

Children's Right to Education During Eviction: A rapid review of Settlers at Red Hill-Gerehu, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea



KEY POINTS

- *The evictions of illegal settlements in the urban areas have significant consequences for children's right to education.*
- *The loss of school time and the trauma experienced by students will have lasting impacts, further limiting access to quality education.*
- *These children will leave school with lower basic skills, hampering their socio-economic progress and loss of skilled labours.*
- *Immediate humanitarian support is needed to ensure affected students can continue their education, with social protection for their families.*
- *The lack of coordinated efforts by the appropriate State authorities has displaced learners, leading to serious human rights violations concerning education, shelter and food security.*



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1. Introduction

Access to quality education is a fundamental human right protected under the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Constitution and reinforced by PNG's commitments to global frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As a signatory to the CRC and other human rights instruments, the Government of Papua New Guinea (GoPNG) is obligated to uphold these commitments. Every child has the right to quality education, as affirmed in international agreements among member nations.

To advance these obligations, GoPNG has developed national education policies, including the current National Education Plan 2020–2029 (NEP), which aligns with Vision 2050. The NEP is operationalized through a costed three-year National Department of Education (NDoE) Corporate Plan that is aligned with the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) IV 2022–2027.

This rapid review assesses the impact of the recent forceful eviction at Red Hill, Gerehu, in the National Capital District, focusing specifically on its effects on students. It highlights the challenges faced by affected learners and demonstrates how such actions compromise access to quality education in PNG. Similar eviction incidents in previous years have also disrupted schooling during critical periods of the academic calendar.

The PNG Education Advocacy Network (PEAN), as a National Education Coalitions of Civil Society advocating for children's right to education, conducted an on-site assessment at the eviction area.

This rapid review focuses solely on the educational impacts on the affected students. It does not examine the legality of the eviction process nor broader issues related to law and order in informal settlements. Instead, it presents an analysis of government policy interventions, background context, methodology, key findings, and discussion, framed within a human-rights-based approach to education. This situation highlights the growing crisis of land insecurity in urban areas of PNG and its detrimental effect on the education and well-being of children from low-income families.

2. Background

Education plays a crucial role in preparing the workforce needed to combat poverty and address social inequalities around the world. However, significant gaps remain in providing access to quality education, particularly in regions affected by conflict, climate change, poverty, and social exclusion. The Asia-Pacific region is no exception, where these challenges continue to hinder educational access.

In PNG, many children face disruptions to their education, and the government's commitment to ensuring the right to education remains unfulfilled. One key issue is the displacement of families from informal settlements, often due to urbanization pressures, land grabbing by foreign investors, and lack of proper legal protection for vulnerable communities.

A particularly concerning example of this is the eviction that took place on 24th to 30th October 2025, at Red Hill settlement in Gerehu, Northwest Electorate National Capital District. Over 160 families affected,

which many of whom had lived there since 1994. They were forcibly displaced after a claim of land ownership by an external entity. The eviction was carried out by police and construction machinery, whom demolished homes and personal belongings, leaving families homeless, without any immediate recourse.

2. Methodology

The rapid review assessment utilized a qualitative snowball sampling method. Data collection was carried out through focus group discussions and open-ended key informant interviews.

Key informants included fifteen women, four men, one head teacher, and one teacher from a single school. Focus group discussions were conducted with caregivers, comprising four mothers, students aged 11 to 25 from affected temporary residences. Additionally, a separate focus group included seven students with their teacher was conducted.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, where codes were applied to identify and develop themes. The analysis was guided by a human rights-based approach, which emphasizes empowering individuals to fully claim and enjoy their human rights. Both the thematic analysis and the human rights framework share a commitment to promoting human dignity and equality.

3. Findings

The evictions disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups, including the elderly, widows, young children, single mothers, and adolescent girls. A total of 160 families, who had lived in the area for 31 years, were forcibly displaced. Among those affected were 88 students (57 males and 31 females), enrolled in both primary and secondary schools in Port Moresby. The evictions severely disrupted their access to essential services such as education, healthcare, shelter, clothing, food and clean water.

Notably, the evictions occurred during the seventh week of the school academic year, intensifying the disruption to students' internal academic progress. Interviews with affected families revealed that some had relocated to the Irian Jaya refugee settlement area, where they were provided with allocated land. However, for students staying with relatives, the situation remained challenging. They had to adapt to unstable living conditions, further hindering their access to education.

4.1 Traumatic Experiences

Many newly homeless parents, concerned about their children's education, encouraged them to continue attending school. However, the trauma caused by the evictions was evident. Many children struggled to focus on their schoolwork and expressed a strong desire to return home to be with their parents. They experienced difficulties to sleeping, often fearing the return of the police and excavators.

Teachers observed that students were distracted and not engaged in class. Formerly high-achieving students appeared disinterested, unable to concentrate, or physically present but mentally absent during class.

4.2 Quality of Education – Low Self-Esteem in Students

The disruptions caused by the evictions led many students to miss classes, leaving them uncertain about how to catch up with their peers. For some, the fear of receiving poor grades contributed to low self-esteem. One female student shared that missing a test left her anxious about her grades, worried that falling behind would make it difficult to catch up.

Teachers noticed a decline in academic performance, with some students unable to complete their tests on time. One student returned to school but didn't attempt her exercises due to the stress caused by the displacement. While some students stayed in the classroom after school to finish their work, others struggled with take-home assignments, returning them incomplete or unattended. One parent and former secondary school teacher shared: "My ten-year-old son (Grade 3) hasn't attended school since the eviction. He can't study or go to school because we have no home. Many parents and children are traumatized. We've lost everything and have nowhere to go."

4.3 Health Risks and Privacy Concerns

The temporary makeshift homes that the displaced families living have severely impacted their children's health. Some children have developed fevers, diarrhea, and nausea. The only available water source, a public tap, is used for drinking, showering, laundry, and washing dishes by both males and females. Girls and women are forced to bath in public during the day, making it difficult to maintain proper hygiene. Female 11-year-old student shared: "I haven't gone to school since the eviction. There's no water to wash with, and no private place to change my clothes. My father drives a taxi, my mother stays home, and I don't have lunch money. I feel scared."

4.4 Families Relying on the Informal Sector

For many families, the informal sector work was their primary source of income. Most families relied on selling fresh produce or betelnuts to support their children. On average, mothers would provide between K2-K5 (USD \$0.40-\$1.00) per day for their child's lunch. However, the current situation has made it impossible for families to continue their informal businesses leaving them unable to provide lunch money for their children.

Some students shared that they went to school without lunch money, aware of their parents' financial struggles. In some cases, lunch money was sacrificed by parents who had lost their homes and were urgently renting a nearby place so their children could continue their education. One student explained, *"We sacrificed so we could have a home to stay in and come to school."*

The new relocation area at Stage 7, where many evicted families have been resettled by a local church leader, lacks electricity and safe drinking water. Children must walk 2–3 kilometers to fetch clean water for drinking and bathing.

While some families with formal employment were able to find new rental home, while those without formal jobs are now living on the streets.

5. Discussion

The testimonies reveal widespread psychological distress, loss of learning spaces, inadequate sanitation, and severe financial barriers that significantly hinder marginalized children's ability to continue their education. Many students experienced trauma due to the displacement of family members, along with feelings of shame and exclusion from their communities and school environments.

5.1 Access

One of the government's major achievements has been improving the affordability and accessibility of education through the Tuition Fee Free (TFF) Policy, now known as the Government Tuition Fee Subsidy

(GTFS). However, the current displacement event constitutes an educational emergency. It has denied 88 students' access to their classrooms, effectively undermining the government's agenda to expand education accessibility for all school aged children. As a result, opportunities for marginalized children to fully develop and meaningfully contribute to social and economic progress have been pushed further below acceptable standards, especially for families already living in poverty.

5.2 Quality

The absence of quality basic education during crucial stages of academic and personal development significantly undermines students' ability to build essential critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This lack of quality education not only limits individual empowerment but also slows broader social and economic progress. Over time, such educational gaps fuel cycles of poverty and leave communities without the skills workforce needs for development. Marginalized and low-income families often face systemic discrimination that restricts their access to quality education (Watkins, 2010).

One affected student, (Student J), recently lost his father and relied solely on his mother's small garden produce and market sales to support his schooling. He reported: *"I have no place to study, no place to wash, and no lunch money. There is no support from family members."*

Teachers confirmed, that students who were absent during school examination weeks, particularly those displaced from the Red Hill community, missed critical assessments. At Gerehu Primary School, the Head Mistress instructed teachers to award average marks for the missed tests. Students in grade 7 and 8 expressed concern that receiving lower grades and missing classes would affect their assessments. They feared this would negatively impact their academic progress, resulting in high risk of dropping out.

Long-term Implications

As shown in Figure 1, nearly all of the affected students were at crucial stages of their educational journey. The displacement is therefore expected to have wide-ranging and long-lasting impacts on their lives. The review shows that students who leave school prematurely due to human rights abuses in PNG often lack basic job skills and contribute to the 40% of unemployed youth nationally—a group projected to remain largely unskilled in the coming decade (National Research Institute Spotlight Report, April 2024).

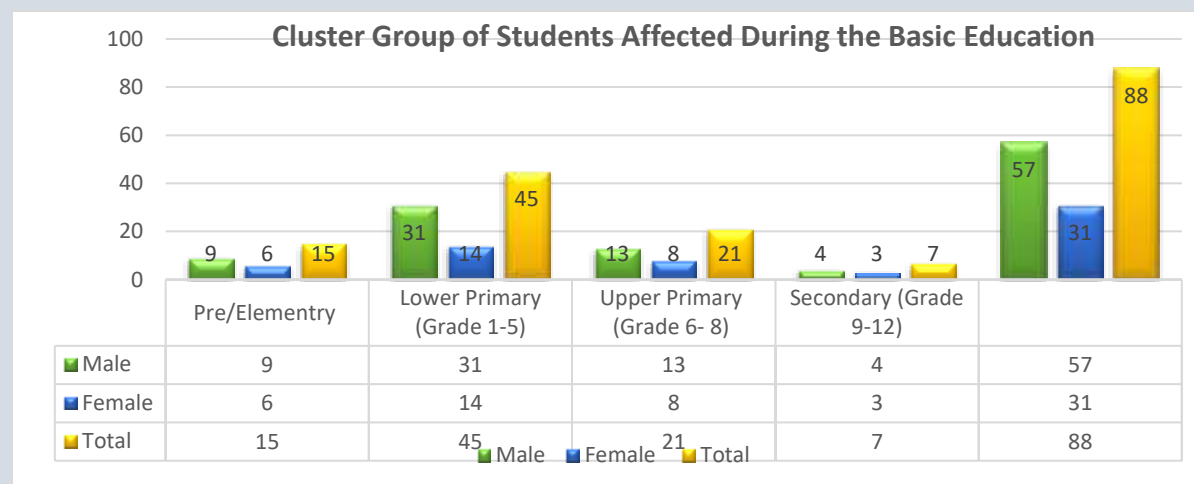


Figure 1 Students affected by settlement removals

A 2018 study conducted by the UBE NRI found that fighting and related disruptions were among the top issues affecting the quality of education. The power dynamics created by forced displacement further

undermines a child's education, compromising personal growth and causing significant setbacks in development.

Youth Education and Unemployment Youth in PNG continue to leave the education system prematurely, either due to poor academic performance that restricts their progression or because of external challenges that interrupt their schooling. According to the National Youth Policy 2020–2030, approximately 80% of young people—around 100,000 annually—are pushed out of the school system. With limited opportunities for post-secondary education, many young people exit school without the skills required to secure meaningful employment. As a result, they require stronger government support, recognition, and the expansion of pathways for training, skills development, and work.

The Government's ambition to create one million jobs by 2027 is currently off-track. The National Employment Policy 2021–2031 notes the country's persistently low employment levels and underscores the urgent need for targeted strategies to address them. Due to limited formal employment opportunities, a significant portion of the population depends on the informal sector for livelihood. The informal economy remains one of the largest sources of employment in PNG.

However, the destruction of homes and the displacement of families directly undermine government commitments to enhance citizen participation in the informal sector. Displacement disrupts economic activities, reduces household earning capacity, and further amplifies the socioeconomic challenges faced by vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

The removal of families in Red Hill settlements could be regarded as a disaster, severely undermining the peaceful existence in the community and disrupting the lives of many school children and their families. The displacement has denied children their right to learn, affected their safety and wellbeing, and placed additional strain on already vulnerable households. Immediate interventions are urgently needed to protect children's rights to education and to ensure their continued safety, stability, and development.

7. Recommendations

PEAN remains committed to advocating for the rights of displaced children and coordinating with relevant authorities to ensure continued access to education. It recommends that:

1. **Temporary learning spaces (TLS)** should be provided, and emergency education kits developed by schools to help students in such situations.
2. **Cash Voucher Assistance (CVA)**-Humanitarian Support for Students should be provided to allow students to continue school and to allow social protection of the families during the challenging period.
3. **Temporary Water, sanitation, and Hygiene (WaSH) facilities** should be made available for girls and boys in the temporary settlements.
4. **Psychosocial support (PSS)** provided for affected families and students to help them to get back on their feet.

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