

EDUCATION DENIED, FUTURES CUT SHORT: ADOLESCENTS ON THE MOVE AMID THE EDUCATIONAL EMERGENCY IN CENTRAL AMERICA



The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) is a global movement comprising more than 120 national and regional education coalitions, international organizations, and youth-led movements. It works in over 100 countries worldwide to promote education as a fundamental human right and a global public good. Its mission is to ensure that governments and the international community fulfill their commitments to education within the framework of the Education 2030 Agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

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ACRONYMS

AE: Accelerated Education

AECID: Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation

AMEXCID: Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation

EiE: Education in Emergencies

ECW: Education Cannot Wait

GCE: Global Campaign for Education

GAC: Global Affairs Canada / Asuntos Globales Canadá

GEC: Global Education Cluster

GRE-LAC: Regional Education Group for Latin America and the Caribbean

IDB: Inter-American Development Bank

IOM: International Organization for Migration

INEE: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

PROHECO: Honduran Community Education Project

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

UN: United Nations

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central America is experiencing an unprecedented educational emergency, marked by the expulsion, displacement, and forced mobility of its adolescent population, a phenomenon that remains largely invisible to many, yet has devastating human and social consequences. This document focuses specifically on the realities of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where thousands of adolescents migrate, return, or become stranded in transit due to circumstances that deny them the right to a safe, quality education, while policies, institutions, and the international community still appear far from responding adequately to the scale of the challenge.

The stories behind the numbers are diverse: adolescents fleeing violence; young people returning after deportation; Indigenous girls and boys crossing borders in search of protection; and those who, with or without documentation, face exclusion that is both educational and social. In each of these cases, institutional fragmentation, insufficient data and resources, and rigid regulatory frameworks exacerbate the challenge. Moreover, even under the best circumstances, **only one in two adolescents completes secondary education**, and the situation is far more critical for those who migrate, have been displaced, or live in extreme poverty (IDB, 2023; Plan International, 2023).

This is not merely a question of access. Exclusion is also reflected in the lack of psychosocial support, gender-based violence, discrimination against rural and Indigenous communities and persons with disabilities, and the absence of flexible pathways for school reintegration. The COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related crises have only deepened these gaps, while international cooperation and public education budgets have been reduced or redirected toward other priorities.

In this context, the Triple Nexus approach, humanitarian action, development, and peacebuilding, offers a pathway for transformative change by integrating immediate protection responses, long-term policies grounded in inclusion and equity, and actions that strengthen social cohesion and justice. Education thus emerges as a structural driver capable of breaking cycles of exclusion and migration while fostering resilient systems and cohesive communities.

This report adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on primary sources, including interviews and focus groups with adolescents, families, teachers, and school leaders, as well as secondary sources such as existing reports, to analyze institutional practices and barriers, along with opportunities for safe and effective access to inclusive, quality education. The report highlights not only the magnitude of the challenge but also the urgency of pragmatic and sustained policies and increased investment in Education in Emergencies (EiE), which currently receives only 3 percent of global humanitarian aid, while the withdrawal of key funding threatens the continuity of vital programs.

Throughout the report, the effects of mobility on access to education and the protection of rights are examined, with particular emphasis on Indigenous adolescents, rural populations, persons with disabilities, and girls and young women, all of whom face additional barriers. Educational exclusion and learning gaps not only limit academic achievement but also hinder social and labor market integration, autonomy, and civic participation, thereby perpetuating poverty and social instability.

The report concludes that the educational emergency in Central America risks becoming normalized and entrenched unless decisive action is taken. Only sustained, collective efforts that integrate identification and referral systems, flexible learning modalities, multi-year financing, intersectional teacher training, and effective multilateral cooperation will ensure that no adolescent is deprived of the right to learn and build a dignified future. The report urgently calls on governments, donors, and partners to embrace this strategic commitment by placing adolescents on the move at the center of the educational response and making Education in Emergencies the foundation for building societies that promote sustainable development, protection, and peace across the region.

The humanitarian crisis affecting children and adolescents in Central America, particularly those who have been forced to leave their homes and countries due to violence, extreme weather events, and structural poverty, demands urgent and sustained responses from both States and international cooperation actors. Alongside the provision of immediate assistance to meet urgent needs, it is essential that education systems evolve into protective, inclusive, and resilient environments capable of supporting children and adolescents on the move and providing them with genuine opportunities for development and well-being.

The daily reality of children and adolescents in Central America is marked by interrupted educational trajectories, often occurring without warning and without being the result of voluntary decision-making. Structural factors such as unequal access, the lack of effective responses from school systems, the absence of adequate, flexible, and coordinated mechanisms to ensure educational inclusion and continuity, documentation barriers, rigid regulatory frameworks, and discriminatory practices have left a significant number of adolescents out of school or trapped in cycles of dropout, understood as repeated processes of exclusion and precarious reintegration into the education system (Krichesky, M., 2023). **Data show that fewer than 50% of adolescents complete secondary education in Honduras and Guatemala, and only 60% in El Salvador, gaps that widen in contexts of mobility and social exclusion** (IADB, 2018) In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, human mobility and socioeconomic conditions accelerate the fragility of the right to education, deepening inequalities and exposing pre-existing structural disparities.

Based on the characterization and diversity of this heterogeneous group, the analysis of responses to their needs and priorities is framed within Education in Emergencies (EiE), in line with the standards of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2025). However, when adolescents are integrated into mainstream schools, their specific needs may go unnoticed. The routines and everyday practices of school staff are generally oriented toward the student population as a whole and do not necessarily take into account the specific conditions of those in situations of mobility.

Thus, while EiE provides a solid foundation for understanding and responding to the immediate challenges faced by adolescents in crisis contexts, the complex dynamics of human mobility and the structural drivers of exclusion in the region require a prioritization by the international community that goes beyond this framework. In many cases, educational challenges are not identified within the traditional parameters of EiE, which limits coordinated responses among actors and educational communities across the three countries.

For this reason, the proposed analysis seeks to broaden the perspective in order, on the one hand, to address education in its most comprehensive sense—with particular emphasis on secondary education—and, on the other, to examine the problem, solutions, and recommendations through the lens of the Triple Nexus. This approach integrates humanitarian action, sustainable development, and peacebuilding, and underscores the need to overcome sectoral fragmentation and siloed approaches in order to ensure continuity of learning, the comprehensive protection of adolescents,

and the resilience of those whose educational trajectories have been interrupted or denied. It also enables attention to diverse population groups that are at risk of falling outside institutional responses across different systems.

For the purposes of this report, “peace” is understood in line with the **Triple Nexus** definition proposed by INEE, recognizing that the peacebuilding component commonly used within the nexus encompasses multiple phases, and that these stages may differ significantly between countries, contexts, and even within a single country depending on specific circumstances. In this sense, in some cases “peace” will be understood as **peacebuilding**, gradually evolving toward what may later be described as “consolidation” (INEE & UNESCO, 2023).

This report is part of the activities carried out by the Global Campaign for Education in Spain, which advocates for education as a fundamental right, not a privilege to be lost in times of crisis. In addition to a review and analysis of secondary sources, the study is based on 26 key informant interviews, 2 focus groups with teachers and school leaders, 3 focus groups with families, and 5 focus groups with adolescents. Based on this evidence, the document focuses on adolescents in situations of mobility and examines how policies, resources, and practices at the lower secondary level are, or are not, responding to their specific needs. It also highlights everyday practices and decisions carried out by school staff and educational communities, such as student reception processes, administrative procedures, pedagogical and psychosocial support, and forms of interaction inside and outside the classroom, along with institutional and bureaucratic barriers, gaps in educational provision, and, at the same time, possible pathways toward safe and effective access to inclusive and quality education.

Furthermore, the report seeks not only to make the scale of the challenge visible, but also to emphasize the importance of ensuring that education systems are prepared to receive displaced populations in a timely manner. It also calls on international cooperation actors, donors, and all national and local stakeholders to promote pragmatic, context-sensitive, and sustained solutions over time.

It is time to recognize that the educational emergency in Central America has become so persistent that it risks becoming chronic, increasingly invisible in public discourse and deprioritized in international agendas, something that cannot and should not be allowed to happen. We are facing a critical moment: although European Union funding has helped sustain essential responses, EiE still receives only 3 percent of global humanitarian aid, a proportion that is similarly reflected in Latin America, despite representing a central demand in contexts of crisis and violence, with lifelong consequences for millions of adolescents (EDUCO, 2024; CLADE, 2025; El País, 2025).

This challenge is further exacerbated by the abrupt withdrawal of United States cooperation; the suspension of USAID funding puts the continuity of education and protection programs at risk precisely when they are most needed. In 2024, USAID allocated approximately 2.3 billion USD to initiatives in Latin America; a significant portion of these resources supported EiE programs and assistance for youth outside the school system, and their suspension affects not only EiE but the broader education sector as well. In this context of widening gaps and insufficient financing, there is an urgent need for the international community and donors to recognize the scale of the challenge, prioritize EiE, and contribute to building flexible, sustainable responses aligned with

the real needs on the ground. The following pages present arguments, data, and voices that call for transforming inertia into commitment and intention into immediate and sustained action.

In light of these challenges, this document endorses calls for adaptive policymaking, increased financial commitments, and strengthened international cooperation, including donor accountability. It emphasizes that advancing toward quality education requires far more than investment in infrastructure and salaries: it demands comprehensive approaches that ensure pedagogical resources, continuous professional development, inclusion, and well-being for the entire school community. Schools will only be able to fulfill their function as spaces of protection and progress if the international community recognizes the urgency, scales up its responses, and prioritizes the right to education across all humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding strategies.

REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE EDUCATIONAL EMERGENCY

At the global level, more than 234 million children and adolescents are affected by protracted crises (ECW & CME, 2024). Among them, adolescents on the move represent a significant and highly vulnerable group: they face violence, structural precarity, discrimination, and a lack of educational opportunities. This exclusion is further exacerbated by the absence of consistent data and weak state capacity, generating a cycle of invisibility that hinders meaningful progress in guaranteeing the right to education.

Although education is internationally recognized as a fundamental right—enshrined in frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child—the reality in many contexts is the systematic disruption of this right due to structural causes: poverty, violence, family instability, and unequal access to opportunities. This gap between normative recognition and the lived conditions of adolescents on the move highlights the depth of the problem.

Within this global context, Central America stands out for its interrelated and persistent crises that particularly affect access to and continuity of education for children and adolescents. The societies of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face a complex combination of widespread violence, high crime rates, structural poverty, institutional weakness, and extreme vulnerability to disasters caused by natural hazards. In fact, the region ranks among the most disaster-prone in the world according to the Global Disaster Risk Index (Germanwatch, 2025). These crises, far from occurring in isolation, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a spiral of exclusion, migration, and forced displacement that severely shapes the educational trajectories and life paths of Central American adolescents (*see Table 1 on categories of displaced populations*).

Table 1: Categories of Persons in Situations of Forced Displacement (UNHCR)

Category	Description
Refugees	Persons who have fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.
Asylum seekers	Persons who have applied for international protection, but whose claims are still pending a decision.
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Persons who have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, or disasters, but who remain within their country's borders.
Stateless persons	Persons who are not considered nationals by any country and therefore lack access to the basic rights conferred by citizenship.
Other UNHCR categories of interest	Includes specific groups such as Venezuelans displaced abroad, returnees (both refugees and IDPs), and host communities that provide support to displaced populations.

This sustained crisis creates a context that pushes hundreds of thousands of adolescents and their families to migrate in search of protection, better living conditions, and access to basic rights. Consequently, human mobility, and forced displacement in particular, takes on a structural and recurrent character, becoming embedded across the life trajectories of adolescents who face heightened risks of school interruption, insecurity, and social exclusion. As a result of this dynamic, opportunities for development are severely constrained, and cycles of poverty and educational exclusion are perpetuated.

In this same context, mobility has become an integral part of the Central American social fabric. Indeed, approximately 14% of those involved in migratory flows in the region are children and adolescents (UNHCR, IOM & UNICEF, 2025). A significant proportion of them face, on a daily basis, school interruption, educational delay, and situations of violence and exclusion. It is important to highlight that girls and adolescent girls, in particular, face even higher risks of sexual violence, trafficking, and exploitation during migratory journeys, as well as more severe barriers to accessing secondary education: the persistence of restrictive gender norms, early pregnancy, and caregiving responsibilities significantly limit their school retention (Plan International, 2024). For all these reasons, the social and educational systems of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras remain embedded in a sustained emergency, where educational exclusion, migration, and forced displacement mutually reinforce and exacerbate one another (UNESCO, 2023; INEE, 2024).

This complex reality exerts multifactorial pressure on national education systems, which must simultaneously respond to the growing presence of displaced populations, humanitarian and climate crises, and persistent structural poverty (UNESCO IIPE, 2024). It is important to note that none of these countries reaches the recommended 6% of GDP allocation for the education sector. In 2023, El Salvador and Guatemala allocated only 3.2%, while Honduras allocated 4% (UNESCO, 2024; ASJ, 2025), with the majority of expenditure concentrated on salaries and leaving insufficient resources for psychosocial support or pedagogical assistance programs. Despite efforts such as free enrollment policies, school meal programs, and infrastructure improvements, educational coverage continues to decline and learning indicators are deteriorating (ASJ, 2025). This deterioration threatens both equity and the sustainability of the right to education.

An example of this structural impact is that in Honduras, coverage in Cycle III (ninth grade) fell to 45.5% in 2023, while upper secondary education coverage reached only 24.9%. More than 846,000 children and adolescents (aged 6 to 17) remained out of the education system that year. In Guatemala, although enrollment in preschool increased by 13% and in primary education by 18% in 2023, secondary coverage remains below 30%, and these gains are insufficient to reverse accumulated exclusion, particularly among migrant adolescents or those living in rural areas. In addition, the challenge of very low public spending per student persists, among the lowest in the region: in Guatemala, less than USD 1,000 PPP annually compared to the Latin American average of USD 3,081 (IDB and CLADE Network, 2023).

This situation is also reflected in academic performance. For example, according to UNESCO's Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE), Guatemala has experienced a severe decline: 60.7% of third-grade students are at the lowest performance level in reading, compared to a regional average of 44.3%, and 64% of sixth-grade students in mathematics are also at the lowest performance level. The ERCE 2019–2023 findings also show that Honduras and El Salvador present persistent learning deficits in basic competencies, with deep territorial, socioeconomic, and ethnic disparities, further exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sustained deterioration in educational coverage (UNESCO-ERCE, 2019–2023).

Finally, the impacts are manifested differently in each country: in El Salvador, school enrollment has declined due to migration, low fertility rates, and school dropout; Guatemala faces the greatest urban-rural inequalities, with secondary coverage below 40% among adolescents aged 12 to 16 (Inter-American Dialogue, 2021); and Honduras shows a decline in secondary enrollment, from 584,617 students in 2021 to 570,863 in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Table 1. Total number of children and adolescents (ages 5–17) affected by crisis and conflict; percentage of affected children and adolescents out of school; and total number out of school in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (ECW, 2025).

Country	Total number of children affected by crisis and conflict	Percentage of affected children out of school	Total number of children out of school
El Salvador	66.442	17,8%	11.816
Guatemala	690.917	9,2%	63.855
Honduras	491.172	18,4%	90.566

In this context, adolescents on the move face a true obstacle course in accessing and remaining in secondary education. Among the main barriers are residential instability, discrimination, limited recognition of prior learning, and the absence of psychosocial support (UNESCO, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). For adolescent girls, these challenges are further exacerbated by gender-based violence, social stigma associated with early pregnancy, and the lack of safe, gender-responsive school environments, all of which contribute to their exclusion from continuous educational pathways (Spotlight Initiative, UN Women, 2022).

In addition to this set of challenges, institutional responses remain fragmented and unsustainable, as they depend primarily on multilateral cooperation and lack flexible and inclusive national policies. As a result, school exclusion becomes normalized, hindering any real progress toward equitable and quality education and perpetuating structural inequalities.

Furthermore, local actors face significant obstacles in exercising responsible and sustainable leadership, as well as limited participation in governance spaces and insufficient support for institutional capacity development. This is partly due to the weakening of local systems as a consequence of current humanitarian financing models, barriers faced by local NGOs in operating effectively, and cuts in aid that further threaten the sustainability of these organizations.

This issue is reflected in the daily experiences of displaced children and adolescents: for them, displacement often results in school absenteeism, dropout, and, above all, educational lag, in addition to numerous administrative barriers. Educational lag, defined as a gap of two or more years between a student’s age and their current grade level, or the failure to complete the compulsory educational levels appropriate to their age group, entails not only academic limitations, but also profound consequences for the exercise of citizenship rights, labour market integration, and the development of autonomy (Rueda Rodríguez, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Evidence shows that educational lag increases the risk of social exclusion, reduces opportunities for informed and active participation, limits access to decent employment, and perpetuates the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Therefore, addressing educational lag is essential to ensuring the full development and social and labour inclusion of young people, particularly in contexts of high human mobility and

vulnerability.

Ultimately, the range of school-related, social, and administrative barriers faced by adolescents on the move creates a context in which educational exclusion and learning lag translate not only into academic limitations, but also into profound restrictions on the exercise of citizenship rights, personal autonomy, and access to decent employment. Building on this analysis, it is essential to examine in greater detail the concrete implications of mobility for access to and retention within the education system, as well as the main challenges to be addressed within the framework of inclusive policies and rights-based strategies.

Before addressing the section on challenges, it is important to clarify that this document adopts the triple nexus approach as its guiding framework. This integrated strategy links humanitarian action, sustainable development, and peacebuilding in a coherent manner, promoting coordinated and mutually reinforcing interventions that address both immediate needs and the structural drivers of vulnerability. In the Central American context, the triple nexus is key to ensuring the right to education, protection, and well-being for adolescents on the move and those in situations of risk, enabling responses that go beyond sectoral fragmentation and prioritize sustainable collective outcomes. The rationale and specific components of this framework are detailed below in the accompanying table.

The Triple Nexus: An Integrated Pathway to Guarantee Education, Development, and Peace for Adolescents on the Move

In the context of a complex reality, addressing the challenges of access to education in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, particularly for adolescents on the move, requires advancing the triple nexus approach. This model simultaneously integrates three essential dimensions: humanitarian action, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. In doing so, it not only responds to the urgent educational needs arising in emergency settings, but also identifies structural challenges and opens pathways toward building more responsive, inclusive, and resilient education systems in the region.

The triple nexus enables a coordinated response: the humanitarian dimension prioritizes rapid and safe action in the face of crises; the development dimension seeks to strengthen capacities and generate sustainable solutions; and the peace dimension promotes coexistence, social cohesion, and reconciliation. This approach guides both the analysis of the causes and consequences of educational exclusion and the formulation of concrete recommendations for the three countries.

The following sections outline how each dimension contributes specific solutions to ensure that no adolescent on the move is deprived of their right to education.

Education in Emergencies: A Gateway to Resilience

In Central America, education in emergencies has become a key strategy for safeguarding rights, restoring dignity, and providing a minimum level of stability for displaced and migrant adolescents. In the face of persistent crises such as violence, natural disasters, poverty, and deep social fragmentation, schooling often becomes a disrupted and fragmented process, shaped by interruptions beyond the control of families and young people (UNESCO, 2025; Humanitarian Action, 2023).

Humanitarian interventions in education seek not only to ensure continuity of learning in critical contexts, but also to provide targeted psychosocial support, particularly at the secondary level. However, identifying and registering affected adolescents remains a central challenge: without disaggregated data and effective monitoring systems, exclusion persists and the ability to

design evidence-based policies remains limited.

Development: Breaking Cycles Through Inclusive and Quality Education

The second pillar of the triple nexus, development, implies moving beyond reactive responses and building education policies that transform education into a structural driver for reducing inequality and forced mobility in Central America. This means shifting from fragmented emergency interventions to long-term strategies aimed at strengthening resilient and adaptive systems capable of addressing root causes such as inequality, lack of opportunities, institutional weakness, and ineffective migration policies. Achieving sustainable inclusion and reintegration requires flexible education models, bridging and remedial programs, psychosocial support, adequate infrastructure, and sustained financing. In particular, investing in secondary education and technical and vocational training, alongside other pathways for transitioning into the labour market, strengthening teacher professionalization, and adopting intersectional approaches such as gender sensitivity, interculturality, and protection frameworks, are essential steps to break the cycles of poverty and exclusion affecting entire generations (IECAH, 2022).

Peace: Education for Coexistence and Reconciliation

The third pillar of the triple nexus, peace, must be understood not only as the absence of violence, but as the active presence of conditions that enable coexistence, justice, and the full respect of rights for adolescents and communities. Peace education involves addressing risk factors and ensuring safe, inclusive, and protective school environments, where diversity is valued as a strength rather than a source of discrimination or exclusion. Recurring crises and compounding emergencies increase the risk of recruitment of young people by armed groups and perpetuate cycles of violence and forced migration. For this reason, schools must become genuine spaces for prevention, reconciliation, and the restoration of social bonds, an objective that can only be achieved through intersectoral coordination and integrated services combining protection, psychosocial support, and community development (UNDP, 2025).

Implications of the Triple Nexus: Challenges and Pathways for Action

Education, social protection, and governance systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras operate under extreme pressure: they must respond to urgent needs, plan for development, and contribute to social peace in the midst of prolonged crises. This complexity is further exacerbated by the statistical invisibility of adolescents on the move, which undermines effective and sustainable responses (UNESCO, 2025; INEE, n.d.). The triple nexus therefore requires renewed models of governance, coordination, and financing, overcoming institutional silos between humanitarian actors, state institutions, civil society, and communities.

It is therefore essential to:

- ✓ Renew governance, coordination, and financing models, overcoming traditional barriers between humanitarian actors, state institutions, civil society, and communities.
- ✓ Develop robust systems to identify migrant and returned adolescents and adapt educational responses to the evolving and multidimensional nature of the emergency.
- ✓ Ensure multi-year financing, decentralization, and the active participation of adolescents and their families as essential conditions for achieving lasting impact.
- ✓ Integrate a system of protection, development, and peace indicators into all stages of education planning.

Only through these pillars will it be possible to achieve lasting impact that guarantees the right to education in emergency contexts and paves the way toward resilience and social development.

MOVILIDAD Y ACCESO A LA EDUCACIÓN: PRINCIPALES DESAFÍOS Y CONSECUENCIAS

Human mobility in Central America has become one of the greatest challenges to guaranteeing the right to education for adolescents. Beyond being a demographic phenomenon, forced migration and internal displacement act as structural drivers that deepen educational gaps and limit the exercise of fundamental rights. In a context where school trajectories are interrupted, access to and retention in secondary education become daily challenges for those living in situations of mobility, requiring institutional responses that are precise and adapted to the complexity of the regional context.

Challenge 1

Strengthening institutional coordination and improving the availability and access to reliable information

One of the main constraints to ensuring educational rights for adolescents on the move is the persistent lack of reliable data and the limited coordination between protection, migration, and education systems. This institutional gap hinders both the identification and differentiated support of those experiencing displacement, generating fragmented responses and perpetuating school exclusion. In addition, unattainable documentation requirements and administrative barriers, combined with economic constraints, recurrent violence, and the absence of bridging, catch-up, and psychosocial support programmes, contribute to a cycle of educational lag and school dropout that persists without effective solutions in the region. (IDB, 2023).

The education system, particularly at the secondary level, is still not adequately prepared to effectively integrate migrant and displaced populations, thereby prolonging protection and exclusion gaps. This is illustrated by the testimony of a young Salvadoran:

"I could not study in the place I wanted because it was rival territory; I attended school at night because I worked during the day, and even so, survival was always a struggle. In the neglected neighbourhoods, danger was part of everyday life. Suddenly, the school closed due to insecurity, and I stopped studying in seventh grade. Later I tried to return, but the only option was farther away, and fear persisted... violence forced us to flee and seek new opportunities, even outside the country." (Adolescente, El Salvador, 2025)

The lack of consolidated, reliable, and up-to-date records makes it difficult to fully grasp the true scale of displacement among children and adolescents in Central America. Existing data are often partial, unsystematic, and frequently do not allow for clear distinctions between different categories of displaced populations (internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees, or migrants in transit). This results in underreporting and limits the capacity for coordinated responses to the multiple impacts of forced displacement on protection and educational opportunities. For example, between January and August 2024, more than 108,000 migrant children and adolescents were registered or apprehended in Mexico, the majority originating from El Salvador, Guatemala, and

Honduras (Unidad de Política Migratoria, 2025). In Honduras, more than 128,000 children have been recorded as returnees between 2014 and August 2025 (COIPRODEN, 2025); however, these figures do not capture the full extent of internal displacement, which remains the least documented and least visible category (MIRPS, 2024; UNHCR, 2023).

This absence of systematic educational data on migrant children and adolescents calls for stronger political commitment and coordinated governmental action across the region. The lack of data thus translates into an inability to design evidence-based public policies and to identify the structural gaps that must be addressed in order to guarantee the right to education for these adolescents (UNESCO, 2024). As a result, the phenomenon remains largely invisible, perpetuating insufficient resources and limited international responses to a problem that is simultaneously structural and compounded by multi-causal crises.

“No existe un registro preciso de adolescentes retornados en el país. Los datos públicos sobre movilidad y exclusión educativa suelen ser incompletos o no reflejan la realidad, lo que dificulta dimensionar y atender la magnitud de las necesidades humanitarias”. (Actor clave, El Salvador, 2025)

Challenge 2

Supporting and promoting the planning of a quality education offer

One of the most immediate effects of internal mobility, displacement, and forced returns is the **persistent difficulty education systems face in anticipating, sizing, and adequately planning resources, staffing, infrastructure, and programmes for school continuity or remedial education** (UNESCO, 2024). Because it is not possible to predict how many adolescents and families will require support at any given time, the education offer becomes insufficient, rigid, and marked by significant territorial disparities. This is illustrated by a key informant:

“The national protection system serves the population that seeks services, not necessarily those who are already within the territory.” (Key informant, El Salvador, 2025)

This challenge is further exacerbated by the dispersion and fragmentation of responsibilities across government and social actors, as well as by the lack of effective coordination among education, social protection, and migration systems. The absence of robust, comparable, and up-to-date information on the number of adolescents affected by displacement, migration, and the various crises affecting the region hinders the design of targeted and effective policies, both to prevent educational exclusion and to ensure successful school reintegration. The testimony of a returned adolescent highlights the extent of the institutional support gap:

“No one helped us when we returned. We had to figure everything out ourselves and find out on our own how to enroll in school again.” (14-year-old Salvadoran girl, returned from Mexico, 2025)

The lack of crisis-sensitive planning and intersectoral coordination leaves thousands of migrant, displaced, and returned adolescents without meaningful access to remedial education programmes, guidance and counselling services, or psychosocial support, thereby perpetuating cycles of educational lag and exclusion that affect Central American societies as a whole.

One of the most significant consequences of mobility and poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is the precarious and fragmented nature of psychosocial support services and academic recognition processes for migrant, returned, and displaced adolescents. According to recent data, 63 per cent of the population in Honduras (National Institute of Statistics, 2024), 56 per cent of the population in Guatemala (ENCOVI, 2023), and 30.3 per cent of the population in El Salvador live in poverty (World Bank, 2024). Poverty, compounded by dynamics of violence and displacement, directly affects adolescents' mental health, well-being, and educational opportunities.

Exposure to violence, abuse, and discrimination is particularly severe among adolescent girls. In El Salvador, six out of ten adolescent girls experienced sexual violence in 2024, with the highest prevalence among those aged 15 to 19 (ODU and ORMUSA, 2024). In the absence of adequate psychosocial support mechanisms within schools, many adolescents develop feelings of apathy, social withdrawal, and disengagement from education. As one school principal in El Salvador explained:

"Many no longer want to socialize or even attend school." (School Principal, El Salvador, 2025)

The lack of multidisciplinary support teams, combined with insufficient training for teachers in trauma-informed approaches and psychosocial support, further deepens educational exclusion and learning gaps. Experts and testimonies alike consistently highlight that **investment in rights-based psychosocial support is essential for both school retention and educational reintegration.**

These challenges are compounded by the limited capacity of education systems to ensure timely and student-centered school reintegration processes for displaced and returned adolescents, as well as to facilitate the recognition of studies completed abroad. Administrative barriers persist, including requirements to provide documents that may be impossible to recover due to displacement, as well as competency examinations used to validate prior learning. In practice, these measures often exclude those who are most in need of support (MIRPS, 2023; World Refugee Migration Council and IOM, 2021).

While the challenges identified, including the need to strengthen institutional coordination, implement adaptable planning mechanisms, and expand psychosocial support services, define the broader structural conditions shaping educational access and retention for adolescents on the move, it is at the level of everyday experience that these challenges become tangible barriers.

Operating within schools, families, and communities, they directly hinder the school reintegration and educational continuity of adolescents who return, are displaced, or move across the region.

- **Documentation requirements** that are often impossible to meet following displacement, hindering school enrolment and educational continuity.
- **Economic constraints**, including a lack of resources for transportation, food, and school supplies.

- **Structural, community-based, and gender-based violence**, which restricts mobility and creates additional drivers of school dropout.
- **The absence of systematic remedial and catch-up programmes**, resulting in educational lag, frustration, and a heightened risk of dropout, particularly when students do not receive differentiated support.
- **Limited access to psychosocial support services**; Schools often lack sufficient specialized personnel, exacerbating disengagement and leaving the emotional consequences of violence and forced migration unaddressed.

The situation is even more challenging at the secondary level. Recent studies indicate that **up to two-thirds of adolescents aged 12 to 17 do not meet minimum schooling requirements** and face a high risk of dropping out as a result of accumulated educational lag, economic pressures, and the absence of sustained support programmes (MIRPS, 2025; Plan International, 2023).

In El Salvador, although official rates of school reintegration following return migration tend to be higher than those reported in Honduras and Guatemala—for example, the Ministry of Education reported re-enrolment rates approaching 60 per cent in some departments (MIRPS, 2025)—these figures primarily reflect formal enrolment and do not necessarily indicate the quality of the reintegration process. In this context, quality refers to the stability of educational trajectories, access to psychosocial support, continuity within the same school, and the absence of persistent discrimination. Indeed, in El Salvador as well as in the other countries examined, qualitative evidence and testimonies collected by international organizations consistently demonstrate that **reintegration does not automatically translate into sustained participation or successful learning outcomes**. Many returned adolescents experience unstable educational trajectories, frequent school transfers, discrimination, and elevated dropout rates within a single academic year (UNESCO, 2024; Plan International, 2023).

“There is no registry of internal forced displacement... When children and adolescents are able to return to school, there are no mechanisms to help them catch up with their peers. In many cases, they become academically overloaded and fall behind in practice.” (Key informant, El Salvador, 2025)

Institutional fragmentation constitutes a major obstacle to the school reintegration and retention of migrant and returned adolescents, deepening educational lag and discrimination, particularly at the secondary level (IOM, 2023). Limited flexibility in enrolment and assessment processes, combined with the absence of clear national protocols for the recognition of prior studies, places adolescents on the move under a double burden. On the one hand, they often face difficulties in documenting their previous schooling or are placed in grades below those corresponding to their age, increasing the risk of dropout and stigmatization. On the other hand, the lack of systematic remedial programmes, psychosocial support, and individualized assistance limits their ability to recover disrupted educational trajectories, particularly in rural areas and in households affected by family separation.

“I felt discouraged when they told me I would have to go back to third grade even though I was 15 years old. I was embarrassed to be in class with much younger children. We did not bring our documents with us, and the only option was to take competency examinations. I am still trying to pass those exams so I can catch up.” (Returned adolescent, El Salvador, 2025)

These challenges are compounded by economic barriers, including the costs of transportation, school materials, and technology, as well as deficiencies in infrastructure, connectivity, and extracurricular opportunities. Together, these factors widen gaps in access and retention and reinforce inequalities between adolescents on the move and their peers (MIRPS, 2023; Plan International, 2025). In this context, insufficient coordination among government institutions and social actors slows efforts toward meaningful inclusion and limits the effective realization of the right to education for this population.

Structural Consequences: Educational Quality, Equity, and Exclusion

The consequences for countries across the region are profound and multidimensional. Weak institutional coordination, challenges in planning educational provision, fragmented psychosocial and educational support systems, and the persistence of rural, gender-based, and age-related inequalities significantly undermine universal access to education and educational equity (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Far from serving merely as spaces of protection, schools face the challenge of becoming genuine environments for quality learning, where educational provision is adaptable, acceptable, and responsive to the contexts, educational trajectories, and needs of adolescents who return or are displaced. When this does not occur, the absence of remedial support, persistent educational lag, and insufficient accompaniment generate frustration, reinforce stigma, contribute to new forms of psychosocial distress, and increase the likelihood of early school dropout.

The convergence of recurrent emergencies and structural deprivation has created a context in which educational stability remains beyond the reach of thousands of adolescents on the move. This reality deepens existing inequalities and places a critical segment of Central America's youth at heightened risk of marginalization and extreme vulnerability (UNICEF, 2024; INEE, 2024). **Unless education systems are transformed to prioritize quality understood as relevance, flexibility, adaptability, safety, and differentiated support, schools may inadvertently reinforce exclusion rather than promote equity and development.**

"School felt like the safest place in the neighbourhood. I preferred being there because my classmates were a positive influence. But sometimes we were still afraid. The violence was outside, but it was also inside, when some students brought those problems into the classroom." (Young graduate from a context of urban violence, El Salvador, 2025)

Against this backdrop of structural challenges, where educational quality, equity, and inclusion are increasingly compromised, it is essential to advance solutions that go beyond expanding access and respond directly to the realities faced by adolescents on the move. Schooling can only become a genuine protective factor when it delivers quality across all dimensions: adaptability of curricula and teaching methods; acceptability in terms of relevance, respect for diversity, and freedom from discrimination; and sustained pedagogical and psychosocial support. When formal education fails to meet these standards, it not only increases the risk of early school dropout and educational lag, but also contributes to disrupted life trajectories and the perpetuation of cycles of exclusion.

The following recommendations focus on transforming educational responses through a rights-based approach, with particular emphasis on ensuring that educational provision is appropriate, flexible, and relevant for those who need it most.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

The educational crisis in Central America, exacerbated by protracted emergencies and interconnected migration, social, and climate-related crises, constitutes a major structural challenge. Displaced, refugee, and returned adolescents face multiple barriers to accessing and remaining in secondary education due to institutional fragility, funding gaps, and restrictive migration policies that shape their educational trajectories and limit their opportunities in both transit and destination countries, whether they are crossing Mexico en route to the United States or moving southward within the region. The educational exclusion of these adolescents perpetuates inequalities, undermines social cohesion, and weakens compliance with international human rights commitments.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to place education at the centre of both humanitarian and development responses. **The “silent crisis” affecting education across the region demands decisive action to align financing with the scale of the challenge while ensuring quality, equity, and resilience.** Recent reductions in development and humanitarian funding, coupled with the lack of effective school reintegration mechanisms, threaten to undermine the right to education and further entrench the exclusionary trajectories experienced by thousands of adolescents on the move.

In this context, multilateral cooperation and international donors must play an active and shared role in closing coverage gaps and adapting educational provision to contexts of crisis, displacement, and human mobility. Ultimately, however, responsibility rests with States, which must strengthen public education systems, ensure effective intersectoral coordination, and fulfil their international commitments. Investing in Education in Emergencies is not merely a short-term response to crisis; it is a strategic investment in human capital, social cohesion, and sustainable peace across the region.

As a preface to the recommendations presented in this report, it is important to highlight several key insights drawn from testimonies collected from local organizations, school principals, as well as adolescents and their families. These testimonies consistently emphasize the need to:

- Implement effective identification and registration systems, coordinated and integrated across education, migration, and social protection systems.
- Strengthen intersectoral coordination between education, social protection, migration, health, and employment sectors.
- Expand flexible and accelerated education modalities, simplify enrollment procedures, adapt curricula, and ensure the recognition of prior learning.
- Provide targeted funding for scholarships covering transportation, access to technology, and learning materials; investments in infrastructure and digital connectivity.
- Promote the participation of adolescents and families in school life, policy design, and social accountability mechanisms, in order to strengthen safe, inclusive, and resilient learning environments.

The following recommendations are aimed at strengthening educational responses in contexts of crisis and mobility, with particular attention to the diversity of trajectories and needs of adolescents on the move. These needs vary according to country context, gender, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, disability, and migration status. The recommendations also seek to promote coordinated action among States, multilateral organizations, donors, and local actors to ensure inclusive, sustainable, and quality education for all adolescents in the region.

Commitment of Multilateral Cooperation and Donors

International cooperation should prioritize multi-year, direct, and flexible funding that enables educational responses to be adapted to the differentiated realities of adolescents, taking into account gender, ethnic origin, disability status, and territorial context.

Recommendations

- Integrate education financing into humanitarian, migration, and climate action cooperation frameworks, explicitly linking it to the international commitment to allocate at least 10 per cent of total humanitarian aid to education (CME, 2025). In addition, establish robust monitoring mechanisms that go beyond access indicators to assess quality, safety, equity, and well-being outcomes.
- Prioritize funding mechanisms that are directly accessible to local actors, enabling grassroots organizations, including those led by women and young people, to lead implementation processes and ensure sociocultural relevance and contextual appropriateness.
- Channel resources to support disaggregated identification and monitoring systems that generate and disseminate evidence and good practices broken down by gender, territory, and other key variables, fostering continuous learning and adaptive responses across the region.
- Invest in resilient educational infrastructure aligned with the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (GADRRES), strengthening preparedness and response capacity in the face of environmental hazards, violence, and other risks.

Leadership of States

Governments must assume leadership in strengthening legal, institutional, and financial frameworks that prioritize the inclusion of adolescents on the move, with a gender-responsive and localization-oriented approach. Their role is to ensure effective intersectoral coordination and the meaningful participation of communities and adolescents in education governance.

Recommendations

- Establish integrated identification and registration systems across education, social protection, migration, health, and employment sectors, supported by disaggregated data that enables tailored and differentiated responses.

- Increase funding allocated to education under a quality- and protection-oriented approach, with the aim of building systems capable of including all diverse groups of displaced learners.
- Adapt the triple nexus approach to national contexts, consolidating education in emergencies as a catalyst for resilience, social cohesion, and peace, and linking protection, well-being, and education through harmonized protocols for school reintegration and recognition of prior learning.
- Establish and strengthen national and regional technical coordination platforms, ensuring the meaningful participation of adolescents, particularly girls, indigenous adolescents, and adolescents with disabilities, in policy design.
- Expand and diversify education modalities (in-person, distance, and accelerated pathways) and strengthen psychosocial support services, with sustained investment in teacher training grounded in inclusion, diversity, and human rights.
- Invest in resilient and crisis-adapted schools, aligned with the All-Hazards approach of the Comprehensive School Safety Framework.

Participation and Coordination of Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations

Local, national, and international civil society actors, including grassroots organizations, networks, regional and international platforms, and NGOs, must play a proactive role in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of educational responses for adolescents on the move. It is essential to promote localization understood as genuine empowerment, as well as the mainstreaming of gender and intersectional approaches across all stages of intervention.

Recommendations

- Lead and advocate for education strategies that are adapted to territorial and contextual realities, prioritizing the leadership of local actors, Indigenous communities, women, persons with disabilities, and youth.
- Engage fully in education governance processes, ensuring that national and local organizations are not only implementers, but also key actors in decision-making, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Promote and strengthen coordination spaces across education, protection, health, employment, and migration sectors through national and regional technical platforms that prioritize adolescents on the move.
- Strengthen community networks and social support models that prioritize psychosocial well-being, protection, resilience, and educational retention, designing interventions and pilot initiatives that respond to specific barriers related to gender, ethnicity, migration status, and disability.
- Generate, systematize, and disseminate evidence, testimonies, and analysis on exclusion and educational integration trajectories among adolescents on the move, using disaggregated data to have an impact on public policies, support advocacy with international cooperation actors, and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

- Implement training processes and awareness-raising campaigns for teachers, schools, and communities on diversity, gender equality, and human rights, identifying and replicating good practices and successful strategies across different national and international contexts.
- Foster strong partnerships between civil society, multilateral organizations, governments, and the private sector to scale up innovative, sustainable, and culturally relevant solutions, ensuring that localization and gender equality are central criteria in resource allocation and programme design.

Towards a Shared Agenda: Cross-Cutting Principles and Commitments

Educational sustainability in Central America requires coordinated action among States, international cooperation actors, and civil society, through flexible, multi-year financing mechanisms aligned with the triple nexus approach. Direct funding to local actors, particularly those led by women and community-based organizations, ensures agile and context-relevant interventions capable of responding to the specific needs of adolescents on the move, reducing barriers and strengthening equity in the allocation and oversight of resources.

Effective intersectoral coordination is essential to guarantee inclusive and context-appropriate educational responses. This requires linking efforts, sharing information, and adapting procedures so that services are responsive to the specific realities of adolescents on the move, taking into account gender, disability, origin, and territorial context. Strengthening the meaningful participation of local actors and adolescents themselves in both school governance and policy design enhances resilience and social cohesion across the region.

With regard to educational quality and well-being, the collective commitment of all actors must focus on diversifying learning modalities, improving infrastructure, and strengthening teacher training grounded in human rights and respect for diversity. Only through clear indicators of inclusion, participation, and well-being can it be ensured that benefits reach, as a priority, those facing the greatest barriers to exercising their right to education.

To translate these recommendations into tangible change, it is essential that States, local actors, civil society, and donors act decisively and in a spirit of shared responsibility, prioritizing structural and sustainable actions supported by effective mechanisms for financing, monitoring, and adaptation to the diversity of adolescents on the move. Only through active multilateral cooperation that is centred on, and where possible led by, local actors, together with renewed political will, will it be possible to build truly inclusive, safe, and resilient education systems that guarantee opportunities, restore rights, and strengthen social cohesion in the region.



The evidence presented throughout this report confirms that access to education for adolescents on the move in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras faces structural challenges driven by recurrent emergencies, persistent inequalities, weak inter-institutional coordination, and long-standing policy gaps. Despite some localized progress, critical deficiencies remain in data systems, inclusion, infrastructure, and financing, perpetuating the exclusion of those who should be at the centre of education policy priorities.

As demonstrated above, institutional invisibility and fragmentation can only be addressed through a comprehensive approach: reliable and disaggregated data, effective inter-institutional coordination, sustained investment, and timely responses for all adolescents who experience mobility as part of their educational and life trajectories.

Mobility intensifies barriers to access and school retention, particularly for migrant, displaced, and returned adolescents who require flexible learning pathways, recognition of prior learning, and psychosocial support. The exclusion of these groups therefore represents not only a violation of the right to education, but also a barrier to collective development, regional equity, and peace.

The analysis through the lens of the triple nexus, humanitarian, development, and peace, demonstrates that no partial intervention is sufficient to respond to the scale of the challenge. Education in emergencies is essential to ensure immediate protection, learning continuity, and psychosocial support; however, its impact remains limited unless it is linked to sustainable development strategies focused on inclusive education systems, investment in secondary and technical education, and teacher training grounded in intersectional approaches. The peace dimension highlights the urgent need for schools to function as spaces of protection, reconciliation, and social cohesion, capable of breaking cycles of violence and forced migration.

Breaking down fragmentation across sectors, overcoming statistical invisibility, and placing adolescents on the move at the centre of policy responses requires genuine coordination among humanitarian, development, and civil society actors, as well as sustained political will and resources aligned with the scale of the challenge. Education systems will only become resilient and transformative if legal and financial frameworks are strengthened, investment in infrastructure and human capital is increased, and access to flexible learning pathways and continuous psychosocial support is guaranteed.

Guaranteeing the right to education for adolescents on the move in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is not only a regional human rights priority; it is also a strategic condition for breaking cycles of exclusion, violence, and displacement. Adopting the triple nexus approach is essential to designing policies and interventions that move beyond reactive responses and instead promote structural, inclusive, and sustainable solutions capable of restoring the region's capacity to envision a more equitable and peaceful future for present and future generations.

In sum, the **challenge is no longer limited to responding to emergencies, but rather to transforming education systems so that they are capable of integrating immediate response, sustainable development, and social cohesion.** Without deep structural reforms, there is a risk of generationally entrenched vulnerability, leaving families and communities trapped in cycles of poverty and forced mobility.

The sustainability of any response depends on building resilient, intersectoral systems centred on adolescents: coordination among education, protection, health, employment, and justice sectors; consolidation of disaggregated and up-to-date data systems; development of flexible regulations for school reintegration and academic catch-up; and the creation of meaningful incentives (scholarships, psychosocial support, connectivity) for school retention and success. Only these efforts, embedded within public systems and policies and supported by multilateral cooperation and strong civil society leadership, can effectively respond to emergencies that are not isolated events, but rather overlapping and deepening crises.

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