

LOCALIZING AND STRENGTHENING EDUCATION SYSTEMS' RESILIENCE IN THE MENA REGION

LESSONS FROM EGYPT, JORDAN, LEBANON,
TUNISIA, AND YEMEN

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT:

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces a series of compounded crises that continuously test the capacity of education systems to adapt and recover. From protracted conflicts and displacement to political and economic instability, environmental pressures, and the COVID-19 pandemic, these disruptions have exposed deep structural weaknesses in education governance, financing, and equity. In this context, discussions on Education Systems Resilience (ESR) have emerged, focusing on how education systems can be better equipped to respond to current and future shocks and disruptions.

While the concept of ESR builds on long-standing approaches to risk, crisis, and education reform, its global policy framing often remains abstract and externally driven. Across the MENA region, international organizations have promoted resilience as a guiding principle, emphasizing adaptability and system efficiency. However, these framings tend to overlook locally embedded meanings of resilience. In the Arabic language, several translations of the word “resilience” exist. The most common terms are *muruneh* (flexibility/adaptability), which refers to adapting to and coping with crises, and *sumud* (steadfastness), which carries political, cultural, and ethical connotations related to justice, collective endurance, and the power to remain.

Part of the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) [Observatory on Education System Resilience initiative](#) and led by the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), the study examined how ESR is conceptualized and operationalized in five GPE countries in the MENA region: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Yemen. Through an analysis of national education strategies, plans, and reforms since 2011, we assess how resilience features in planning, governance, and implementation, and how it relates to inclusion, equity, and transformation. This policy brief provides an overview of the study’s findings and recommendations for local governments in the five countries, as well as international donors.

2. RHETORIC: OVERCOMING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION IN MENA GPE COUNTRIES

The evidence gathered through the study underscores a set of systemic patterns and constraints that collectively define the state of education systems’ resilience in the five MENA GPE countries.

a. Adaptive, Not Transformative, Resilience

The five MENA GPE countries examined in this study have developed emergency and response plans, particularly in response to COVID-19; however, these plans remain largely reactive in nature. Policies emphasize adaptation (“bouncing back”) rather than transformation. Structural inequalities and political constraints limit efforts to address the root causes of vulnerability. As a result, resilience is often equated with short-term continuity rather than systemic change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tunisia implemented emergency distance-learning measures to maintain educational continuity, while largely continuing to rely on the pre-existing 2016–2020 Education Sector Strategic Plan as its primary policy framework,

with only limited adjustments to address the crisis. As a result, the plan underwent mainly superficial modifications, without substantive policy shifts or longer-term planning aimed at strengthening the education system's resilience to future shocks and crises. In parallel, a COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan was developed in coordination with UNICEF; however, it predominantly emphasized economic recovery, with relatively limited focus on education-specific responses.

Overall, across the five countries, education plans and strategies have focused solely on crisis and crisis management (short-term) alone, thereby undermining development. Thus, this prevailing approach reflects *murunah* (flexibility), while the deeper meaning of *sumud* (steadfastness, justice, collective endurance, and the power to remain), which is necessary for long-term development, is largely absent from policy frameworks.

b. Towards Locally Rooted Resilience: Moving Beyond the Limits of External Agendas

Resilience has largely been introduced into education policy as an external agenda planned and led by international organizations. Many national strategies are written in English (some with no Arabic translation) and promoted by international agendas rather than local needs. This has created what Andrews et al. (2017) refer to as "isomorphic mimicry," a form of policy borrowing that mirrors global rhetoric without being locally institutionalized. This externalization creates a sense of misalignment and even disconnection between global frameworks and local realities, resulting in limited local ownership, weak sustainability, and underdeveloped national capacities. Consequently, resilience often fails to resonate with the political, cultural, and linguistic contexts of MENA countries. There is an urgent need to localize both the discourse and practice of resilience, reframing it in locally meaningful ways and rooting it in local understandings of justice and transformation.

For instance, the Jordanian *Crisis and Risk Management Strategy for the Ministry of Education (2023–2027)* states that it was developed to align with global trends in addressing crises. Informed by the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector (GADRRRES), an international platform advocating for children's rights, resilience, and sustainability in education, the strategy draws heavily on global frameworks and principles. Consequently, the national plan primarily reflects internationally framed conceptions of resilience, rather than interpretations grounded in local contexts and lived realities.

c. Inequality, Access, and the Rise of Private Education

Access to quality education remains deeply unequal. Rural areas, low-income communities, refugees, and children with disabilities face persistent barriers to access and quality education. This inequality has been compounded by the growing privatization of education across the region. As public systems struggle to deliver quality and inclusive education, families increasingly turn to private schools to fill the gap. However, the state's inability to regulate or fund private education exacerbates inequity, dividing access based on socio-economic status. The expansion of private education, while offering short-term alternatives, undermines education as a public good and weakens the state's responsibility to ensure equitable access for all learners, thereby weakening the resilience of the public education sector and widening inequalities. In Egypt, for instance, private schools and private tutoring are on the rise, leading to increased inequality among students. Consequently, deep socioeconomic and geographic inequalities persist in Egypt's education system, with significant disparities in access and completion, particularly for rural poor girls, further exacerbated by unequal

access to digital learning and the limited operationalization of inclusion commitments within education plans and emergency continuity frameworks.

d. Centralized Governance and Fragmented Policy

Education governance across the five countries remains highly centralized, leading to bureaucratic inertia and delayed implementation. In Egypt and Tunisia, top-down administrative structures constrain innovation and responsiveness. In Lebanon, governance fragmentation, driven by political instability and divided authorities, has led to the creation of parallel systems that rely heavily on donor funding. This has resulted in weak coordination, overlapping strategies, and an overdependence on international partners for policy design and financing. In Yemen, prolonged conflict has fragmented education governance among competing authorities, undermining coordination and coherence, complicating donor engagement, weakening efficiency and accountability, and resulting in a patchwork of parallel initiatives rather than a unified public education system.

These governance constraints underscore the importance of participatory, transparent, and accountable resilience strategies that meaningfully engage local stakeholders. Such inclusive processes can enhance coordination, rebuild trust, and ensure that reforms are grounded in local realities.

e. Chronic Underfunding and Resource Constraints

Education financing remains a major challenge. Public spending on education averages below 3% of GDP in most cases, which is lower than the international benchmarks of 4–6%. For example, in Lebanon, despite receiving over \$2.5 billion in education aid between 2011 and 2021, the country's public expenditure on education has continued to hover around 1.8% of GDP. This chronic underinvestment has widened inequalities, eroded teacher motivation, and restricted system recovery. International assistance has filled immediate gaps but has not strengthened the fiscal base or enabled independent policy action. Furthermore, in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan, the amounts that are allocated for education, a disproportionate share of national budgets is spent on salaries, leaving little for infrastructure, technology, or teacher development. This financial imbalance hinders the implementation of long-term resilience strategies. For example, Yemen's education financing has become heavily externalized as national budget allocations have declined amid fiscal collapse, leaving a sector that can function in the short term but lacks the capacity for strategic planning or self-financing. This dependence is further reinforced by weakened domestic revenue generation and the absence of effective fiscal decentralization to sustain local schools beyond the lifespan of donor-funded projects.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reveal a need to rethink resilience in education away from a technocratic or donor-driven agenda and towards a transformative process rooted in justice, inclusion, and local agency. Local governments and international actors must consider the following priorities:

a. From Adaptability to Transformation: Redefining Resilience for Inclusive Education

Policymakers should broaden the concept of resilience beyond short-term continuity and adaptation to crises, encompassing development and sustainability. Education reforms must address the structural and political causes of vulnerability, such as inequality, exclusion, and governance weaknesses, so that resilience leads to transformation rather than symbolic stability. Furthermore, policies should conceptualize resilience as a continuum that bridges *muruneh* (adaptation) and *sumud* (steadfastness). This framing recognizes resilience as dynamic, requiring flexibility in the face of shocks and persistence in pursuing systemic change and social justice.

Moreover, resilience depends on inclusivity and justice. Policymakers should prioritize equity-focused policies that expand access for marginalized groups, strengthen gender equality, and ensure that all learners benefit from safe, high-quality, and relevant education.

b. Localize Resilience Agendas and Reclaim local ownership:

National and local policymakers must reclaim leadership over the resilience agenda to ensure it is grounded in local priorities, sociocultural contexts, and community experiences. Resilience strategies should emerge from participatory processes that are transparent, accountable, and representative, and meaningfully engage local stakeholders in defining objectives and shaping reform trajectories.

At the same time, international partners and development agencies should reposition their roles and involvement from a directive to a supporting role. While it is recognized that full local ownership may remain constrained by structural dependencies and aid dynamics, a rebalanced partnership is both necessary and possible. Their contributions should prioritize the strengthening of local capacities, institutional governance, and policy autonomy. Technical and financial assistance must be aligned with nationally defined visions and priorities, thereby reinforcing local ownership and sustainable policy leadership.

c. Embedding Resilience: From Rhetoric to Systemic Implementation

Resilience should be embedded within national education reform frameworks, planning cycles, and budgeting processes, rather than being treated as an emergency response mechanism. This involves creating governance structures and accountability mechanisms that sustain reform efforts beyond crises.

Similarly, resilience should not be included in education strategies, plans, and reforms merely to align with donor agendas or secure funding. Rather than treating resilience as a rhetorical or funding-driven requirement, policymakers must ensure its genuine implementation through concrete system-strengthening measures. This entails enhancing governance and institutional capacity through decentralization, strengthening coordination across ministries, and integrating resilience planning into education frameworks. System strengthening also involves reforming curricula to promote inclusion, social cohesion, and critical thinking, supported by effective national assessment systems. Infrastructure investments should ensure safe, inclusive, and climate-resilient learning environments, while alternative modalities, such as digital and community-based education, help maintain continuity during disruptions. Engaging communities, youth, and civil society in governance enhances accountability and relevance, and aligning education with broader social protection, health,

and labor policies ensures policy. These measures are a necessity so that resilience becomes an embedded, lived reality within education systems, not just a policy slogan that looks good on paper, but one that is far from being achieved in implementation.

4. CONCLUSION

The evidence from across Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Yemen makes clear that resilience, as currently operationalized, remains too narrow and focused on continuity and adaptation rather than systemic change. If the underlying causes of fragility are ignored, resilience can become symbolic rather than transformative.

Reframing resilience as a continuum between *muruneh* (adaptation) and *sumud* (steadfastness) offers a pathway toward more meaningful reform. True resilience must go beyond continuity to encompass transformation: building education systems that are inclusive, equitable, and capable of advancing justice. For MENA policymakers, this means reclaiming the resilience agenda from international organizations and embedding it within locally grounded, participatory, and forward-looking policies.

For local governments and international actors in the region, the task is urgent: resilience must be localized, democratized, and institutionalized as a long-term reform project. For international partners, the role must shift from directing to supporting, enabling local leadership to define priorities and pathways. Only by reframing resilience as a continuum that bridges adaptation with transformation can education in the MENA region be a driver of social change.