns and to prepare schools in receiving areas to accommodate the influx of students after a disaster. Future research and policy must ensure that voices and perspectives from marginalised groups are included in the process to avoid producing solutions that could perpetuate existing inequalities.

## Note

This policy brief is based on research conducted by UNU-IAS and UNESCO, which also produced the book *Asia-Pacific Regional Synthesis: Climate Change, Displacement and the Right to Education* (UNESCO & UNU-IAS 2023).

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