

## INTERNATIONAL NGO ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN'S EDUCATION SECTOR: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** *Since the political transition in August 2021, Afghanistan's education sector has faced an unprecedented crisis characterized by restrictive policies, funding shortfalls, and a contracting operational space for humanitarian actors. This article examines the evolving role of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in sustaining access to education amid these challenges. Drawing on document analysis of Scopus-indexed literature, recent field reports from UNESCO and UNICEF, and stakeholder interviews, the study analyzes the shifting trends in NGO engagement from 2001 to 2024. Key findings indicate that, while international NGOs successfully established a parallel infrastructure for community-based education (CBE) that reached over 1 million children, the post-2021 landscape has severely curtailed their operational capacity. The ban on girls' secondary education has forced NGOs to pivot toward primary-level support, digital learning alternatives, and localized teacher training. However, these efforts are undermined by a precipitous decline in international aid, coordination deficits, and increasing bureaucratic impediments imposed by the de facto authorities. The paper argues that sustaining educational gains requires a strategic shift toward localized partnerships, adaptive programming, and protection mechanisms for female educators. These insights offer transferable lessons for education in other fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Yemen and South Sudan.*

**Keywords:** *NGO engagement, Afghanistan education, humanitarian aid, community-based education, girls' education, education in emergencies*

### Introduction

The trajectory of Afghanistan's education sector over the past two decades represents one of the most volatile yet significant chapters in international development history. Following the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001, a concerted international effort led to a rapid expansion of educational infrastructure. Student enrollment surged from fewer than 1 million, almost exclusively



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boys, in 2001 to approximately 9.7 million by 2018 (UNESCO, 2025). This period was marked by substantial investment in school construction, curriculum reform, and teacher training, largely facilitated by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in partnership with the Ministry of Education. However, the political transition of August 2021 and the subsequent reinstatement of restrictive policies by the de facto authorities have precipitated a profound crisis, particularly affecting female students and educators.

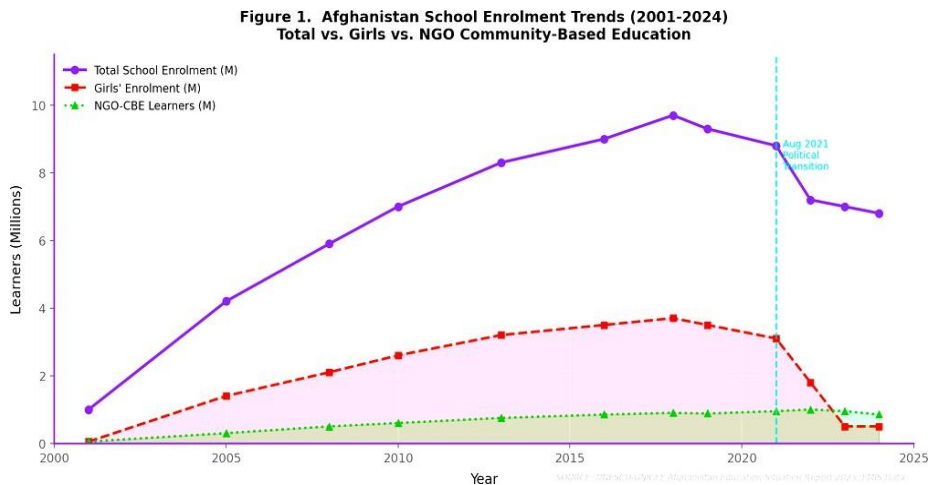
Currently, Afghanistan stands as the only country in the world where girls are systematically barred from secondary and higher education, excluding an estimated 2.2 million adolescent girls from classrooms (UNICEF, 2025). In this restrictive environment, international NGOs have become the primary, albeit constrained, custodians of educational service delivery, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. They operate in a complex humanitarian space, navigating sanctions, funding volatility, and shifting regulatory frameworks to maintain essential services.

This article investigates the changing dynamics of NGO engagement in Afghanistan's education sector. It aims to analyze the trends in service delivery, identify the primary challenges facing humanitarian actors, and propose a framework for sustained engagement in fragile contexts. The analysis is supported by data on enrollment trends, funding flows, and operational capacities. Table 1 below provides a snapshot of key enrollment statistics, highlighting the severe contraction in female participation post-2021.

Table 1. Student Enrollment Statistics in Afghanistan (2018 - 2024)

Year	Total Enrollment (Millions)	Female Enrollment (%)	Secondary School Girls (Millions)	Community-Based Education (Classes)
2018	9.7	39%	2.5	8,500
2020	9.5	38%	2.4	12,000
2022	8.8	28%	1.1*	18,000
2024	6.7	21%	0.0***	21,000

Source: Aggregated data from UNESCO (2025), UNICEF (2025), and Global Partnership for Education (2023).



**Figure 1. Student Enrollment Trends in Afghanistan (2001-2024)**

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 International NGO Typologies and Educational Delivery Models

The landscape of educational aid in Afghanistan is populated by a diverse array of non-state actors. Theoretically, these can be categorized into three distinct typologies: large multilateral INGOs (e.g., Save the Children, IRC), bilateral contractors, and grassroots organizations. Doshmangir et al. (2025) argue that NGOs in conflict settings often function as "surrogate states," stepping in to provide public goods when the central government lacks capacity or political will. In Afghanistan, this has manifested in the "shadow alignment" model, in which NGOs deliver services in parallel with state systems but are theoretically aligned with national curriculum standards (Cameron, 2025). This typology is critical for understanding current operational pivots, as larger INGOs face different regulatory pressures than smaller, localized entities.

### 2.2 The Humanitarian-Development Nexus in Education

The engagement of NGOs in Afghanistan is situated at the precarious intersection of humanitarian relief and long-term development, often referred to as the humanitarian-development

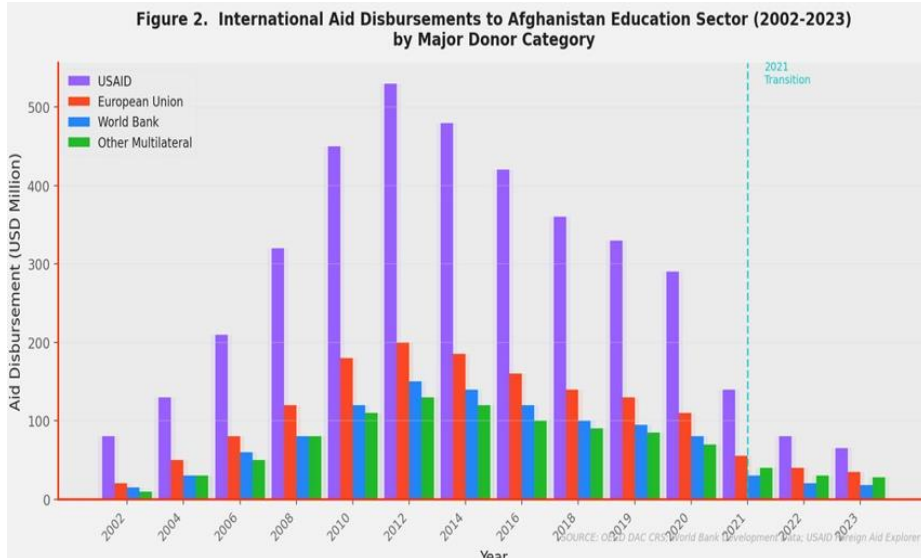
nexus. Retamal and Aedo-Richmond (1998) and later Kagawa (2005) emphasized that education in emergencies must transcend immediate relief to foster resilience and social cohesion. However, the post-2021 context has forced a regression toward purely humanitarian modes of delivery. As noted by Novelli and Cardozo (2008), aid in conflict zones is rarely neutral; it is often entangled with broader geopolitical agendas. The shift from "nation-building" development aid to "life-saving" humanitarian assistance has fundamentally altered the scope and duration of educational programs, prioritizing basic literacy and numeracy over systemic reform (Sinclair, 2002).

### **2.3 Fragile State Contexts and Educational Governance**

Educational governance in fragile states is characterized by fragmented authority and weak institutional capacity. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2010) Minimum Standards highlight the necessity of community participation in such contexts. In Afghanistan, the concept of "localized governance" has become paramount. With the central Ministry of Education's legitimacy contested by international donors, governance has devolved to the community level (Cameron, 2025). This theoretical lens helps explain the reliance on Community-Based Education (CBE) as a primary delivery mechanism, where accountability is horizontal (to the community) rather than vertical (to the state).

## **3. Historical Context of Afghanistan's Education Landscape (2001-2024)**

The reconstruction of Afghanistan's education sector post-2001 was a cornerstone of the international intervention. Between 2002 and 2021, the sector received over \$3.8 billion in international aid (Global Partnership for Education, 2023). This influx of capital facilitated the construction of thousands of schools and the recruitment of over 200,000 teachers. However, these gains were unevenly distributed, with rural areas often lagging behind urban centers. As illustrated in Figure 2, aid disbursements peaked around 2011, at the height of the military surge, and have since declined sharply following the 2021 withdrawal.



**Figure 1. International Aid Disbursements to Afghanistan Education Sector (2002-2023)**

The period from 2001 to 2021 also saw the institutionalization of Community-Based Education (CBE). Initially piloted by NGOs such as CARE and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan to reach remote villages, CBE was formally incorporated into the Ministry of Education's policy framework in 2018. This integration allowed for a standardized curriculum and teacher certification process (Burde & Linden, 2013). However, the collapse of the Republic government in August 2021 ruptured these institutional linkages. The subsequent decree banning girls from secondary education (grades 7-12) and universities erased two decades of progress toward gender parity, creating a bifurcated system in which primary education remains accessible but higher pathways are blocked (Shahir, 2025).

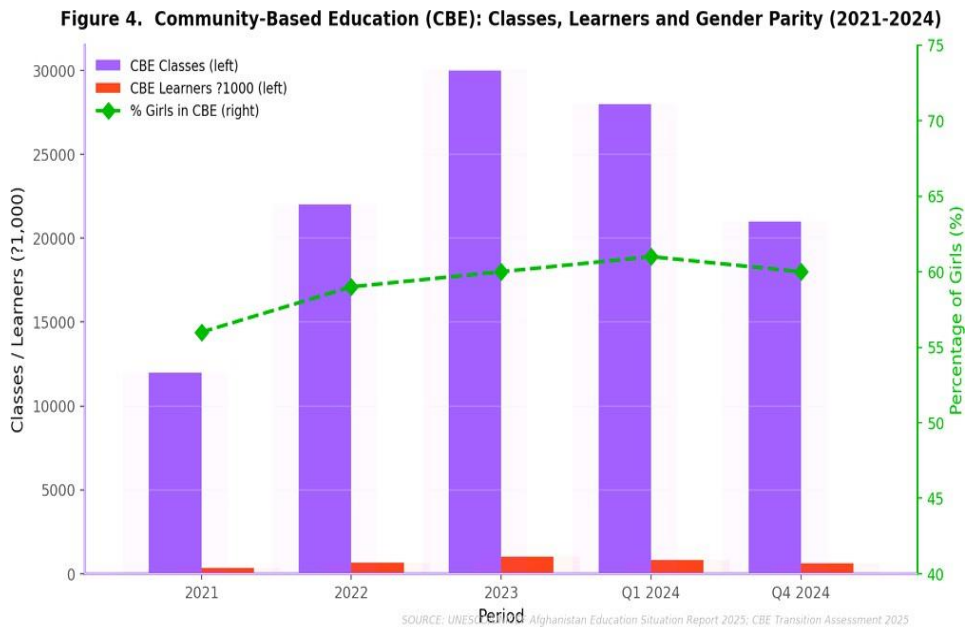
## 4. Trends in International NGO Engagement

### 4.1 Community-Based Education Programs

In response to the contracting formal education space, international NGOs have aggressively expanded Community-Based Education (CBE) programs. As of 2024, UNESCO reports over 21,000 active CBE classes reaching approximately 600,000 children, 60% of whom are girls

(UNESCO, 2025). These classes are typically held in private homes or mosques, circumventing the need for formal school

infrastructure and, crucially, offering a culturally acceptable modality for girls' education in conservative areas. Figure 4 illustrates the correlation between CBE expansion and the closure of formal secondary schools, highlighting the compensatory role of NGOs.



**Figure 4. CBE Expansion vs. Formal School Closures (2019-2024)**

Figure 4 illustrates trends in Community-Based Education (CBE) from 2021 to 2024, focusing on the number of classes, learners, and gender parity. The left y-axis represents the number of CBE classes (in purple) and learners (in red, with a threshold of 10,000), while the right y-axis shows the percentage of girls in CBE (green dashed line). Digital and Distance Learning Initiatives

With physical access restricted, NGOs have pivoted to digital and low-tech distance-learning solutions. Initiatives range from radio-based instruction, a legacy method revitalized for remote areas, to WhatsApp-based learning groups for secondary school girls. An interview with a UNICEF Education Specialist (2024) revealed that while digital platforms offer a lifeline, the "digital divide" remains a significant barrier; only 18% of Afghan women have access to the internet. Despite these limitations, innovative pilot programs utilizing solar-powered tablets pre-loaded with curriculum content have shown promise in maintaining learning continuity for girls confined to their homes (Save the Children, 2023).

## **4.2 Teacher Training and Capacity Building**

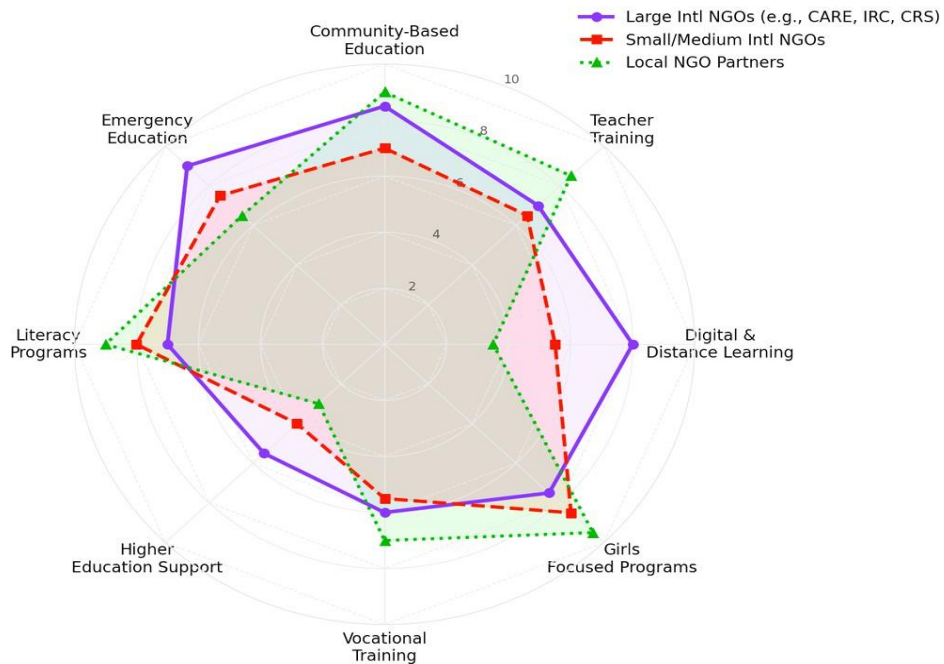
The quality of education has been severely compromised by the "brain drain" of qualified professionals post-2021. Endler et al. (2023) note a similar trend in the health sector, which is mirrored in education. To counter this, NGOs have intensified teacher-training programs, focusing on female teachers in CBE settings. Kirk and Winthrop (2007) identified home-based female teachers as pivotal change agents; current NGO programs build on this by providing psychosocial support training and pedagogy workshops. In 2023 alone, international partners trained over 15,000 community teachers, ensuring that the workforce remains capable despite the absence of formal state-led professional development (Orfan, 2024).

## **5. Challenges to Sustained NGO Engagement**

### **5.1 Operational and Security Constraints**

The operational environment for NGOs in Afghanistan is categorized as "extremely high risk." Security constraints are no longer primarily kinetic (conflict-related) but bureaucratic and administrative. The de facto authorities have imposed strict regulations on NGO operations, including the ban on Afghan female staff working for INGOs and the UN, issued in December 2022 and April 2023, respectively. This has severely hampered the ability to reach female beneficiaries. Figure 3 provides a radar chart analysis of NGO operational capacities, contrasting the high need for services against the low levels of access and staff security.

**Figure 3. Operational Scope of NGO Categories across Education Delivery Modalities (Composite Score 0-10)**



**Figure 3. NGO Operational Capacities Radar Chart**

The figure presents a radar chart illustrating the operational scope of various NGO categories across different education delivery modalities, with composite scores ranging from 0 to 10. Three types of NGO partners are highlighted: Large International NGOs (depicted by purple), Small/Medium International NGOs (shown in red), and Local NGO Partners (indicated in green)

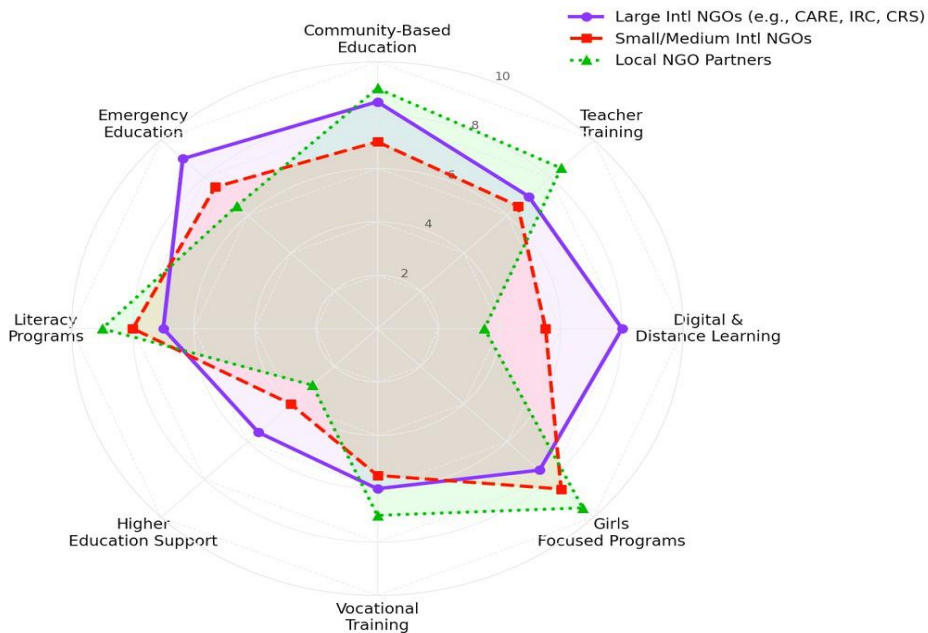
## 5.2 Funding Volatility and Donor Dependency

Financial sustainability is a critical vulnerability. Following the Taliban takeover, development, which constituted 75% of public spending, was frozen. While humanitarian aid surged initially, "donor fatigue" and competing global crises (e.g., Ukraine, Gaza) have led to a precipitous decline in funding. The Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2024 remains significantly underfunded, with the education cluster receiving only a fraction of the required resources (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024). This volatility prevents multi-year planning and forces NGOs into short-term, project-based interventions that lack sustainability.

### 5.3 Coordination and Accountability Deficits

The proliferation of over 200 active NGOs in the education sector has created a fragmented landscape. Effective coordination is hindered by the suspension of formal sector-wide approaches (SWAPs) that previously aligned donor, NGO, and government efforts. Figure 5 presents a heat map of these challenges, illustrating the acute intensity of coordination and funding deficits compared to technical capacity issues. Furthermore, the lack of a recognized government counterpart complicates accountability mechanisms, leaving NGOs answerable primarily to external donors rather than local stakeholders (Cameron, 2025).

**Figure 3. Operational Scope of NGO Categories across Education Delivery Modalities (Composite Score 0-10)**



**Figure 5. Multi-Dimensional NGO Challenge Matrix**

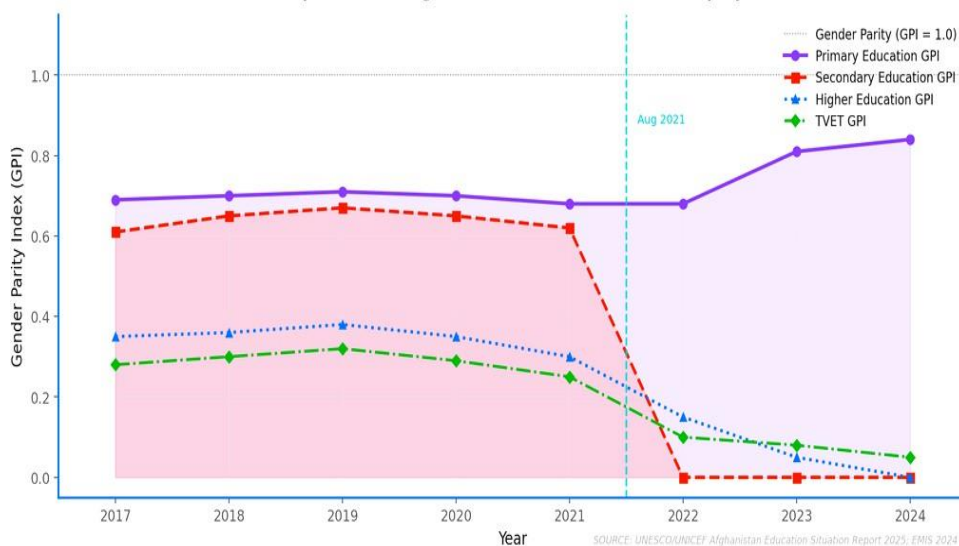
The figure presents a multi-dimensional challenge matrix assessing the NGO sector in Afghanistan's education system. It uses a color-coded grid to display expert-assessed composite scores for various challenges, on a scale from 1 (low impact) to 10 (critical impact). The matrix highlights eight dimensions, including Security Risks, Funding Volatility, Coordination Deficits, Policy Restrictions, Capacity Gaps, Access Barriers, Data Gaps, and Staff Retention.

Each dimension is evaluated against five impact categories: Operational Severity, Financial Impact, Programmatic Risk,

Gender Equity Impact, and Scale-up Feasibility. The scores are represented as a gradient, with darker shades indicating higher severity. Key findings suggest that Security Risks and Policy Restrictions are among the most critical challenges, while areas such as Data Gaps and Staff Retention exhibit moderate concern. The insights derived from this matrix can inform strategic planning and resource allocation for NGOs operating in Afghanistan's education sector.

## 6. Toward a Framework for Effective NGO

Figure 6. Gender Parity Index (GPI) by Education Level in Afghanistan (2017-2024)  
Impact of the August 2021 Transition on Gender Equity



### Engagement

Sustaining education in Afghanistan requires a paradigm shift from emergency response to resilience building. Based on the trends and challenges identified, this article proposes a framework centered on three pillars: localization, adaptive programming, and protection.

**Localization:** International NGOs must accelerate the transfer of ownership to local civil society organizations (CSOs). Local entities often possess greater community trust and can navigate the political nuances of the de facto authorities more effectively than international actors (Interview with Local NGO Director, 2024).

**Adaptive Programming:** The static project models of the past are ill-suited to current volatility. Programming must be modular and flexible, capable of scaling up or down based on security access. This includes hybrid learning models that combine low-tech distance education with small-group in-person tutoring.

**Protection of Educators:** As the frontline defenders of education, teachers, particularly women, require robust protection mechanisms. This involves ensuring consistent salary payments (often via mobile money to bypass banking restrictions) and creating peer support networks to mitigate psychosocial stress.

Figure 6 highlights the gender parity trends, underscoring the urgency of these interventions to prevent a complete erasure of female participation in the education sector.

## **7. Conclusion: Implications for Education in Conflict Settings**

The case of Afghanistan serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of educational gains in conflict-affected states. The regression from a burgeoning sector to one defined by exclusion and emergency demonstrates that education cannot be insulated from broader political failures. For international NGOs, the experience in Afghanistan highlights the limitations of "shadow alignment" when the state apparatus becomes hostile to fundamental human rights.

However, the resilience of the Community-Based Education model offers a glimmer of hope. It suggests that when education is anchored in community demand rather than in state supply alone, it can withstand severe political shocks. The lessons drawn here - specifically the necessity of flexible funding, the primacy of local partnerships, and the integration of low-tech digital solutions- are directly applicable to other crises, such as those in Yemen, Syria, and South Sudan (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008; Mendenhall et al., 2015).

Ultimately, the international community must remain engaged. While the modalities of support must evolve to avoid legitimizing exclusionary policies, abandoning Afghanistan's education sector would condemn a generation to illiteracy and isolation. The "imperative of presence" for NGOs remains valid, but it requires a renewed commitment to principled, adaptive, and localized action.

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