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Policy Brief

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THE RISE OF PRIVATE EDUCATION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

Evidence shows that (I)NGOs and local communities favour investment in public schools to bridge the educational gap in northwest Syria.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDING PRIORITIZATION

- Not to build on the private sector to enhance education quality and access in northwest Syria. The private sector aims at making profits rather than developing better educational strategies.
- Support the development of public schools and the access and quality of public education. This includes funding teachers' salaries, encouraging (I)NGOs' best practices and fostering community-led initiatives.
- Advocate for the empowerment of teaching staff (including in the directorates of education), (I)NGOs and local communities on educational issues.
- Support accelerated learning programmes and remedial educational classes, especially for grade 12. These support programmes fill the educational gap and facilitate the re-insertion of drop-out students into the educational system.
- Encourage the development of online education, including the training of teachers to deliver education through online platforms. Online platforms facilitate inclusive access to education (especially for women) and provide an alternative to destroyed educational infrastructures.
- Facilitate the inclusion of child protection measures in educational activities (i.e., psychological support, gender-based violence, provision of warm meals, safe transportation to school).

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CONTEXT

• Salvation Government areas: The Ministry of Education takes all major decisions regarding education. The Ministry used to host several educational complexes but they were dismantled about one year ago. There is also a separate Ministry of Higher Education to handle educational affairs after Grade 12. In these areas, there are **20 private schools**, including 17 schools for grade 1 to grade 9 and three schools for grade 1 to grade 12. Their number amounts to about 50 if one includes their local branches.

• Interim Government areas: There is one Education Directorate with 11 local representations and that directly coordinate with 17 central local councils; each local council has an educational office. This network is loosely coordinated, supervised and monitored by the Turkish government. The Education Directorate is the main point of contact for (I)NGOs and members of the Education Cluster, because it managed to retain a high level of independence from the two opposition governments (in the same fashion as Health Directorates). In these areas, the **50 private schools** are called 'educational centres'.

• Across the northwest: Private schools are often established by **traders or owners of capital** who obtain licenses from the Education Directorates or the Ministry of (Higher) Education. Besides private schools and universities, there are also between 500 and 600 private kindergartens, which fees amount to \$100-150 a year.

A **general policy prevents existing teachers** (those who have not newly qualified) **who have arrived to the area after 2017 from teaching in public schools**. The justification for this policy is to allow teachers who have been formed and accredited in the northwest to teach in these areas. As a consequence, **private schools represent the only employment opportunity for many teachers**.

The role of individual teachers is key in Syria, and this was already the case before the start of the conflict. **Students follow their favourite teachers rather than they choose a school or university (either public or private)**.

There is **no discrimination to access education other than based on money**. All children, regardless of their displacement status, gender or ethno-religious identity are accepted in both public and private schools. However, in areas under the control of the Salvation government, there are no mixed classes from Grade 4.

FUNDING

• Salvation Government areas: There is no official information about the funding of private schools, beyond the private sector. It is believed that Gulf countries might financially support private schools, but there are no tangible proofs of their involvement. In these areas, the tuition fees for private school average **\$250 to \$300 per year**, in addition to \$100 for transportation (for schools that provide this service).

• Interim Government areas: (I)NGOs and members of the Education Cluster do not directly fund private schools. Instead, they coordinate with Education Directorates to **design and implement educational programmes and activities**. They also used to pay the salaries of staff at Education Directorates. Finally, (I)NGOs and cluster members contribute to the **salaries of teachers in private schools**. This process happens in two steps. First, the Directorate publishes employment opportunities as well as a list of qualified teachers. Based on this list, (I)NGOs and cluster members conduct job interviews and hire teachers directly as their own staff. The teachers are thus employed and accountable to the (I)NGO and not to the school where they teach, and they receive their salaries directly from their employer rather than one of the opposition governments. The UNICEF standards put the average monthly salary between \$125 to \$170 for teachers in northwest Syria, while this salary is higher when paid by (I)NGOs and can reach \$400 when paid directly by private schools. In these areas, the tuition fees for private educational centres does not exceed **\$200 per year**, including transportation (for the educational centres that offer this service).

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CURRICULUM

• Across the northwest: All public and private schools use the **same curriculum that was provided across Syria before the start of the conflict**. Only some modifications have been performed. For instance, the topic 'citizenship' has been removed, like the references to the Syrian regime. In rare instances, in the areas under strong Turkish influence, the Turkish curriculum is used but these cases are exceptional. Following a mediation initiated and moderated by UNICEF, all key educational actors across the northwest discussed and agreed on a **common curriculum**. The current curriculum is generally perceived as good and satisfactory. Educational experts acknowledge that it needs to be developed in certain topics, but this is **not an urgent matter for funding prioritization**.

THE IMPACT OF HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

• Salvation Government areas: **There is no link between HTS interference and increasing privatisation**. However, the influence of HTS in the Salvation Government is responsible for the decrease of funding and the interruption of supported educational programmes.

However, there is a spread of private school based on a radical ideology in these areas. Moreover, the Salvation Government encourages registrations in private schools because private schools give **more flexibility in the modes of delivery of education**, which means that Islam can inform education more than in public schools. For instance, recreational time for children (sports or drawing) can be replaced by praying time. Yet, neither the Salvation Government nor HTS can amend the curriculum directly. Another advantage of private school is that they attract investors at a time when the Salvation Government cannot afford paying salaries of teachers in public schools. Private schools are also a **source of income** through registration fees, and licensing fees.

The Salvation Government, and leaders and religious figures affiliated with HTS also would

like to see a stronger presence of religion in education. Fatwas are regularly issues in this sense. However, there is a **strong rejection from the grassroots communities, (I)NGOs and the education sector**. As such, **the presence and action of (I)NGOs in these areas is very positive and key to ensure independent and inclusive education**.

PRIVATE EDUCATION: SOLUTION OR FACTOR OF INEQUALITY?

• Across the northwest: Private schools can be a temporary solution to those who can afford it in the sense that they provide **more efficient modes of delivery**, mostly because teachers are better paid and, thus, do not go on strike. Moreover, **private schools do not have to abide by the regulations issued by the two opposition governments**. For instance, private schools remained open throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, while public schools were forced to close for several months. In some cases, this inequality in terms of delivery led to drop-out, or to great educational loss for students registered in public schools. It also pushed families to invest large sums of money to bridge their children's educational gaps. Some hired private tutors whose fee could amount to 25,000 Syrian pounds (about \$10) an hour. This added to the economic burden of families.

However, private education is not the solution to dwindling donor funds. Private schools are simply too expensive for the majority of the population considering the average salary in northwest Syria and the economic crisis raging across the country. Education experts fear that the spread of private schools might **cause a split in the society based on class, thereby creating another layer of fragmentation and conflict**.

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THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

• Across the northwest: For the sake of communities, the private sector cannot be the solution to deficient education. Instead, a number of **local community-led initiatives, in coordination with (I)NGOs emphasise the need to provide better public education** and support the payment of salaries for teachers. Local communities are aware of the importance of public education and do not wish to see it replaced with private education. One of these community-led suggestions is that (I)NGOs pay adequate salaries to teachers in private schools to support these teachers to volunteer in public schools after their shift.

GENERAL EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

There is no clear and accessible pathway for education in northwest Syria for a number of reasons:

• The **closure of many public schools**, especially at the secondary level of education, because of the lack of funding. For instance, (I)NGOs used to support 100% of public schools in the northwest but have reduced their support by more than half.

• **Classes are overcrowded**, with an average of **50 students per class**, which has a negative impact on the willingness of children to be in the classroom.

• Practices of both opposition governments to **facilitate the promotion to higher grades**. For instance, kids might be registered in grade 5 if the school does not offer grade 3 or 4. After the Covid-19 pandemic, many students were promoted without passing exams to compensate months of school closure. But these students ended up struggling to follow the curriculum of the higher grade, or failing their exam after one or two years.

• **The salary of teachers in public schools is very low** (\$60 a month in the northern countryside of Aleppo) regularly not paid by either of the two opposition governments due to a lack of funding.

As a result, these teachers are on strike for at least one month of each academic year, which has an adverse impact on the education of students registered in public schools.

• The **lack of recognition of grades and qualification between different governments** across Syria at the university level. Successive displacements from one area to another because of the conflict lead to cases where students have to start their degree multiple times and need up to six years to complete an undergraduate degree.

• The **general lack of well-qualified teachers**, the **mental exhaustion** of educational staff and students and their families after close to 12 years of conflict, and the lack and poor condition of educational infrastructures.

Main reasons that prevent children from accessing education in northwest Syria:

• **Poor economic conditions**; parents prioritize the acquisition of basic reading, writing and numeracy skills over secondary education.

• The **cost of registration, textbooks and transportation**

• **Safety concerns** (especially for girls); over 90% of children go to school by foot in Idlib governorate

• **Child labour**

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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