REQUEST RESPONSE

Technical assistance for systems strengthening in conflict and crisis settings

REQUEST SUBMISSION

Given significant reductions in global humanitarian and development funding, many aid actors are shifting away from direct service delivery toward greater reliance on technical assistance (TA) as a means of sustaining education investments. This shift heightens the urgency of strengthening the evidence base on what forms of TA are effective—particularly in conflict and crisis settings, where evidence remains especially thin. In this context, FCDO has requested support from the ERICC Helpdesk to synthesise evidence on promising practices and lessons learned from TA models that may inform systems strengthening in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Education systems in these settings vary significantly, from informal community-led services to early-stage government-led systems or low-capacity state structures. These systems operate across a continuum, from fully humanitarian to development responses. Opportunities for TA within these systems are shaped by donor engagement, political recognition (or non-recognition) of authorities, and operational constraints.

This study explores three illustrative scenarios of systems in conflict and crisis-affected settings, with different and unique opportunities and barriers for system strengthening engagement. These scenarios are:

1) Countries where donors do not engage de facto authorities and operate mainly through humanitarian channels (e.g., Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar);

2) Countries in transition where donor engagement was previously restricted, but where political changes have newly opened opportunities for potential direct systems engagement (e.g., Syria); and

3) Countries with donor engagement despite low state capacity and/or incentive to implement education reforms (e.g., South Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon).

Each of these scenarios contains specific structural and governance characteristics and engagement constraints which need to be better understood to identify parameters and opportunities for potential engagement and inform feasible technical assistance strategies. Understanding the challenges and opportunities across this continuum can support the development of effective and strategic investments in TA.

About the ERICC Helpdesk

The ERICC Helpdesk provides an expert, demand-driven, high quality, and agile call-down mechanism for technical assistance to FCDO country offices, implementation partners, and in-country partners. This provides rapid research, evidence synthesis and analysis, and expert advice, as well as the provision of small-scale research linked to program design or evaluation (including replication and implementation science studies). Through this mechanism, we support a strengthened uptake of evidence-based policies and improve value for money in FCDO-supported education programming in key FCDO areas of operation.

This mechanism links to existing and forthcoming FCDO technical assistance resources for education. In addition, with FCDO clients, the Helpdesk seeks to proactively identify areas of interest and collaborate on design and early identification of technical support needs. The Helpdesk roster comprises over 50 highly skilled technical experts and senior researcher specialists from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partner organisations, with extensive experience in education in conflict-affected contexts.

Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed here are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ERICC partner organisations, the International Rescue Committee, or the UK government's official policies.

Suggested citation

Pacifico, A. (January 2026). Technical assistance for systems strengthening in fragile and conflict affected settings. ERICC.

ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil society organisation
KI	Key informant
KII	Key informant interview
LEG	Local education group
LMIC	Low-and middle-income countries
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PTA	Parent–teacher associations
TA	Technical Assistance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evidence review synthesises research related to technical assistance (TA) for education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. It also explores the tensions, opportunities, and risks that shape potential approaches and entry points for TA across a range of crisis-affected settings drawing on a literature review and key informant interviews with technical experts (n=15). The findings have implications for donors and practitioners seeking to maximise the value of TA approaches to improve education outcomes amid shrinking resources for international education cooperation.

Despite decades of substantial investment in TA, there is little robust evidence on the impact of TA to strengthen education systems or improve education outcomes in conflict and crisis settings. Evidence from education in development contexts and from other sectors in crisis settings suggests that sound technical solutions only gain traction when they are developed through trusted, equitable relationships, with attention to power imbalances between governments, providers, and funders. Promising approaches include long-term engagements (10+ years) that allow for iterative problem-solving and deep national buy-in, and strengthening local knowledge actors such as think tanks to support country-driven agendas. By contrast, embedded technical specialists show mixed results, with limited evidence on the specific modalities and conditions under which they contribute to sustainable system change. The limited evidence base underscores the need for donors and implementing partners to increase investment in rigorous, shared monitoring, evaluation, and learning for TA in conflict and crisis settings. Prioritising longer-term learning-oriented evaluation, rather than narrow output reporting, will be critical to understanding which TA approaches work, for whom, and under which conditions.

This study identifies the following tensions, issues, and lessons related to TA to support education system strengthening across three illustrative types of conflict and crisis settings.

Type I: Countries where donors do not engage de facto authorities and operate mainly through humanitarian channels (e.g., Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar). In these settings, low levels of trust and politicised perceptions of TA can undermine collaboration and uptake, underscoring the need for conflict-sensitive, relationship-based approaches that carefully manage expectations, ownership, and engagement. Where governing authorities are not recognised, education system strengthening may depend on working through humanitarian, development, and grassroots education systems which present a series of interrelated complexities. First, operating outside national systems often confines TA to project-based efforts with limited pathways for scale, institutionalisation, or self-funding. Second, when basic education and non-education needs are unmet, more strategic or higher-level TA (such as pedagogical reform or teacher training) is understandably deprioritised by local actors. This points to the need to deliberately pair TA in acute crisis with service delivery so that immediate humanitarian priorities are addressed alongside longer-term system objectives. Finally, limited government presence, weak coordination structures, and inadequate infrastructure constrain entry points for TA, even as programmes may still require some form of approval or acceptance from de facto authorities to operate in their territories. As such, there may be a need to engage strategically with governing authorities on planning and technical issues in order to effectively deliver TA.

Type II: Countries in transition where donor engagement was previously restricted, but where political changes have newly opened opportunities for potential direct systems engagement (e.g., Syria). In transitional contexts, poorly designed support can displace or substitute emerging ministry capacity, slowing the consolidation of national systems and weakening their legitimacy. Ensuring TA reinforces and complements ministry investments, rather than replacing them, is critical to build durable national capacity. Transitional moments often attract a surge of donors and actors,

increasing the risk of duplication, misalignment with national priorities, and added transaction costs for already overstretched ministries. In periods of post-conflict transition, TA must be careful not to reinforce exclusion, sectarianism, or highly centralised power structures that contribute to the drivers of conflict. Finally, while supporting humanitarian and other non-state providers is essential to maintain educational access in protracted crises, such support risks entrenching parallel systems unless it is deliberately linked to national pathways for coordination, recognition, and long-term sustainability. TA must therefore navigate support for immediate education access through non-state systems while ensuring investments strengthen, rather than substitute for, the development of sustainable education systems.

Type III: Countries with donor engagement despite low state capacity and/or incentive to implement education reforms (e.g., South Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon). In these settings, weak education performance may not be a capacity problem but instead may reflect elite incentives, patronage networks, and resources redirected to maintain political settlements rather than inclusive service delivery. Even where staff skills and knowledge are strengthened, capacity development has limited impact if officials lack the basic resources—electricity, technology, operating budgets—needed to apply new competencies. At the same time, TA aimed at system strengthening must be conceived over a long time horizon, yet remain agile and responsive to frequent shocks and rapidly changing conditions. Finally, as humanitarian funding declines, TA needs to help maintain immediate access through non-state and humanitarian providers while also carving out pathways toward more sustainable, government-led systems, rather than privileging one at the expense of the other.

Entry points for technical assistance (TA) in conflict and crisis settings are highly context-specific and emerge where local priorities, trusted relationships, policy windows, and available resources align. Opportunities may arise through coordination groups, technical bottlenecks, existing partnerships, education plans, or direct service delivery, as well as through incentives for reform, diaspora engagement, and locally driven initiatives. These examples are not prescriptive but illustrate the diverse spaces in which TA can meaningfully contribute to education system strengthening amidst rapidly shifting political and operational conditions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the face of diminishing resources for education cooperation globally, the imperative to strengthen and better target investments in education has become increasingly urgent. Official Development Assistance (ODA) for education is projected to decline by USD 3.2 billion—a 24 percent drop from 2023—which could leave an additional 6 million children out of school by 2026, one-third of them in humanitarian settings (UNICEF, 2025). Aid reductions are expected to disproportionately affect low-income countries more—with some expected to lose as much as half of current aid levels (UNESCO, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this study is part of ongoing efforts to support interventions that build the institutions, capacities, and systems needed to deliver durable improvements in education access, quality, and continuity. Specifically, this study examines the role of technical assistance (TA) in supporting education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. For the purposes of this study, TA is defined as knowledge-based assistance provided by local or international specialists to either governments or non-state actors intended to shape policies and institutions, support implementation and build organizational capacity.[1]

Spending on TA represents a substantial share of total aid flows. In 2022, OECD recorded total spending of USD 9.62 billion (constant USD) on technical cooperation in Least Developed Countries, an amount that has been on an upward trajectory since 2000 when total spending on TA was USD 3.68 billion in least developed countries (OECD, 2025).[2] However, spending in conflict and protracted crisis contexts represents a small percentage of this funding. Within the top 30 countries receiving the most aid for technical cooperation in 2022, only three are classified as fragile and conflict-affected by the World Bank: Ukraine (an outlier in terms of international support), Ethiopia, and Niger. As global aid contracts, it is expected that spending on education service delivery will be reduced, and TA will be further prioritised by donors.

Despite the significant and expanding investments in TA, there is scant evidence on its effectiveness in terms of building stronger education systems or of TA's contributions to improved education outcomes. The lack of a systematic evidence base is especially pronounced in conflict and crisis settings. A stronger evidence base is needed to identify which approaches to TA are effective, under what conditions, and how they can best guide future investments in conflict and crisis settings.

This review responds to these gaps by examining the existing evidence on TA and highlighting relevant findings for education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. It also explores the tensions, issues, and risks that shape potential entry points for TA across a range of crisis-affected settings. Education systems in conflict and crisis settings are highly varied, ranging from informal community-led services, to early-stage government-led systems or state structures with limited capacity or incentives to provide public services. Operating along a continuum—from humanitarian to development-oriented provision—these systems are often shaped by patterns of crisis and conflict, the legitimacy and incentives of governing authorities, and broader political economy dynamics. Donor engagement with governments also varies significantly across contexts presenting different opportunities and barriers for TA to strengthen education systems.

[1] Adapted from (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019).

[2] Estimates of TA spending as proportion of foreign assistance vary depending on how TA is defined and packaged. OECD figures underestimate the real scale of global spending on TA as they refer to freestanding TA programmes only. Other sources have estimated TA could be as much as 25% of total aid (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019).

Research Questions

1. What does existing evidence suggest supports effective or ineffective technical assistance for systems strengthening in conflict and crisis settings?
2. What are key characteristics, issues, and tensions within the following illustrative categories of conflict and crisis settings that inform entry points for TA?
    - Type I: Countries where donors do not engage with de facto authorities and operate mainly through humanitarian channels (e.g., Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar)
    - Type II: Countries in transition where donor engagement was previously restricted, but where political changes have newly opened opportunities for potential direct systems engagement (e.g., Syria).
    - Type III: Countries with donor engagement despite low state capacity and/or incentive to implement education reforms (e.g., South Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon).

These 'types' are not fixed or rigid classifications; rather, they are intended as tools to help think through particular parameters, barriers, and opportunities in approaching TA. Because they are primarily defined by donor engagement and not education system characteristics, there are both meaningful differences within categories and important similarities across categories.

Methods

In order to answer research question #1, this study consisted of a scoping review and synthesis of empirical evidence from academic and grey literature related to technical assistance for system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. The review also included relevant emerging and published ERICC outputs. Literature was drawn from the education sector as well as other relevant sectors working in humanitarian contexts. Example search terms included: technical assistance, technical cooperation, humanitarian, development, system strengthening, education system strengthening, capacity building, capacity development, governance, political economy, finance, and coordination. Due to the scarcity of robust studies in conflict and crisis settings, the review draws on evidence from broader low- and middle-income contexts as well as from TA initiatives in other sectors in conflict and crisis settings.

In order to answer research question #2, this study draws on semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) (n=5) with FCDO Education Advisors working within each of the three country types. In addition, KIIs were conducted with other key education experts (n=10) working on technical assistance systems strengthening projects in conflict and crisis affected contexts within INGOs, UN agencies, multilateral, and bi-lateral institutions. The KIIs helped to identify the system characteristics, tensions, and challenges working across the three scenarios as well as experiences and lessons learned supporting TA for education system strengthening.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, as a scoping review rather than a systematic review, it provides a broad overview of available evidence without the comprehensive search or appraisal processes of more systematic approaches. Second, it does not include an in-depth analysis of evaluations of education projects with technical assistance components, many of which remain internal publications or are difficult to identify as TA projects. Third, due to the rapid nature of this assessment, only a small number of key informant interviews were conducted (n=15), limiting the diversity of perspectives captured and constraining the ability to fully address research question #2.

Background

The evolution of technical assistance in development practice

Technical assistance emerged in development discourse in the 1940s when United States President Harry Truman called for making the nation's "store of technical knowledge" available to others (Rist, 2008, p. 71). The UN General Assembly soon launched the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (1949), appointing experts to decolonising countries to foster industrial and agricultural development and promote independence (Rist, 2008). From the outset, TA positioned developed countries in a privileged intellectual position, reinforcing the notion that the developing world had to adopt the ideas and practices of the developed (Escobar, 1992).

From the 1950's to 1970's, TA was focused on strengthening the technical knowledge and skills of individual government officials through the local adaptation of foreign ideas and practices (Bazbauers, 2017). It is now widely recognised that institutional models and ways of working from the Global North are often inappropriate for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This approach often led to TA substituting government capacity and core skills and functions being performed by international technical advisors. Under pressure to get the job done, these efforts often displaced, rather than built, local capacity (Cox and Norrington-Davis, 2019).

In the 1980s and 1990s, development organisations took a broader view of TA—beyond individual skills building—to the role of organisational development in the context of neoliberal policy reform (Berg, 1993). Development organisations and governments realised that capacity development required broader support to organisations to ensure sustainability. Beginning in the late 1990s, research on strengthening state systems focused on the role of institutions, and the 'formal and informal rules' that complement institutional and organisational level capacity.

By the 2000s, it was widely recognised that meaningful policy change cannot be externally imposed, shifting attention toward nationally owned development strategies. Initiatives like the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), and the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan (2011) called for better coordination between donors and countries, closer alignment of TA to country priorities, country ownership of TA, and the implementation of measurement and evaluation systems to ensure accountability among all parties (Kanagat et al., 2021). Donors supported these efforts by providing technical inputs—such as studies prepared by international experts, support to develop data systems, and assistance with drafting and coordinating national policies and strategies (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2022).

Politically informed adaptive TA

The most recent shift in conceptualising technical assistance draws on systems theory and political economy approaches. This shift frames TA as part of a complex adaptive system, rather than as the mechanistic, linear process as it has often been characterised (Nastase, Rajan, French and Bhattacharya, 2020b). Within this way of working, TA is understood as an intervention embedded in a complex system engaging a broad network of actors, each responding to diverse pressures and expectations in highly context-dependent ways (Kanagat et al., 2021). The relational and power dynamics of TA within interactions in the systems have also come to the fore in new models with the acknowledgement that persistent institutional challenges may be better understood in terms of power and politics as opposed to weak capacity (Jones, et al. 2012).

There are a wide range of development and public service reform approaches that support politically informed adaptive TA including: Thinking and working politically (Whaites, Piron, Menocal and Teskey, 2023), development entrepreneurship (Faustino and Booth, 2014), problem driven iterative adaptation (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2013), local systems practice (USAID, 2024), adaptive management practices (USAID, 2016), and smart technical assistance (Whaites, 2025) to name a few. Many of these models share several core principles such as centring local actors through locally-led initiatives, prioritising problem-driven rather than solution-driven engagement, and allowing space for iteration and course correction during implementation.

There are a few implications of the systems approach to TA. First, experimentation, flexibility, and learning become core TA programming elements. Some TA may address discrete and narrow system components, but larger scale system reforms are often part of an incremental, imperfect, episodic, adaptive, and opportunistic trajectory, which must learn from and build on successive interventions (Alari and Omas, 2016). Second, as systems are unpredictable and complex, there is a need to anticipate and plan for change so that TA can adapt to emergent conditions throughout implementation (USAID, 2024). Third, there are implications for how to measure success, shifting away from an overemphasis on linear theories of change and quick measurable results towards expanding the kind of longer-term sustainable results that are valued. Fourth, systems approaches suggest a shift in the role of technical advisor from doer, or partner, to facilitator to help navigate complex change processes with counterparts in the driver seat (Le et al., 2016; Nastase, et al., 2020b).

In addition, these models emphasise the importance of understanding systems in all their complexity as a starting point for the development of meaningful TA. Systems analysis can draw on a variety of tools and methods, applied either individually or in combination. The approach to understanding the system may depend on the objectives of the TA and characteristics of the system under study, but may include:

- **Political economy analysis:** to understand how and why political, social, economic, and institutional change comes about and endures, or is obstructed (Whaites et al., 2023)
- **Institutional analysis:** primarily for use with public sector bodies, institutional analysis may guide the design of capacity development, establish a `baseline' of existing capacity and what kind of support (e.g. technical expertise) may be most effective (Whaites, 2025).
- **Conflict analysis:** to capture the multidimensionality (political, social, economic, security, etc.) of conflict and to enable marginalisation to be addressed in a holistic manner (UNICEF, 2016).
- **Systems approaches:** to characterise key actors and interactions in the education system, think through how these interactions produce systems outcomes, and identify ways to intervene that can shift the system towards better outcomes (see, for example RISE, n.d.).

These tools provide a useful starting point for analysis and understanding systems; yet donors and practitioners must also evaluate their ability to realistically understand and influence complex and unpredictable political and economic dynamics (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2022).

Despite the large number of frameworks available to guide politically informed TA to support systems strengthening, the empirical evidence base on the extent to which these frameworks and principles improve development outcomes is not yet documented in a solid evidence base.

TA modalities

TA encompasses a wide range of objectives, approaches, and delivery formats, which vary across multiple dimensions. TA may be delivered in-person or virtually; target individuals, groups, or

organisations; and vary in terms of duration, intensity, and scale (Scott et al., 2022). TA can engage actors across all levels of the education system including government officials, NGOs, civil society networks, teachers, school administrators, teacher training institutes, donors, and INGO partners. Common forms of TA include training, consulting, coaching, facilitation, mentoring, and referral to information and evidence. More specifically, TA modalities include[3]:

- Embedding technical experts into government ministries to develop capacity and/or to support organisational change;
- Providing research, analysis, or advisory support to influence government legislation or policy implementation;
- Facilitating scholarships, professional development, and training courses;
- Facilitating knowledge exchange through non-state or professional networks to improve services;
- Supporting peer-to-peer partnerships between equivalent institutions;
- Providing financial or technical support to organisations that produce and disseminate policy-related data and knowledge.

While these modalities may be relevant in conflict and crisis settings, there is limited empirical evidence on how TA may need to be adapted to function effectively under conditions of political instability, insecurity, and institutional fragility to avoid unintended harm or inefficiency. Findings from this study related to the tensions that arise across different conflict and crisis contexts offer valuable insights into how TA modalities may need to be adapted to support education system strengthening more effectively in these settings.

FINDINGS

Evidence review on TA for education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings

There is scant evidence on the effectiveness of TA and its contributions to education outcomes in conflict and crisis settings. The body of evidence on the effectiveness of TA in low- and middle-income contexts is mixed and relatively weak (Le et al. 2016; Cox and Norrington-Davis, 2022). The evidence gap is *significantly greater* within conflict and crisis settings, particularly with regard to the recent movement towards politically informed and adaptive approaches to TA. High quality research and evaluations on which aspects of TA are effective, and when, how, and for whom to support education system strengthening are *extremely* limited. There has been little detailed analysis of the relative effectiveness of different forms of TA or of the conditions under which TA is most likely to be effective (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019). This is due to the following range of factors:

- **Underinvestment in monitoring and evaluation of TA.** There is a significant disconnect between the significant investments in TA and the monitoring and evaluation of these investments. Despite TA playing a large role in international cooperation, TA providers have largely unexplored the effectiveness of these investments (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019; OPF, 2020). While exceptions exist, (e.g. Montrose, 2024) such examples remain rare and insufficient to build a robust evidence base.
- **Time lags in achieving measurable system gains.** Of the TA evaluations that exist, most involve endline evaluations before TA may show its long-term results. A systematic review of

[3] From Cox and Norrington Davis, 2019. For a full list of common forms of TA see the publication.

TA across varying implementation contexts (mostly high income) and capacity building aims found only 5% of the studies examined sustainability of TA outcomes (Scott et al. 2022). This figure is likely much lower in conflict and crisis settings where resources are more scarce.

- **Methodological challenges in measuring the impact of TA.** Monitoring and evaluation has largely relied on perceptions (e.g. reported value of a training) or on narrow outputs (e.g. the production of a strategy) rather than robust measures of organisational capacity change. Moreover, in the absence of baseline data or a clear basis for causal claims, there is a risk TA providers or recipients may overstate benefits, particularly where dependency on TA has developed (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019; Whaites, 2025)
- **Focus on internal reporting of TA initiatives.** Monitoring and evaluation has largely focused on internal reporting that does not contribute to cultures of learning and mutual accountability to improve TA effectiveness and increase harmonisation with others in the sector. In addition, where TA components are bundled within broader operations, they are frequently not reported on which suggests the majority of TA is not evaluated (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019).
- **Lack of clarity on the definition, extent, and objectives of TA.** There is no consistent definition of TA, nor consistent standards for reporting objectives, scope, or modalities. This lack of conceptual clarity makes it difficult to compare across interventions or build a cumulative evidence base (Dunst, Annas, Wilkie and Hamby, 2019; Scott et al. 2022). Despite this lack of clarity, the focus has largely been on externally driven TA interventions limiting understanding on how to facilitate locally-driven knowledge sharing and co-development.

Despite the clear limitations in evidence for TA to support system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings, the following points review the literature that constitutes the evidence base to identify insights and priorities for future research. However, given the limitations above, these findings largely rely on endline evaluations or stakeholder perceptions of impact rather than rigorous, longitudinal evaluations capable of capturing system-level change.

Poor TA practices have been widely documented. Ineffective TA practices include supply- or donor-driven agendas over country priorities, poor coordination and accountability among TA actors, capacity substitution over genuine joint problem solving and knowledge co-creation, an emphasis on quick fixes and short-term thinking, and inadequate governance mechanisms to oversee and manage TA (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019; Greijn, Hauck, Land and Ubels, 2015; Kanagat et al., 2021). Implicit conditionality remains a challenge where resource-strained partners, aware of what kinds of policy commitments will be supported by donors, prepare development strategies with the objective of accessing external funds, undermining alignment with national priorities and TA effectiveness (Cox and Norrington-Davies, 2019). Another misalignment arises when TA providers benefit from meeting short-term, donor-defined outputs and are therefore incentivised to develop rapid quantifiable solutions that do not align with long-term system strengthening goals (Kanagat et al., 2021). Despite this body of critique, for the reasons described above, there is little empirical evidence on strategies that successfully enable TA to achieve long-term system gains.

Sound technical solutions are as important as the social relationships that surround their creation. An analysis of World Bank institutional learning on TA found that the relational dynamics between TA provider and recipient ultimately shaped its efficacy: the more collaborative, voluntary, and consensual the provision of World Bank TA, the greater the legitimacy and uptake of reforms (Bazbauers, 2017). This confirms other scholarship suggesting that participatory TA mechanisms through trusted relationships lead to greater domestic support from country officials and TA targets (Alari and Omas, 2016; Le et al., 2016). For example, a case study from a peer support programme was designed to facilitate honest and open 'practitioner-to-practitioner' discussions between UK and Ethiopian technical civil servants on technical aspects and implementation challenges. The respect

and trust created through this initiative led Ethiopian ministers to request UK practitioner support through a government-to-government arrangement to implement Ethiopian Civil Service reform priorities (Alari and Omas, 2016). This echoes other policy research that finds learning requires conditions in which individuals can be open about failure and challenge each other to explain or justify a course of action (Norris, Kidson, Bouchal and Rutter, 2014).

Embedding technical specialists shows mixed results, but there is little evidence related to the modalities and conditions of success. The practice of internationally supported secondments[4] within national government institutions is a widely implemented strategy for capacity development in conflict and crisis settings although there is little evidence on the modalities, system level impacts, or the factors needed for success (Lepistö, Gisselquist and Ojala, 2015). A study from the health sector in Botswana found that secondment can be a successful strategy to strengthen health systems in resource-limited settings but that maximising the benefits requires investment and management including: clear memorandums of understanding on secondments to promote ownership from all levels of management at the national host institution; a strong tripartite relationship among the donor, national host institution, and seconding organisation to facilitate collaboration; and clear and well-defined plans on secondment duration and plans to absorb the position into national structures (Grignon et al., 2014). In Ghana, the embedded Resident Adviser in the Ministry of Health (MoH) reportedly modelled and helped to establish different working habits such as formal reporting, collecting and analysing data, minute writing, and follow-up on decisions (Alari and Omas, 2016). Although relatively minor in relation to the many systemic challenges of the health sector in Ghana, this approach has reportedly increased the capability of MoH civil servants to translate plans into implementation which may add future value if internally driven change processes are initiated in the future. These case studies present the experience of single organisations in single resource-limited settings, do not represent the views of the national host institutions or donors, or explore long-term system level impact.

Local think tanks may be catalysts for country-driven development processes. Enhancing the capacities of think tanks in low-income contexts, whether within universities, NGOs, ministry departments, the media, foundations, consultancy firms, or policy and research institutes, may be catalytic for country-driven development. Particularly where TA supports the development of sustainable think tank organisational capacities and the ability to engage effectively with the wider policy environment. This approach is grounded in the assumption that think tanks, along with their knowledge networks, can strengthen ownership and multi-actor engagement in social change, create feedback loops within policymaking and enhance the quality of policy processes (Hauck and Young, 2015). Although there is limited evidence on the policy and system-level impact of these approaches there are promising examples of strengthening the capacity of the knowledge sector to produce evidence to inform priority social development issues (see for example, Hauck and Young, 2015). However, it is unclear how this approach would translate in conflict and crisis settings where human capital flight, including the loss of highly education professionals, academics, and researchers, can significantly constrain the viability and sustainability of such institutions.

Long-term donor commitment with continuity of staffing facilitates sustainable system gains. Research suggests that short-term TA initiatives, aligned with three-to five-year donor funding cycles, often necessitate rushed TA implementation and are too brief to achieve sustained change (Kanagat et al., 2021). In conflict and crisis settings, funding cycles may be significantly shorter. However, long-

[4] Secondment refers to movement of a staff member from one organisation to another for a fixed period, during which the staff member will normally be paid by and be subject to the staff regulations, supervision and rules of the receiving organisation, but will retain his or her rights of employment in the releasing organisation.

term investments of 10 years or more are seen to facilitate trusted relationships, allow time for iterative problem-solving, and secure deeper engagement and buy-in from national stakeholders (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Fixsen, Blase, Horner and Sugai, 2009). Donor and project-level continuity further strengthens institutional memory and the capacity to facilitate complex systems change. However, scholars caution that in aid-dependent contexts, prolonged external support may also reduce incentives for institutional transformation (Moss, Pettersson and Van de Walle, 2006). Moreover, in humanitarian settings, where circumstances demand rapid response, more nimble TA with shorter-term objectives may be more appropriate.

Power imbalances between government actors, TA providers, and funders impact the effectiveness of TA. Underlying the operational mechanics of TA, scholars have emphasised that unequal power relations between TA actors influence the way TA is managed, funded, designed, and implemented (Kanagat et al., 2021). These dynamics can undermine effectiveness in subtle but important ways. For example, civil servants may experience diminished morale when core functions for which they are responsible are carried out by an external partner with greater visibility or more polished outputs. Disparities in resourcing may exacerbate these imbalances if TA providers are equipped with better technology, higher salaries, and greater logistical support than government counterparts. Such asymmetries not only affect day-to-day collaboration but may also weaken alignment with national priorities, ownership, and sustainability.

Building sustainable system capacity requires institutional strengthening, not just individual capacity development. Capacity building falls short when it focuses on a small number of individuals who may be reassigned, overburdened, or unable to apply new skills. To support sustainability, TA should focus on institutional change, establishing better systems, and accessible institutional memory (OPM, 2021). This includes training at least two staff per function, embedding capacity building in action learning directly linked to participants' work, and agreeing regular follow-up between TA providers and participants. Automating key processes where feasible can reduce the risk of losing critical information between projects or staff transitions. Likewise, all project information and documentation—such as policies, strategies, user manuals, and data simulations—should be organised in accessible formats (e.g. a single online repository) for relevant government staff beyond the life of the TA programme (OPM, 2021).

Tensions in implementing TA across in conflict and crisis settings

The following section examines tensions, issues, and risks that arise in implementing TA to support education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. While these are discussed in relation to the three illustrative scenarios, or 'types', many of the tensions cut across categories and reflect broader dynamics common to fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Type I Countries

Countries where donors do not engage with de facto authorities and operate mainly through humanitarian channels (e.g., Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar)

Type I countries are often characterised by high numbers of out-of-school children and youth, extremely limited resources, and weak and fragmented national education systems. Governing authorities often lack the capacity, control, and/or the incentives to implement education reforms and develop an education system that serves the broader population. In some cases, there may be

no functional ministry presence in marginalised regions, or governing authorities may be unwilling to recognise or address the education needs of marginalised groups.

In these contexts, delivering education for children and youth that are not being reached by the formal system means working through humanitarian, development, and grassroots systems. Broadening the definition of actors that constitute the education system is essential in contexts where engagement with government is limited or completely restricted. In such settings, support must focus on education provision outside of national government structures. KIs emphasised the importance of asset-based approaches that value and recognise community initiatives, ethnic and community education systems, and other bottom-up models. KIs also highlighted the value of strengthening long-standing humanitarian education systems, which in many cases have operated for decades but remain the only systems providing education for marginalised populations.

Type I: Key tensions, issues, and risks

1. Scale and sustainability outside national systems

In the absence of engagement with government, TA often becomes project-based, with activities confined to limited geographies and project timelines. Activities implemented outside of government systems often face limited pathways to institutionalisation or self-financing, especially in conflict and crisis settings where resources are already strained. However, there may be opportunities to extend the reach of TA and have a wider impact by promoting change across key donors and implementing agencies in ways that strengthen future programming and leverage multiple large-scale investments (see, for example CMP SCALE example).

2. Decentralisation, fragmentation, and lack of national coordination

Decentralisation and limited coordination mechanisms at sub-national or school levels present significant challenges for scaling the impact of TA in conflict and crisis settings. In many crisis contexts, project based-approaches as well as community-driven activities (e.g., parent–teacher associations (PTAs)) are widespread but highly localised, operating primarily at the level of individual schools without strong linkages to national or regional coordinating bodies. This fragmentation means that TA aimed at strengthening PTAs must engage across numerous decentralised nodes, making it resource-intensive and difficult to generate system-wide influence. Without a mechanism in place to connect these efforts across localities, TA risks remaining isolated and uneven in its impact. Decentralised systems may also present entry points for TA related to coordination. For example, in Myanmar there are concerns that the lack of coordination between ethnic education systems could exacerbate fragmentation and grievances between groups. Supporting coordination in this context is highly sensitive and resource-intensive, yet it represents a potentially important role for TA—particularly given that UN agencies, focused on managing global fund mechanisms, are not taking on this task.

3. Balancing humanitarian needs and system-level objectives

Where basic education and non-education needs are unmet, TA for higher-level objectives is likely to be deprioritised by local actors. Key informants shared examples of TA interventions focused on mother tongue instruction, pedagogical reform, or digital learning being introduced in schools where teacher salaries went unpaid and students' basic WASH, health, and nutrition needs were not met. These unmet basic needs undermined the ability to meet the higher-level TA objectives. In contexts facing acute crises, addressing basic needs is essential to secure motivation and buy-in for system-level reforms. This raises important questions about how TA in acute contexts can be paired with service delivery in ways that address immediate humanitarian priorities while also advancing longer-term system objectives.

4. Reconciling non-engagement with authorities and TA operational realities

Even where donors cannot directly engage with unrecognised regimes, programmes may still operate in territories under government control and require some level of approval. For example, in Afghanistan, UNESCO led the development of the Afghanistan Education Sector Support Program (AESSP) which outlines education sector priorities without any engagement with the Taliban authorities. However, implementation of the plan ultimately required approval from the de facto government to operate in its territories, creating tensions and significant delays when authorities rejected initiatives they were not consulted on during the design stage. In Afghanistan, given the operational constraints faced by most INGOs, there is a growing recognition of the need to engage strategically with governing authorities on planning and other technical issues in order to be able to operate effectively (KI, INGO).

5. TA to build civil society capacity has limited system impact without structural reforms to transfer power and responsibility

In many humanitarian contexts, capacity development and mentorship for local civil partners and sub-awardees has long been part of all education projects (KI, INGO). These efforts are perceived to strengthen individual knowledge and skills, and improve organisational capacity and implementation efficiency. However, these gains may be limited at the system level as international financing continues to be highly fragmented, project specific, and channelled though INGO prime contractors rather than directly to local actors. Without a clear vision for transfer of power and responsibility, such as direct responsibility for managing resources at scale and leading on agenda-setting and strategy, TA to strengthen civil society at a systems level may have limited impact.

6. Capacity and access in remote marginalised areas limits entry points for TA

In historically marginalised and remote areas, identifying entry points for TA to support education system strengthening is particularly challenging. These contexts are often characterised by the absence of government presence, weak or non-existent coordination mechanisms, and limited (or no) implementing partners. Technical capacity to deliver and absorb high-quality TA is minimal in these settings, while basic infrastructure—such as electricity, internet connectivity, and transportation—is frequently lacking, making sustained engagement difficult. As a result, both capacity and access constraints limit the feasibility of traditional TA modalities, underscoring the need for context-specific approaches that account for extreme isolation and structural marginalisation.

7. Ownerships and perception of TA in fragmented systems

In politically fragmented contexts, conflict-sensitive approaches to TA are essential to avoid reinforcing divisions and to ensure system-wide relevance. Securing acceptance from multiple governing authorities can be highly sensitive, as the optics of engagement and ownership shape whether TA products are perceived as legitimate or as aligned with competing groups. Where outputs are seen as "belonging" to one actor, uptake in other regions may be limited or actively resisted. Trust in external actors is also often low, making it difficult to openly identify education challenges or to collaborate with researchers and technical specialists. Designing TA in conflict and crisis settings therefore requires careful attention to conflict dynamics, inclusive consultation processes, and deliberate strategies to depoliticise engagement and build trust across diverse stakeholders.

Box 1: SCALE TA to support non-formal education provision in Sudan (ongoing in 2025)[5]

The war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 disrupted education for all 19 million school-aged children, leaving the 12.5 million previously enrolled students at high risk of dropout, and those already out of school less likely to ever return (UNICEF, 2023). Although schools have been gradually reopening since early 2024, non-formal education (NFE) has become a critical lifeline for providing continuity of learning and protection where formal school is inaccessible or overcrowded. Yet its reach has been alarmingly limited, and the most vulnerable groups have remained largely excluded as of 2025.

The objective of the SCALE TA initiative is to provide technical guidance on enhancing the reach, quality, and relevance of non-formal education programming through the following specific objectives:

1. Map and develop learner profiles to determine the education needs of different types of learners with a focus on those not enrolled in or attending formal education.
2. Map NFE programming to identify what is offered, where, and by whom, as well as the scope, objectives, dosage, assessment, and implications for certification and school-to-work transitions.
3. Link the learner profiles to the established NFE programmes and undertake gap analysis.
4. Engage stakeholders, including through the INEE Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) and Education Cluster, to develop and operationalise concrete recommendations for partners and education authorities on adapting, enhancing, and harmonising NFE.

This initiative linked global best practice on enhancing non-formal education with a problem identified through the Education Cluster at a critical moment, when there was little clarity on the shape of non-formal education provision under major new investments from ECHO, GPE, and ECW. At the time, all actors were in the planning phase, with grant agents seeking feasible approaches for delivering non-formal education to ensure continuity in areas without formal provision. FCDO only stepped in once it was clear that no partner had the capacity to respond efficiently. As the initiative is ongoing, it is too early to gauge impact but promising practices include:

- **Local problem identification and ownership.** Rooted in challenges identified by the Education Cluster and Local Education Group partners—ensuring strong buy-in from diverse stakeholders.
- **Local technical expert with meaningful partner engagement.** The TA initiative is supported by a Sudanese consultant with deep contextual expertise and is further supported by cluster coordinators and a reference group of stakeholders actively supporting education in Sudan—bolstering relevance and local buy-in.
- **International best practice.** TA included support from the INEE Accelerated Education Work Group (AEWG)—ensuring the approach to research and recommendations development were informed by international best practice.
- **Depoliticised TA delivery.** FCDO stepped back from direct implementation, enabling the accountable grant holder (EDT) to lead, and positioning the work in the technical space.
- **Strategic window of engagement.** Aligned with major donor financing windows (GPE System Transformation Grant, ECW Multiyear Resilience Program, ECHO Humanitarian

[5] Drawn from the SCALE TA request form 2: Detailed assignment of scope (internal document).

Implementation Plan)—increasing potential sustainability and scale through influence on forthcoming investments.

- **Facilitative donor role.** FCDO acted as a facilitator rather than driver of change, allowing for problem-driven and locally responsive engagement—strengthening prospects for relevance and uptake.

Type II Countries

Countries in transition where donor engagement was previously restricted, but where political changes have newly opened opportunities for potential direct systems engagement (e.g., Syria).

Syria represents a country in transition from a non-recognised regime toward potential reintegration into formal diplomatic and development relationships. Ministries are assuming responsibility for territories and populations far beyond their previous remit, requiring them to govern diverse communities while still determining basic priorities, strategies, and modes of operation. National systems and processes are often nascent or absent, with government structures, staff, and institutional arrangements continually evolving. This institutional volatility creates uncertainty for donors such as FCDO, which are building trust and developing new bilateral relationships in highly complex operational contexts. Although these transitions are often framed as a linear shift from humanitarian to state-led provision, they are rarely straightforward as risks of backsliding, renewed conflict, or escalating humanitarian needs remain high.

Type II: Key tensions, issues, risks

8. Risk of displacing or eroding emerging national system capacity

In contexts transitioning from humanitarian-led provision to nationally led education systems, such as Syria, it is essential that TA does not inadvertently displace or erode emerging government capacities. Existing evidence clearly shows that poorly designed TA can substitute for ministry functions rather than strengthen them, creating parallel structures that undermine national system strengthening. In transition contexts, where ministries are beginning to reassert responsibility for planning, financing, and education service delivery, TA that bypasses or duplicates these functions risks slowing the consolidation of state systems and weakening their legitimacy. Ensuring that TA complements, rather than replaces, ministry investments is therefore critical to building durable national capacity and supporting a sustainable shift away from humanitarian dependence.

9. Supporting national systems while ensuring TA does not reinforce structures that perpetuate exclusion or contribute to conflict

TA must be careful to support reforms that are conflict sensitive and do not contribute to the drivers of conflict. The new Syrian transitional government presents an important opportunity for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and inclusive democratic governance. At the same time, there are meaningful concerns over sectarianism, centralisation of power, and exclusivity. Practical approaches currently used in Syria to address these concerns include the use of targeted assessments, such as ERICC Helpdesk rapid political economy analyses, to better understand systems in flux; leveraging the expertise of politically focused colleagues within FCDO; and employing third-party monitoring to review investments through a conflict-sensitive lens.

10. Ensuring TA is driven by local priorities, coordinated, and has long-term strategic value

Transitional moments often attract heightened donor attention and a surge of new actors eager to provide support. While this influx can create opportunities, it also risks overwhelming already overstretched ministries of education with fragmented initiatives, duplicative efforts, and short-term projects that are misaligned with ministry priorities. Without strong coordination mechanisms and deliberate alignment with nationally defined goals, TA may generate transaction costs for ministries rather than strengthening the education system.

11. Strengthening critical non-state systems vs. perpetuating parallel services in emergencies

Humanitarian and grassroots providers play an indispensable role in reaching learners excluded from national systems in conflict and crisis settings. Yet, the humanitarian architecture is marked by significant inertia, and external actors may be incentivised—through funding cycles, mandates, or institutional logics—to sustain temporary parallel services rather than transition toward integrated, nationally anchored provision. TA must therefore navigate the dual imperative of supporting immediate education access through non-state systems while ensuring that such investments contribute to, rather than substitute for, the development of sustainable education systems over time.

Type III Countries

Countries with donor engagement despite low state capacity and/or incentive to implement education reforms (e.g., South Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon).

Many Type III countries are characterised by poor public service provision where governing elites lack the incentives or capacity to implement inclusive education reforms. Defining the education system often requires broadening the lens beyond public sector actors to capture the diverse financing mechanisms and implementers that sustain education service provision. Government ministries and humanitarian sectors outside of education may also directly shape education outcomes and relevance. For example, refugee education is closely tied to financial inclusion policies that determine whether refugees can work, open bank accounts, or access livelihoods. Likewise, ministries and humanitarian actors responsible for health, labour, social protection, infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity influence whether schools can operate effectively and whether learners are able to transition from school to work. There is also a potential value in expanding the boundaries of the system beyond national boundaries to regional economic and educational alliances to share ideas, and promote positive competition and regional initiatives that promote education access (e.g., regional qualifications frameworks). Expanding the definition of the "system" in conflict and crisis contexts therefore entails mapping these interdependencies and understanding how cross-sectoral and humanitarian linkages, alongside varied financing channels, condition the possibilities for education system strengthening.

Type III: Key tensions, issues, risks

12. Capacity is not necessarily the constraint on education sector performance

While it is often assumed that education systems underperform in conflict and crisis settings due to lack of capacity, there are many other reasons why institutions may perform poorly. Political economy theories suggest that public systems may fail to serve the wider population because governing elites lack incentives to invest in broad-based services, because institutions are deliberately kept weak to preserve opportunities for patronage and rent-seeking, or because resources are captured and redirected to maintain political settlements that prioritise regime survival over inclusive service delivery (Kelsall, 2018). In Lebanon, for example, improving public education services, which serve the most marginalised learners, or taking ownership of refugee needs is largely not a priority of political

elites. Further, although many officials are highly skilled, massive underpayment due to the economic crisis has impacted motivation, morale, and productivity. In such contexts, technical solutions may have limited impact on national system capacity building or system strength without aligning with political and economic realities and constraints.

13. Balancing investments in skills and knowledge development with the resources, infrastructure, and operational conditions needed to apply them.

Individual capacity development loses value when staff lack the resources to apply the acquired skills. In many conflict and crisis contexts, ministries face basic operational challenges such as unreliable electricity and limited access to technology. Effective application of knowledge and skills requires complementary resources—whether funding for service delivery, workforce capacity, or essential infrastructure like computers, vehicles, or fuel. One KI illustrated this gap through an example of a TA initiative to strengthen provincial government in Kenya. The UN agency conducted a series of high quality trainings for ministry officials on teacher supervision, which ultimately had limited impact as they lacked the vehicles and fuel needed to visit the schools and conduct the evaluations. TA must therefore be designed with operational constraints in mind, particularly where initiatives are not coupled with financial support for service delivery. Another KI was concerned that in the global environment of decreasing financial resources globally, "everybody wants to be a catalyser" including efforts to shift away from service delivery towards TA, policy, and advocacy efforts which may not be effective if adequate resources are not in place to back up these initiatives (KI, UN). In the longer term, chronic underfunding of government in conflict and crisis settings hinders implementation of TA related projects and threatens post-project financial sustainability (Godfrey et al, 2002).

14. Multi-year TA strategies to support systems strengthening on a realistic timeline versus agility and reflexivity

While systems change operates over long timelines, conflict and crisis contexts are characterised by frequent internal and external shocks, requiring TA to remain agile and responsive to unpredictable conditions. Existing (limited) evidence suggests that changes in government have a negative effect on the effectiveness of TA programmes, especially when new actors have different priorities (Megersa, 2019b) This aligns with other systems practice frameworks which emphasise building staff capacity to anticipate and plan for change, and managing adaptively to enable TA to adapt to emergent conditions throughout implementation (USAID, 2024). In these contexts, building flexibility into contracts and budgets can allow implementers to adapt activities to ongoing learning, changes in context, and shifting priorities (OPM, 2021). Crisis modifiers are a valuable strategy to allow resources to be rapidly reallocated in response to shocks; however, this may mean shifting the focus away from longer-term system strengthening objectives to meet immediate humanitarian needs.

15. Balancing humanitarian education provision and TA for national system strengthening

As funding for humanitarian services declines, there is a risk that TA will divert resources away from direct delivery, leaving the most marginalised learners without access. The challenge is to maximise impact across both domains: supporting non-state and humanitarian providers to reach those excluded from national systems, while simultaneously identifying entry points to shift toward more sustainable, government-led approaches. Addressing this tension requires working coherently across the humanitarian–development nexus to ensure that immediate access needs are met without undermining long-term system-building objectives.

Box 2: TARGET- TA to Reinforce the General Education and Quality Improvement for Equity (GEQIP-E) programme [6] in Ethiopia August 2019-January 2024

TARGET was a FCDO technical assistance programme implemented by Education Development Trust (EDT) which aimed to amplify the reach and effectiveness of the flagship bi-lateral investment in Ethiopia, the General Education and Quality Improvement for Equity (GEQIP-E) programme.

Since 2008, GEQIP has been operating in Ethiopia across three phases, with the overarching aim of enriching the teaching and learning conditions in primary schools and fortifying educational institutions and service delivery at both federal and regional tiers. The third phase, GEQIP-E (2018-2024), quality component focused on the continuous professional development (CPD) of educators and the reduction of educational disparities addressing gender, learners with disabilities, and gaps between pastoral and non-pastoral communities. The programme also sought to strengthen education data systems including EMIS and the evaluation of learning outcomes like Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and National Learning Assessment (NLA).

The TA component, TARGET, aimed to bolster GEQIP-E through four key outcome areas:

1. Facilitating a delivery approach at federal, regional, and woreda levels
2. The establishment of professional, practice-oriented education leadership training
3. The transformation and capacity building of current education leaders
4. The enhancement of monitoring, evaluation, research, data, and learning within the education system

TARGET was a £20.8 million investment which speaks to both the scale and expectations for the program as well as making it an important reference point for the design and delivery of future large-scale TA initiatives. Overall, findings from the endline review emphasise TARGET's successes in contributing to GEQIP-E objectives. The following are select findings and lessons learned from the endline evaluation that may inform future FCDO TA initiatives in conflict and crisis settings:

1. Improving training programmes is not sufficient for sustainable capacity development where, as in many conflict and protracted crisis settings, incentive structures and financing are not in place for them to be sustained over time. While TARGET strengthened the school leadership training programme and developed an accreditation process, the certificate's perceived lack of contribution to career advancement raised concerns about its use going forward. At the same time, the MoE raised concerns that there would be inadequate funding to support components of the school leadership training system, such as Professional Learning Communities and monitoring visits, again, limiting the future impact of programme improvements. Without explicit links to system-level supports including career incentives and financing, even technically sound capacity development initiatives risk being perceived as irrelevant and unsustainable.[7]
2. Advancing women's leadership requires TA to go beyond building individual capacity to address structural and systemic barriers to gender equity. TARGET's accelerated women leadership programme trained 4,500 school leaders (728 female) but fell short of its goals to increase the proportion of women school principals (from 9% to 20%) and female school

[6] Drawn from the programme review report: Montrose. (April, 2024) Endline Evaluation of TARGET Endline Evaluation Report.

[7] This example is related to tension 13.

supervisors (from 4% to 20%). This was in part due to systemic challenges that make it difficult for women to take on leadership positions often present in crisis settings, including: A low proportion of women with the education qualifications required for leadership positions, household and social responsibilities of women, lack of confidence to compete for leadership positions, negative community attitudes toward female leaders and challenge of remote school locations. The impact of capacity-building for women may be limited without a commensurate effort in structural reforms, the development of supportive policies for women and mothers, and community-level efforts to shift gender norms.

3. TA in conflict and crisis settings requires adaptability and agility in the face of shocks. TARGET operated amid conflict, COVID-19, political shifts, and changes of key government officials at the federal and regional levels. The programme employed various mechanisms to navigate these challenges including embedded technical experts within REBs and MoE to facilitate an integrated approach to communication and coordination, regular stakeholder meetings, strong management processes and the ability to reallocate resources in response to realities on the ground, and a risk-adjusted implementation strategy which modified activities in conflict-affected areas.[8]

Entry points for TA in conflict and crisis settings

Entry points for TA in conflict and crisis settings are highly context-specific, shaped by a convergence between a range of factors including the presence of committed champions, the opening of policy or influencing windows, the strength of relationships, locally-driven problem identification, available resources, and promising practices. What works in one setting may not be feasible in another, and opportunities often shift rapidly with changes in political dynamics or crises. The entry points outlined below are therefore not intended as prescriptive recommendations but as illustrative examples of the kinds of spaces where opportunities may emerge.

- **Education coordination groups.** Coordination groups (e.g., Education Clusters, LEGs, refugee education working groups) can help to identify bottle necks, knowledge gaps, and capacity limitations in the sector. These groups may also be important venues for the development of concrete TA support mechanisms and partnerships. Ensuring these groups are inclusive, and not dominated by international UN and INGO actors, but instead meaningfully involve local stakeholders is essential.
- **Technical gaps.** KIs shared a long list of discrete technical issues that may provide entry points for TA in conflict and crisis settings, for example around: data systems, EMIS, learning assessments, teacher professional development, teacher well-being, and system responsiveness to climate shocks. Given shrinking UN presence and reduction in country level education clusters, TA to strengthen donor and civil society coordination capacity was raised across KIIs. Addressing technical gaps in ways that support sustainable system gains is highly context specific. KIs noted the importance of shifting the mindset from the transfer of international solutions to collaborative joint problem solving and facilitation led by experts that are well placed to facilitate learning, unlock technical bottlenecks, and develop trusted relationships.
- **Existing trusted relationships, areas of expertise, and FCDO comparative advantage**. Long-standing relationships and recognised expertise can provide critical entry points for TA

[8] This example is related to tension 14.

because they build on established credibility, reduce transaction costs, and create demand-driven opportunities for engagement. For example, in Syria the regional programme Manahel, running since 2018, is well regarded by the MoE. Based on the perception of quality implementation over time, the MoE requested additional TA support on data and safeguarding systems, key areas of Manahel expertise.

- **Education plans** (e.g., transitional education plans, joint response plans, education sector plans) can represent helpful entry points for TA in conflict and crisis settings as they establish shared priorities, create space for donor coordination, and may highlight critical gaps in education response where TA approaches may be appropriate.
- **Direct education service delivery** provides a concrete entry point for grounding TA immediately in a pilot space. Connecting TA to education programmes can help to secure buy-in and encourage more proactive engagement by associating it with visible and funded activities.
- **Where there are incentives to support reforms.** Financial incentives and conditionalities, including co-financing by national authorities, can create compelling entry points for TA in conflict and crisis settings as they may motivate engagement in reform processes. Key informants emphasised that TA is especially effective when linked to changes in financing flows or embedded in government programming to enhance scale and sustainability.[9]
- **Where there is not funding to support service delivery.** Where FCDO does not have investments in service delivery, TA initiatives may support the alignment of anticipated donor investments, strengthen planning and coordination, or support governments and partners to mobilise domestic or international financing to fund sector plans.
- **Localised entry points for TA.** Where political authority and state institutional capacity are weak or fragmented, bottom-up approaches may provide more effective entry points for TA. Interventions that strengthen school leadership, support school-level resource management, or build the capacity of PTAs and associations of parents and children with disabilities can enhance accountability and responsiveness at the local level. Such localised efforts may generate disproportionate gains for system strengthening by embedding change where education service delivery and community engagement directly intersect. KIs also highlighted the value of TA interventions that elevate the voices of marginalised families in education decision-making and supporting local CSOs to develop accounting and financing systems that increase their eligibility for international grants.
- **Deliberate and strategic incorporation of diaspora engagement in TA approaches.** Especially in contexts where refugees are considering voluntary return, such as Syria, engaging the diaspora in TA can support gaps in agency, relevance, and technical expertise. Diaspora human capital can be mobilised through temporary or virtual return programmes, training, and mentorship initiatives, and is particularly valuable where domestic capacity in the country of origin remains weak or is in the process of recovery (Russell, 2025).
- **Leveraging key partnerships.** TA initiatives can be strengthened where partners bring complementary comparative advantages. The World Bank-FCDO-UNHCR INSPIRE project was highlighted as a partnership that enables FCDO to expand its impact through collaboration with UNHCR, who contributes deep understanding of issues in refugee communities, and the World Bank, who offer well established relationships with government counterparts.

[9] Donor incentives can work against bottom-up processes. As Boesen warns, the "asymmetrical relationship between donors and recipients and skewed incentives can make it impossible for donors to be 'honest brokers' of endogenous political processes" (2015, p. 22). As such, TA interventions create incentives to adopt international best practices that are unlikely to work in the national context (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In the current climate of declining education aid and rising humanitarian needs, ensuring that scarce resources are used effectively and that TA investments contribute to long-term system gains is critical. This review underscores that, despite substantial investment in TA globally, the evidence base on the effectiveness of TA in conflict and crisis settings remains weak. While numerous conceptual frameworks and guiding principles exist, there is little empirical research on which TA strategies work, in which settings, and under what conditions.

The review also highlights the complex challenges and tensions that TA to support system strengthening must navigate in conflict and crisis settings. These include balancing immediate service delivery with longer-term system reform, supporting non-state provision without entrenching parallel systems, and engaging with governments and non-state actors in ways that are conflict-sensitive and politically informed. Such tensions underscore the need to move beyond technocratic solutions and toward approaches that are locally led, politically informed, and adaptive.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following section outlines gaps in the evidence base related to technical assistance for education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. Addressing the evidence gaps identified means not only documenting what works but also understanding the conditions under which TA can enable governments and local actors to exercise ownership, build accountability, and achieve inclusive system strengthening. Ensuring this research is relevant and actionable necessitates approaches that are grounded in contextual realities, driven by priorities on the ground, and led from the perspective of local actors. Research processes should align with efforts to promote promising partnerships (Menashy and Zakharia, 2022) and decolonise international and comparative education research (Takayama, Sriprakash and Connell, 2017) and education in emergencies research (Oddy and Adinsa, 2025). This may require support for studies in local languages, a diversity of research paradigms, and the elevation of local government and community perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

- **Longitudinal impact of TA in conflict and crisis settings**. There is very little evidence on the medium- and long-term outcomes of TA. More research is needed to track what happens one, three, or five years after TA projects conclude to assess direct, indirect, unintended, and longitudinal outcomes on state and non-state system strengthening.
- **Independent, high-quality TA evaluations.** There is a scarcity of rigorous, external evaluations of TA to support education system strengthening in conflict and crisis settings. More independent assessments using mixed-methods and comparative designs are needed to strengthen accountability and learning. A widely adopted standard definition for TA would enable sector wide learning.
- **Baseline and comparative data.** Most studies rely on endline evaluations with weak or absent baselines. Future research should incorporate baseline data and comparative approaches to better capture change attributable to TA.
- **South–South cooperation in conflict and crisis settings.** While South–South and triangular cooperation has been studied in other LMICs, its role, modalities, and potential in conflict and crisis settings remain largely unexplored. Evidence is needed on whether and how these approaches contribute to system strengthening.

- **Localisation and power transfer.** Research should examine how TA can be designed to support community-driven education initiatives and strengthen local systems in ways that transfer power, resources, and decision-making authority to national and community-based actors in conflict and crisis settings.
- **Perspectives of TA recipients.** There is a dearth of research that captures the experiences of those directly targeted by TA—including ministry officials, civil servants at different levels, teachers, and local CSOs—to assess relevance, understand TA demand, ownership, and perceived value of TA initiatives and connections to system-level outcomes in conflict and crisis settings.
- **Measuring system-level change.** Research should move beyond outputs (e.g., number of trainings, policy documents) to assess how TA contributes to organisational capacity, institutional resilience, and system-wide performance.
- **Financing and incentives.** Evidence is limited on how different financing modalities (e.g., pooled funds, conditionalities, co-funding, crisis modifiers) shape the effectiveness of TA and incentivise sustainable reforms.

REFERENCES

Alari, C., and Omas, P. (2016). InsideOUT A series of personal perspectives on government effectiveness: Improving government effectiveness across the world Can lessons from the UK's reform experience help? INSIDE About the Institute for Government.

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., and Woolcock, M. (2013). Escaping capability traps through problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA). World Development, 51, 234-244.

Bazbauers, A. R. (2017). World Bank Technical Assistance: The Relational Dynamics of Policy Movement. Public Administration and Development, 37(4), 246–259. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1796

Berg, E. J. (1993). Rethinking technical cooperation: Reforms for capacity building in Africa. United Nations Development Programme.

Boesen, N. (2015). Can donors do better in public sector capacity development? In. Greijn, H., Hauck, V., Land, T., and Ubels, J. (Eds.). Capacity development beyond aid. SNV

Netherlands Development Organisation and European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/migratedNewsAssets/Files/CAPACITY_BOOKLET_ENG_WEB.pdf

Booth, D., and Unsworth, S. (2014). Politically smart, locally led development. ODI. https://media.odi.org/documents/9204.pdf

Chami, R., Darkey, E., and Williams, O. H. (2021). A Time to Build: Does Technical Assistance Matter for Revenue Mobilization? IMF Working Paper. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3799627

Chisholm, L. and Steiner-Khamsi, G. (eds). (2009) South-South cooperation in education and development. (International perspectives on education reform). Cape Town: HSRC Press. http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/5028

Cox, M., and Norrington-Davies, G. (2019). New thinking on an old problem. Open Society Foundation.

Dunst, C. J., Annas, K., Wilkie, H., and Hamby, D. W. (2019). Review of the effects of technical assistance on program, organization and system change. In International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (Vol. 8, Issue 2, pp. 330–343). Institute of Advanced Engineering and Science. https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v8i2.17978

Escobar, A. (1992). Imagining a post-development era? Critical thought, development and social movements. Social text, (31/32), 20-56.

Faustino, J., and Booth, D. (2014). Development entrepreneurship: how donors and leaders can foster institutional change. Working Politically in Practice Series.

Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K., Horner, R., Sims, B., and Sugai, G. (2009). Scaling-up brief. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina. https://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023-SISEP-Brief-2-Current.pdf

Godfrey, M., Sophal, C., Kato, T., Piseth, L. V., Dorina, P., Saravy, T., ... and Sovannarith, S. (2002). Technical assistance and capacity development in an aid-dependent economy: the experience of Cambodia. World Development, 30(3), 355-373.

Greijn, H., Hauck, V., Land, T., and Ubels, J. (2015). Capacity development beyond aid. SNV

Netherlands Development Organisation and European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/migratedNewsAssets/Files/CAPACITY_BOOKLET_ENG_WEB.pdf

Grignon, J. S., Ledikwe, J. H., Makati, D., Nyangah, R., Sento, B. W., & Semo, B. W. (2014). Maximizing the benefit of health workforce secondment in Botswana: an approach for strengthening health systems in resource-limited settings. Risk Management and Healthcare Policy, 91-98.

Hauck, V. and Young, J. (2015). Strengthening countries' capacity to steer themselves: Experiences from think tank and knowledge network support programmes. In Greijn, H., Hauck, V., Land, A., and Ubels, J. (Eds). Capacity development beyond aid. SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.

Hoeffler, A., and Justino, P. (2023). Aid and fragile states (WIDER Working Paper, Vol. 2023). UNU-WIDER. https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2023/391-8

Jones, H., Jones, N., Shaxson, L. and Walker, D. (2012) Providing practical guidance for in-country programming: the value of analyzing knowledge, policy and power. ODI Background Note. https://odi.org/en/publications/providing-practical-guidance-for-in-country-programming-the-value-of-analysing-knowledge-policy-and-power/

Kanagat, N., Chauffour, J., Ilunga, J. F., Ramazani, S. Y., Ajiwohwodoma, J. J. O., Anas-Kolo, S. I., ... and Kasungami, D. (2021). Country perspectives on improving technical assistance in the health sector. Gates open research, 5, 141.

Kelsall, T. (2018). Thinking and working with political settlements. The case of Tanzania (No. 541). ODI.

Kelsall, T., Colenbrander, S., and Simpson, N. (2024). One Size Won't Fit All: Designing Country Platforms for Different Political Contexts. ODI.

Laws, E., and Marquette, H. (2018). Thinking and working politically: Reviewing the evidence on the integration of politics into development practice over the past decade. https://research.birmingham.ac.uk/en/publications/thinking-and-working-politically-reviewing-the-evidence-on-the-in

Le, L. T., Anthony, B. J., Bronheim, S. M., Holland, C. M., and Perry, D. F. (2016). A Technical Assistance Model for Guiding Service and Systems Change. Journal of Behavioral Health Services and Research, 43(3), 380–395. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-014-9439-2

Lepistö, R. S., Gisselquist, R. M., and Ojala, J. (2015). 'Embedded' Assistance: Finn church aid's secondment in somalia. International Peacekeeping, 22(4), 354–371. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2015.1059283

Megersa, K. (2019). The Effectiveness of Technical Assistance in Middle Income Countries. K4D Helpdesk Report.

Megersa, K. (2019b). The Implication of Government Change to Technical Assistance Question Does a change in government affect (increase/reduce) the impact of technical assistance. K4D Helpdesk Report.

Menashy, F. and Zakharia, Z. (2022). Guiding principles for promising partnership practices in education in emergencies. Dubai Cares.

Montrose. (April, 2024) Endline Evaluation of TARGET Endline Evaluation Report. (Internal document)

Moss, T., Pettersson, G., and Van de Walle, N. (2006). An aid-institutions paradox. A review essay on aid dependency and state building in Sub-Saharan Africa, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development (CGD Working Paper 74/2006). https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/5646_file_WP_74.pdf

Nastase, A., Rajan, A., French, B., and Bhattacharya, D. (2020). Technical assistance: a practical account of the challenges in design and implementation. In AAS Open Research (Vol. 4, pp. 1–15). F1000 Research Ltd. https://doi.org/10.12688/gatesopenres.13205.1

Nastase, A., Rajan, A., French, B., and Bhattacharya, D. (2020b). Towards reimagined technical assistance: the current policy options and opportunities for change. Gates Open Research, 4, 180. https://doi.org/10.12688/gatesopenres.13204.1

Norris, E., Kidson, M., Bouchal, P., and Rutter, J. (2014). Doing them justice: Lessons from four cases of policy implementation. Institute for Government, London, 12.

Oddy, J., and Adinsa, M. (2025). Reimagining Humanitarianism and Refugee Research: Decolonisation or Symbolic Gesture?. Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, 6(1), 59-62.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2025). Data Page: Total official development assistance for technical co-operation 2022. https://archive.ourworldindata.org/20250730-091307/grapher/total-official-development-assistance-for-technical-cooperation.html

Oxford Policy Fellowship (OPF). (2020). Revisiting technical assistance: Evidence-based learning. OPF. https://www.policyfellowship.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/OPF_revisiting-technical-assistance_2020.pdf

Oxford Policy Management (OPM). (2021). Technical assistance to RACE II: End of programme report. UKAID. [Internal Report]

RISE. (n.d.) The RISE Education Systems Diagnostic. RISE. https://riseprogramme.org/tools/rise-education-systems-diagnostic.html

Rist, G. (2008). The history of development: From western origins to global faith. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Russell, M. (2025). Diaspora Engagement in Transition Assistance: Bolstering Local Resources and Agency.

Scott, V. C., Jillani, Z., Malpert, A., Kolodny-Goetz, J., and Wandersman, A. (2022). A scoping review of the evaluation and effectiveness of technical assistance. Implementation Science Communications, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-022-00314-1

Takayama, K., Sriprakash, A., and Connell, R. (2017). Toward a postcolonial comparative and international education. Comparative Education Review, 61(S1), S1–S24.

UNESCO. (2025, June). Aid to education: Time for tough decisions. Global education monitoring report: Policy paper 50. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/aid-education

UNICEF. (2016). Guide to conflict analysis. UNICEF. https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/Guide_to_Conflict_Analysis_-_UNICEF_Nov_2016.pdf

UNICEF. (2025, 3 September). Global funding cuts could force 6 million more children out of school in the coming year. Unicef. https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/global-funding-cuts-could-force-6-million-more-children-out-school

USAID. (n.d.). Guide to inclusive development analysis. USAID. https://www.thepolicypractice.com/sites/default/files/2025-04/ads201_guidetoinclusivedevelopmentanalysis_final508compliant_1.pdf

USAID. (2016). ADS Chapter 201 - Program Cycle Operational Policy.

USAID. (2024). Local Systems Position Paper. USAID. http://alanhudson.info/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Local-Systems-Position-Paper.pdf

Whaites, A., Piron, L. H., Menocal, A. R., and Teskey, G. (2023). Understanding political economy analysis and thinking and working politically. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP). https://twpcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Understanding-Political-Economy-Analysis-and-Thinking-and-Working-Politically.pdf

Whaites, A. (2025). Understanding and using smart technical assistance. [Technical guide]. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-and-using-smart-technical-assistance/understanding-and-using-smart-technical-assistance-april-2025