Rights, Capabilities, and Critical Pedagogy: Assessing Empowerment in INGO-led Non-formal Education for Refugees & Migrants in Libya

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Abstract

This study investigates how INGO-led NFE programmes for children and youth on the move seek to empower learners amid the complexities of mixed migration. It takes Libya as a case study, given its position as a central route to the Mediterranean and its high influx of refugees and migrants. The study proposes an integrated conceptual lens—combining the 4As rights-based framework, the capability approach, and critical pedagogy—to examine the empowering dimensions within INGO practices. Based on qualitative interviews with 12 staff from five INGOs, findings reaffirm critiques of Education in Emergencies' short-term approach, highlighting its emphasis on provision over impact. Education's empowering potential is found to be constrained by the absence of progressive learning pathways and the limited efforts to enhance learners' agency.

Key words:

Education in Emergencies; Refugee education; Mixed Migration; Capabilities; quality education; Empowerment

Introduction

While education has long been enshrined as a fundamental right in international treaties and reasserted through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG4 (UNESCO, 2019a; 2019b), it remains an unfulfilled promise for many children and young people caught in the uncertainties of mixed migration[1] (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies [GGH-EiE], n.d.; UNESCO, 2019b; Mixed Migration Centre [MMC], 2024b; 2024c). The magnitude of people moving through mixed migration flows—especially children—highlights the urgent need to examine how education systems respond to their rights and needs. UNHCR (2025c) reports over 123 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including more than 45 million children. In parallel, the number of international migrants has risen to over 281 million (IOM, 2024) with mid-2024 figures from the Migration Data Portal (2025) showing a total of 304 million. However, data on children and young people in irregular migration remains difficult to capture due to the informal and often undocumented nature of such movements. Nevertheless, the increasing number of children—reported as 28 million in 2020 (IOM, 2024)—arriving in destination countries highlights their growing significance within global mobility (UNESCO, 2019b; IOM, 2024; MMC, 2025).

Whether people move to escape conflict or persecution, or to pursue better economic opportunities, their journeys are often non-linear, involving irregular routes and multiple border crossings (UNHCR UK, n.d.; Sharpe, 2018; MMC, 2021; MDP, 2022). This complexity is reflected in the educational experiences of children and youth, not only during their journeys but also throughout

[1] There is no widely agreed definition of mixed migration; it can refer to mixed motivations for moving among individuals or the varied legal statuses within migration flows, often highlighting the complexity of population movements (MMC, 2021).

prolonged stays in transit countries (GGH-EiE, n.d.; UNESCO, 2019b; MMC, 2024a; 2024c). Compounded by irregular legal status, language barriers, discrimination, and the fear of detention, difficulties in accessing education are reinforced (UNESCO, 2019b; MMC, 2022; 2024c). In such situations, non-state actors—particularly international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)—guided by the principles of human rights, intervene to ensure that educational needs are met (UNESCO, 2019b). In certain mixed migration contexts, INGOs serve as the primary education providers, with this reliance being especially pronounced in states lacking formal asylum frameworks, such as Libya (UNHCR, 2024).

INGOs' interventions often involve the provision of non-formal education (NFE), which typically includes learning opportunities delivered outside the formal school system (UNICEF, n.d.; UNESCO, 2019b; Shohel, 2022). Interventions may also include advocacy and negotiation with host and transit states, strengthening existing systems and promoting the integration of children and youth into formal education frameworks (UNICEF, n.d.; UNESCO, 2019b; Shohel, 2022). However, INGO-led education interventions are not without limitations. One is that they are typically delivered within the humanitarian framework of Education in Emergencies (EiE), which is inherently immediate and short-term (Mustafa, 2019; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2019; Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Another key critique of humanitarian interventions is the prevalence of top-down approaches, often shaped by donor priorities and international agendas rather than local needs (Novelli and Kutan, 2023; ElAsad, 2025). However, there is limited critical analysis on these interventions' impact (Novelli and Kutan, 2023)—beyond quantitative indicators— which prompts further inquiry into their empowering dimensions. Responding to this gap, I situate my research within the space of empowerment.

The aim of this research is twofold. First, it seeks to make a theoretical contribution by proposing an integrated conceptual lens—combining the rights-based approach (Tomaševski, 2001), the capability approach (Sen, 1999), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). This contribution involves exploring the conceptual intersections between the three frameworks—particularly around agency and empowerment—to propose a more coherent lens for analysing the impact of educational provision in humanitarian contexts. This analytical lens carries possibilities for reimagining NFE practice in ways that better respond to learners' realities and aspirations, while also contributing to the literature on the operationalisation of the capabilities approach in education.

Second, the research examines how INGO-led education programmes seek to empower learners in mixed migration settings, offering novel empirical insights from Libya through qualitative interviews with 12 staff from five INGOs. In doing so, it highlights the challenges embedded in the design and delivery of these programmes—as well as the structural and operational constraints facing INGOs—that weaken their potential to empower learners.

Conceptual framework

While the Rights-based 4 As Framework, the Capability Approach, and Critical Pedagogy each offers distinct contributions, this analysis proposes that when these three frameworks are used in combination, they offer a more comprehensive lens to understanding what it means for education to be both transformative and rights-fulfilling. The study unpacks each of the three frameworks and synthesises the ways in which they mutually reinforce one another. To translate abstract theoretical concepts into observable elements of programme design, the study identifies indicators

that reflect alignment with the empowerment dimensions demanded by the integrated conceptual framework.

The 4 As framework

This rights-grounded framework establishes a normative structure for the provision of the right to education. Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability represent the four fundamental and interdependent conditions under which this right must be fulfilled (Tomaševski, 2001; Tikly and Barrett, 2011, UNESCO, 2019a; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2019). Each of the four dimensions carries specific implications for the design of humanitarian education programmes. Availability refers to the adequate provision of educational resources. Accessibility involves the removal of barriers—whether physical, economic, or sociocultural—that prevent learners from accessing educational activities. Acceptability focuses on the quality and cultural relevance of education, including respect for learners' dignity and values, while guaranteeing safety within the learning environment. Finally, Adaptability refers to the flexibility of educational provision to respond to learners' circumstances.

Rights to, in, and through education

Tomaševski (2001) explains that the four As serve to fulfil *rights to, in* and *through* education. Availability and accessibility address rights *to* education, while acceptability and adaptability fulfil rights *in* education. Directly linked to the focus of this study, adaptability fulfils rights *through* education—where education's empowering potential lies.

However, although Tomaševski does not present any of the four elements as standalone or more significant, availability is often prioritised in humanitarian settings, justified by the imperative to

ensure rapid access (Mustafa, 2019; Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2019). The study argues that such prioritisation risks weakening education's acceptability and adaptability and the mechanisms through which they are implemented.

A social justice response to rights-based gaps

The top-down orientation commonly adopted by EiE interventions (Novelli and Kutan, 2023; ElAsad, 2025) could mirror the dynamics through which human rights were originally formulated, often at a high international level, and thus at risk of remaining disconnected from the lived realities of politically marginalised communities (Robeyns, 2006b; Tikly and Barret, 2011). To address this limitation, scholars like Tikly and Barrett (2011) and Shah and Lopes Cardozo (2019) argue that the rights-based approach should be supplemented with a social justice perspective. Similarly, Thorsen (2020) argues that the social justice lens helps inform education in migration settings because it encourages looking beyond basic enrolment to understand how migration, gender, class, and ethnicity shape educational opportunities, constraints, and empowerment. Building on this, this study undertakes such an integration by drawing on the capability approach (Sen, 1999)—particularly for its emphasis on agency, voice, and contextual relevance.

The capability approach

The capability approach views freedom as both the means and the end of development (Sen, 1999). At its core are the interrelated concepts of functionings, capabilities, resources, and unfreedoms. *Functionings* refer to the actual achievements or states of being—such as being literate. *Capabilities*, on the other hand, represent the real opportunities or freedoms individuals have to attain those functionings—often not explicitly measurable or visible. *Resources* constitute the means—such as income, services, or institutional support—through which individuals may pursue

valued functionings. In contrast, *unfreedoms* refer to constraints that prevent individuals from living a life they value while also limiting their ability to convert resources and capabilities—such as that of education—into desired achievements and capabilities. It encompasses various barriers, including economic disparities, social inequalities, and structural constraints (Saito, 2003; Robeyns, 2006a; 2006b; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Buzzelli, 2015; Aoun Barakat et al., 2025).

Synergies between the capabilities and rights-based approaches

Both the capability approach and the rights-based approach are grounded in a commitment to human dignity and a multifaceted understanding of development. While the rights-based approach frames individuals as rights-holders entitled to legal and moral claims (Tomasevki, 2001; Robeyns, 2006b), the capability approach emphasises the real freedoms people have to achieve well-being focusing on agency and dignity (Sen, 1999). Both share a multifaceted view of development—encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions (Sen, 1999; Tomaševski, 2001; Robeyns, 2006b; Tikly and Barret, 2011; UNESCO, 2019a). The rights-based approach focuses on securing education rights (*to, in,* and *through* education), while the Capability Approach complements this by assessing how these rights translate into meaningful opportunities and functionings (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2019).

Capabilities and education

Although Sen did not explicitly develop the capability approach in relation to education, he recognised education as a capability in its own right and as a vital expander of other capabilities**.** The approach recognises education's intrinsic and instrumental value, acknowledging both the importance of education for skill development and the role it plays in fostering a deep

understanding of the world, cultivating freedom, reasoning, and meaningful relationships (Robeyns, 2006b; UNESCO, 2003).

Addressing critiques of the capability approach

While I argue that the openness of the capability approach—particularly not defining a list of essential capabilities (Robeyns, 2006b; Tikly and Barret, 2011; Trezi, 2014)— is strategically important to maintain contextual sensitivity. I argue that the openness of this approach presents a limitation—specifically, the absence of ethical grounds to govern the use of capabilities. This is one reason why this research combines the capability approach with the rights-based approach, which, despite its own limitations, offers a legal and moral reference for exercising freedom. This critical reflection was inspired by Saito (2003), who argued that education should teach values to guide the exercise of capabilities.

Additionally, a central debate in the capability approach concerns how the expansion of capabilities is reflected in empirical indicators, and whether measurement should focus on capabilities or functionings (Robeyns, 2006a; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Nonetheless, I would argue that the primary concern should not be the outcomes measurement per se, but rather the extent to which education programmes align with the principles of agency and freedom. Cary Buzzelli's interpretation of the capability approach in early education reinforces this perspective: 'When education enhances freedom and agency it allows for expanded capabilities in the future' (2015, p. 207). Therefore, this study focuses on identifying indicators within INGO education programming that reflect alignment with the capability approach. The emphasis is on how to achieve empowerment through education, rather than on measuring programme outcomes.

Deepening acceptability and adaptability

By centring agency and relevance, this approach supports recognising the forms of knowledge, skills, and learning most relevant to their lived realities. In this way, it is useful in identifying critical gaps in acceptability and adaptability dimensions within humanitarian education interventions, such as weaknesses in community engagement and participation.

A central alignment indicator with the capability approach is the (1) meaningful community participation throughout the lifecycle of education projects, facilitated through structured channels that ensure relevance and timely adaptation to learners' evolving needs. This includes shaping content, modalities, and outcomes, and informing the programme's strategies and theory of change. In parallel, to reflect accountability and a genuine commitment to respecting the agency and dignity of the people served, this participation should be accompanied by (2) structured mechanisms through which learners and their caregivers can voice feedback and satisfaction regarding the educational experiences. Their satisfaction with the relevance of the programmes to their needs and aspirations should be an indicator of the effectiveness of these programmes.

Holistic perspective

Sen asserts that 'Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency' (Sen, 1999, p. xii). This perspective shifts the focus from merely equalising provision—availability within the four As framework—to the need to interrogate and address the constraints that hinder learners from utilising education to achieve valued functionings and capabilities. This perspective points to a critical aspect: the heterogeneity of learners. In Sen's terms, individuals have different capability sets based on personal characteristics—*conversion factors*—such as gender, disability,

ethnicity, and shaped by broader social power dynamics and structural inequalities (Walker, 2005; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Buzzelli, 2015; Aoun Barakat et al., 2025).

Building on this, the perspective of unfreedoms can be applied to interrogate the barriers to achieving empowerment through INGO-led NFE in two key ways: first, by interrogating how NFE programmes engage with *conversion factors* (Walker, 2005; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Buzzelli, 2015; Aoun Barakat et al., 2025); and second, by applying the concept of unfreedoms to examine the structural and institutional constraints imposed on INGOs that undermine their efforts to empower learners.

A humanitarian education programme aligned with the capability approach would reflect its holistic nature by (3) identifying and addressing these conversion factors. This could be reflected in the proactive integration of complementary services—either internally at the INGO level or externally through coordination and partnerships with other actors.

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy positions learning as a means for emancipation and social transformation. This emancipatory aim is pursued by cultivating critical consciousness—an awareness of social, political, and economic injustices and one's position within these structures—and linking this awareness to praxis—understood as reflective and transformative action, thereby enhancing learners' agency (hooks, 1994; Thomas, 2009; Biesta, 2017; Luter et al., 2017; Magee, A. and Pherali, T. , 2019; Cubeddu and Mangone, 2024).

The methods central to this approach focus on making education a collaborative work, where students are viewed as active participants in knowledge production rather than passive recipients

(hooks, 1994; Thomas, 2009; Biesta, 2017; Luter et al., 2017; Magee, A. and Pherali, T. , 2019; Cubeddu and Mangone, 2024).

Synergies between the capability approach and critical pedagogy

Synergies between the capability approach and critical pedagogy emerge from their shared goal of advancing freedom and social justice. Empirical applications of critical pedagogy in educational programmes reveal strong synergies with the capability approach, offering meaningful routes for its operationalisation through pedagogy. For example, outcomes from the *Community as Classroom* programme—a Freirean-inspired academic support programme implemented at a K–8 school in an under-resourced neighbourhood in Buffalo, New York—demonstrate increased learner engagement, not only in heightened awareness of social and environmental issues within their communities but also through fostering agency and collective action to address such problems (Luter et al., 2017). Notably, participation in this project correlated with measurable improvements in academic outcomes (Luter et al., 2017). These findings align education's dual role: as intrinsically valuable in expanding individuals' capacity for critical reflection and agency, and as instrumentally valuable in improving outcomes such as academic achievement and skill development (UNESCO, 2003; Robeyns, 2006a).

To align with critical pedagogy, NFE programmes should create spaces for learners to critically reflect on their lived experiences—such as displacement, legal status, marginalisation, or limited access to rights—and actively take a role in shaping their educational experiences. Such alignment could be observed in the (4) use of problem-posing and dialogue-based methods, alongside (5) participatory approaches that involve learners in shaping the content. These practices align with the adaptability and acceptability of the rights-based approach, as they respond to the specific needs and priorities of affected populations. At the same time, they reinforce the capability

approach by enhancing learners' agency and the relevance of education. Alignment with critical pedagogy could also be evident when programmes link critical awareness with meaningful action, for instance, through student-led projects or community-based learning initiatives.

Educators' role

Building on Friere's foundation, bell hooks' highlights in her concept of *Engaged Pedagogy* educators' central role in fostering critical reflection and awareness—not only in their students, but also within themselves. hooks argues that an educator's wellbeing, including their pursuit of self-actualisation and personal growth, is essential to fulfilling their role (hooks, 1994). In humanitarian contexts, teachers may be affected by displacement, insecurity, or other forms of hardship, which can impact their wellbeing and, in turn, their ability to support their learners. Therefore, the analysis will consider the different challenges and the internal working conditions that may challenge teachers in enacting their pedagogical roles. In doing so, the analysis will also explore the extent to which INGOs offer support to teachers. Such support can include (6) institutional support for teachers' wellbeing, professional development opportunities, and efforts to raise awareness about the importance of holistic care.

Conceptualising the empowerment space

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnections between the three frameworks discussed in this section. Acceptability and adaptability are central to fulfilling *rights in* and *through education*, representing the empowerment space within the rights-based approach. Extended by the capability approach, empowerment—capability expansion—can occur both through skill development and the cultivation of critical reasoning and freedom.

On the skill development side, *rights in education* are essential to ensuring that education is of quality and relevance to learners' language, cultures, needs, values, and aspirations. Crucially, such relevance cannot be realised without meaningful community participation. This relevance also strengthens the agency of learners and the broader population served, allowing them to act as agents shaping their own educational experiences. Finally, as indicated earlier, the cultivation of critical consciousness and agency through critical pedagogy further enhances academic outcomes, which in turn reinforces skill development.

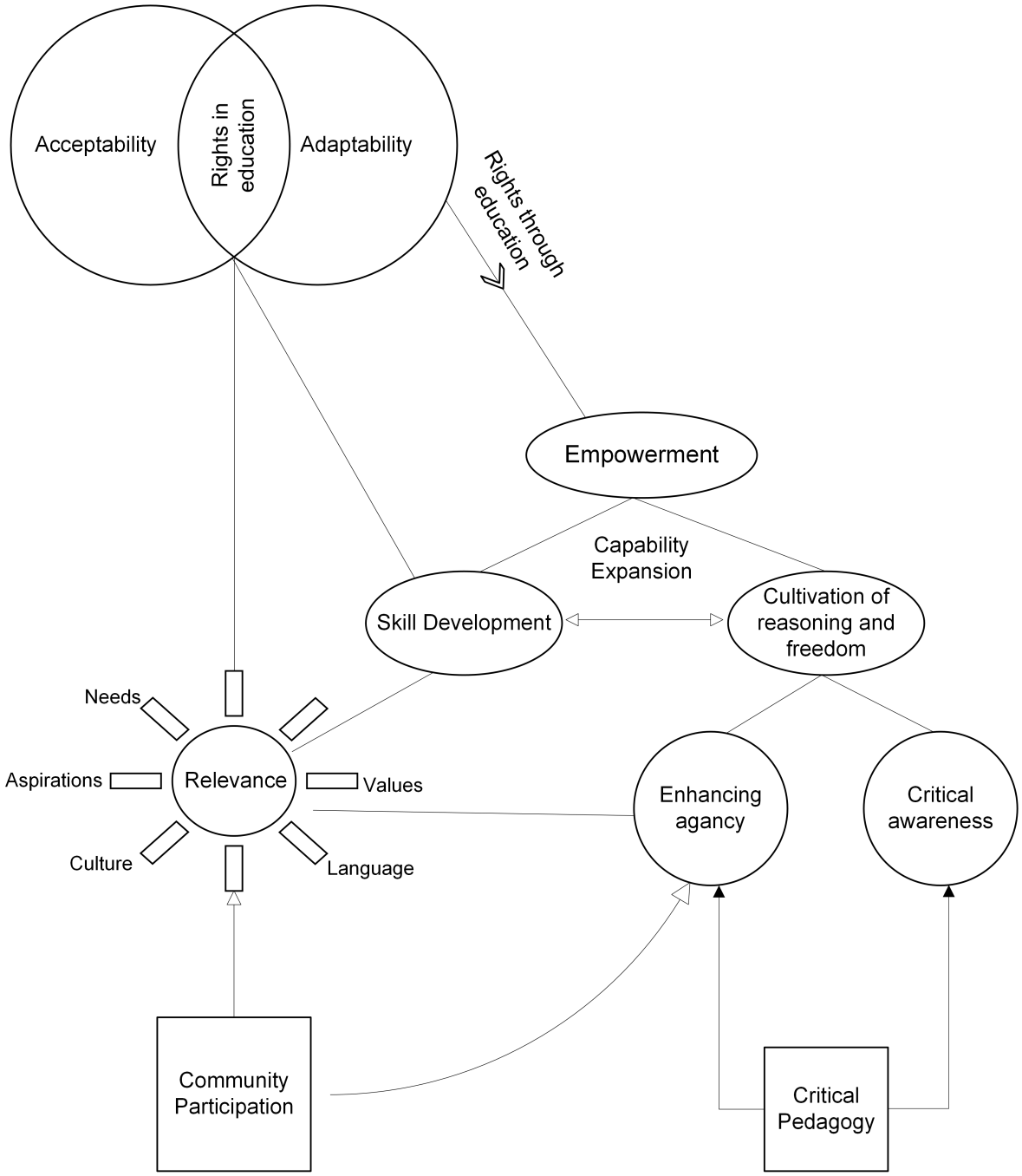

Figure 1. **Links between rights, capabilities, and critical pedagogy within the empowerment space.**

Research context: Libya

Libya represents a critical and an under-researched context in the study of access to education for children and youth within mixed migration flows. Strategically located along the southern Mediterranean coast, bordering six countries—with porous southern borders, Libya functions as a key transit hub on the Central Mediterranean route to Europe (GGH-EiE, n.d.; MMC, 2024a; 2024c; UNHCR, 2025a; IOM, 2025; MMC, 2025). Additionally, its largely unregulated informal economy makes it a destination for many economic migrants (MMC, 2024a; 2024c; UNHCR, 2025a; IOM, 2025).

IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix reports that 867,055 migrants currently reside in Libya, mostly from Niger, Egypt, Sudan, Chad, and Nigeria (2025). Among them, 7% are accompanied children, and 4% are unaccompanied children. Within these protracted mixed migration flows are considerable numbers of refugees. As of May 2025, UNHCR data indicates that 92,436 refugees and asylum seekers were registered in Libya, 37% of them are children under 18—primarily from Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2025b). The protracted dynamic of long-term mixed migration flows of refugees and migrants from across the region is marked by severe gaps in protection, particularly for children and young people, many of whom are denied access to fundamental rights such as education (UNICEF, 2023; MMC, 2024a).

Critically, Libya lacks a national asylum framework—being neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2025a)—and addresses mixed migration primarily through the lens of 'illegal migration' (UNHCR, 2025a; MMC, 2025). Consequently, neither refugees nor migrants receive legal protection from the Libyan state nor guaranteed access to essential services such as health and education. While UNHCR operates in Libya to provide

protection and assistance to refugees, it does so without a formal agreement with the Libyan government, leaving UNHCR-registered individuals still vulnerable to the risk of refoulement (UNHCR, 2025a). Similarly, although IOM delivers protection and migration management services, significant protection risks persist for migrants.

Despite the increasing attention the issue of mixed migration is receiving in the region, the specific experiences and educational needs of children and youth within these flows remain largely invisible (GGH-EiE, n.d.). This invisibility is reflected in the limited academic and grey literature that explore the education of migrant and refugee learners in Libya beyond surface-level access barriers (REACH and UNHCR, 2022). Existing publications primarily highlight barriers to formal education (REACH and UNHCR, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; IOM, 2025).

Publications by UNICEF tend to focus on system-strengthening interventions and coordination with Libyan authorities, while acknowledging the persistent barriers to education faced by refugee and migrant populations (UNICEF, 2023). On the other hand, publications of INGOs implementing non-formal education programmes in Libya largely report their achievements in quantitative outputs, such as the number of children reached with NFE. These reports offer limited qualitative insight into the lived educational experiences, and their broader relevance and impact. Donor agencies such as Education Cannot Wait (ECW), through the (2022-2024) Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP), provide some insight into the state of NFE in Libya and its associated limitations, identifying UNICEF and INGOs as grantees and consortium leads (ECW, 2021). According to ECW, NFE provision generally consists of two categories: remedial classes for children enrolled in formal school and catch-up classes for those who are out of school. Yet the sector suffers from limited harmonisation across actors in how these services are delivered.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach to examine how INGO NFE programmes act to empower learners within mixed migration flows. Firstly, the theoretical section of the research explores the empowerment dimensions embedded within the rights-based approach and the capability approach, and as operationalised by critical pedagogies. Secondly, the empirical component of the research consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews with staff from five INGOs implementing education programmes for children and youth within mixed migration flows in Libya. Participants held a range of technical, managerial, and field-based roles (see Table 1). Purposive sampling was used to select participants with firsthand experience designing, managing, or implementing NFE activities. Effort was made to include diverse perspectives across international and local staff, a range of organisational roles, and varied operational areas within Libya, allowing for a broader understanding of practices across different organisational contexts.

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams between 13 June and 20 June 2025 in Arabic or English depending on participants' preference. Interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed using Microsoft Teams and supplemented by manual transcription.

Table 1. participant profiles

Participant ID	**Functional Role**
Interviewee1	Technical Staff
Interviewee2	Management Role
Interviewee3	Field Staff

Interviewee4	Information Management Role
Interviewee5	Technical Staff
Interviewee6	Management Role
Interviewee7	Technical Staff
Interviewee8	Field Staff
Interviewee9	Monitoring & Evaluation
Interviewee10	Field Staff
Interviewee11	Management Role
Interviewee12	Management Role

Thematic analysis was used to explore the interview narratives. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 15 and analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were informed by the conceptual framework and included categories such as availability, unfreedoms, agency, acceptability, capability expansion, critical pedagogies, and holistic programming. Inductive codes, by contrast, emerged organically from participants' own language and the issues they raised during interviews. These included themes such as access vs quality, and internal challenges within INGOs.

Findings

In exploring the research questions, seven themes were identified from the empirical data collected.

1. Populations served

The responses reflected an operational adoption of a refugee–migrant distinction as it is commonly applied within humanitarian practice in Libya. In the absence of a formal asylum system, respondents often referred to individuals originating from countries listed by UNHCR as experiencing conflict or persecution—such as Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia—as 'refugees', regardless of their actual legal status or documentation. Conversely, individuals from other countries within the broader mixed migration flows were generally referred to as migrants.

1.1 Unfreedoms and conversion factors

The distinction within mixed migration populations includes the degree of empathy extended towards different groups, reflecting differentiated experiences of unfreedoms.

Respondents consistently noted that refugees and migrants of Arab origin receive more empathy from both host communities and authorities. This distinction in empathy has implications for access to essential services provided by the government and by humanitarian actors, including access to education—formal and non-formal.

A secondary differentiation layer concerns migration aspirations. Some refugees and migrants view Libya as a place to settle and integrate—often engaging in informal work and establishing a degree of stability—while others see it as a transit point, staying temporarily to secure funds for onward movement to Europe. These differing aspirations shape how families decide to invest in

education and how they navigate access to it. While more settled families may enrol children in private, community-run schools or INGO-run NFE programmes, newly arrived or those in transit often lack the financial means or the stability to do so.

2. Goals of NFE programmes

INGO staff narratives emphasise that the primary goal of their programmes is to uphold the right to education, while providing protection and safeguarding to children who otherwise '*will be on the streets, begging, stealing, exploited.'* (Interviewee1). However, the narratives reflect not only the lifesaving value of EiE in humanitarian settings but also its long-term, capability-expanding function—aligning with Sen's capability approach. Education was framed as enabling autonomy and future agency, equipping children and youth with capabilities that would serve them regardless of where their futures unfold. Interviewee9:

> *It's empowerment for them, for the children. Even if they don't stay in Libya for long, it's for their future. Whether they return home or reach another country, they carry that knowledge with them.*

3. Access vs Impact

Although programme narratives suggest an intention to promote the rights *to*, *in*, and *through* education, the findings reveal notable gaps in the alignment with the acceptability and adaptability dimensions through which rights *in* and *through* education should be realised in practice (Tomaševski, 2001).

The narratives notably highlight a stronger focus on increasing access and enrolment in NFE compared to attention to its acceptability and adaptability. Yet persistent gaps in availability and accessibility continue to undermine the realisation of rights in and through education. A disconnect

between needs—persistent barriers to education—and INGOs' temporary non-formal education interventions is underscored by respondents who explained that after completing a short course—typically two weeks to a few months, with one INGO offering access for up to a year—participants become ineligible as programmes shift to new 'unique beneficiaries.' This approach was largely attributed to donor pressures with only one actor reported flexibility in enrolment by their donors. The implications of this approach for capability expansion are observed in two ways: it limits learners' ability to develop skills progressively and limits learners' and caregivers' decision-making power to pursue further educational levels, undermining empowerment through the cultivation of agency.

Table 2. INGO staff quotes on access vs impact

Prioritisation of availability	*I understand that with the with the* [sic] *organisation such as* [INGO] *or any other organisation, they don't want to leave children without education. So they want to reach as many children as they can, which I understand. But at the same time, we hope that we can continue to do more, we don't stop, especially for those who were unlucky enough to be accepted* [in formal education]. (Interviewee8) *keeping the same student will leave us way behind in our targets, each ... so for us to reach the 4,000 we will have to reach new children or as we call them unique beneficiaries, these targets that the donors put for us, puts us in another pressure which is keep getting funded* [sic] *so the project continues to implement.* (Interviewee1)
Limited skill development	*We can say we provided supplementary education or catch-up activities to this beneficiary, but we're basically rushing through everything. We're rushing to meet deadlines and meet indicator targets, not necessarily focusing on real learning impact.* (Interviewee12) *It's just such a short period of time. You try to at least teach them the Arabic alphabet and how to make words, like first graders. The teachers make a great effort, but once they feel they will fulfil the objective, that's it. We end with them and bring in a new group. We don't take them to level 2 or 3 or 4. After six weeks, we move on, this is the policy.* (Interviewee8)

Agency restriction	*I see that at the end of each cycle when the children get sad because they think it's something wrong they did that is stopping the cycle.* (Interviewee1) *We have some parents, they ask for more, for example my child has been coming here, you have taught him a lot and why don't they continue taking them because they haven't been accepted in schools yet.* (Interviewee8)

3.1 Language of numbers

Another implication of higher focus on increasing numbers of children and youth reached with NFE is creating a culture of numbers and quantitative indicators that ultimately sidelines the overarching goal of making transformative impacts— in favour of meeting donor requirements. Notably, this donor–implementer relationship was replicated between INGOs and their local implementing partners, reinforcing upward reporting. Interviewee7:

> *Sometimes they don't care. They care about the figures, the numbers, …that there are these number of migrants in needs when they have to use in in* [sic] *speech or whatever.*

In contrast, one example that stood out was a basic literacy and numeracy programme offering one year of progressive learning, demonstrating greater impact, not limited to literacy and numeracy but also social skills. Interviewee6:

> *We felt the impact through the appreciation expressed by parents and the visible improvements in the children. This impact isn't just educational…, it also affects the child's social development. The children were able to integrate into the school environment, make friends, and become part of a community. This had a broader positive impact on the students, their sense of belonging, their mindset, and even their outlook on the future.*

4. Rights in and through education

The narratives highlight INGOs' efforts to improve the acceptability and adaptability of education, particularly their focus on enhancing teaching quality. Examples include the recognition and response to learners' psychological needs—particularly through efforts to create safe learning environments and provide psychosocial support—alongside attempts to address language barriers. However, INGOs' efforts to ensure acceptability and adaptability are not underpinned by robust participatory mechanisms throughout the educational experience. As the findings indicate, these programmes lack structured involvement of learners and caregivers through all stages of the project life cycle. Interviewees indicate that cultural sensitivity is often mediated through teachers' personal capacities over structured community consultation mechanisms. This was highlighted by Interviewee6 who stated,*' the success of these efforts depends heavily on the capacity of the volunteers.'*

While communities are often involved in initial needs assessments during the project initiation phase, this early engagement is unsustained in subsequent project phases. During the planning phase, community participation is largely confined to caregiver induction sessions, with limited consultation on logistical matters such as activity scheduling, and, in some cases, input on selecting from a set of pre-defined life skills topics.

The implementation and monitoring phases lack structured and consistent mechanisms for participants to voice their evolving needs or provide real-time feedback—aside from the general Complaint and Feedback Mechanisms (CFMs) established at the organisational level. However, despite the presence of CFMs, the feedback that is gathered generally influences future initiatives instead of adjusting current interventions. This is particularly problematic given that children and

youth are often not targeted with further services once they are no longer classified as ‘unique beneficiaries.’ Interviewee12:

> *At the beginning of the cycle, we do a session for our beneficiaries and introduce the specific approach of cycle for them and what’s the followed curriculum exactly and the timeline for the cycle, the session takes about 2-3 hours, and in about 4 weeks we do an evaluation session with the parents to hear their feedback in order to improve our implementation in the next cycle.*

In the evaluation phase, success is typically measured through short-term, quantifiable indicators aligned with donor commitments. In contrast, less emphasis is placed on participants’ satisfaction. This suggests accountability is primarily directed toward donors over the people served. Furthermore, the prevailing exclusionary reporting practices weaken the efficiency of existing feedback mechanisms; once learners are deemed ‘reached’ and no longer eligible for further NFE, they have little incentive to offer genuine feedback to improve services from which they no longer benefit.

Notably, stronger alignment with the principles of adaptability and acceptability was evident in interventions with increased participation and agency of local education providers through partnerships, where they had more agency in decision-making and planning. These collaborations supported existing educational structures, strengthening what already exists instead of operating in isolation. Such partnerships often bore fruit in the form of pathways to accredit children’s learning, thereby enhancing its potential for recognition and transferability. Interviewee5:

> *Our clearest successes were* [sic] *in the remedial education program. Around 90% of those who participated were able to obtain a certificate of completion for their educational level.*

5. Empowerment through critical pedagogies

When asked whether life skills and critical thinking sessions support learners in engaging with real-life projects that link critical reflection with action—in line with Freirean pedagogy—staff largely acknowledged that such practices are limited. While some programmes include sessions about child rights to raise awareness, it was noted that life skills sessions tend to remain more theoretical.

In relation to teachers, interviewees repeatedly highlighted challenges impacting their wellbeing, which in turn, constrain the enactment of critical pedagogies. While internal advocacy secured limited benefits—such as health insurance and paid leave in two cases—these remained exceptions. Challenges included insufficient compensation and persistent payment delays, which caused financial instability for teachers. Interviewee6:

> *The biggest challenge in working with volunteers is the organization's own policy regarding their engagement and management. This situation often leads to a high turnover of volunteers…, they are treated almost like full-time staff but contracted as casual workers.*

Additionally, teachers often share traumas or personal hardships of migration and displacement, creating additional emotional burdens. Yet, psychological and mental health support for teachers remains limited, as do opportunities for professional development, contributing to sustained stress and burnout among educators. Interviewee12 highlighted the limited training opportunities caused by busy work schedules:

> *Another challenge faced by our teachers is the limited number of training opportunities we are currently able to provide. This has become especially difficult recently due to the large number of ongoing activities and the already packed schedules of the staff. It's hard to pause activities just to conduct training sessions*

6. *Holistic Programming*

A single example of integrated programming emerged where an INGO integrated vocational training and livelihoods support, supporting youth with business skills and start-up materials. However, the majority of responses indicated that service integration was often reactive rather than proactive, occurring through referrals upon raising concerns instead of proactively integrating complementary services to address learners' broader needs. However, referral mechanisms themselves are marked by significant gaps. Interviewee6:

> *There's no pre-defined pathway, no established steps or designated partners to refer to. Instead, when a case arises, we scramble to figure out who can take it on, and this leads to delays and inefficiency.*

INGOs with case management units demonstrated relatively stronger referral mechanisms, primarily in responding to protection needs such as psychosocial support. However, this often follows the same ad hoc approach.

At the broader humanitarian coordination level, coordination was described as fragmented despite the presence of sectoral task forces. This fragmentation was critically expressed as a hindrance to joint advocacy efforts. Interviewee7 stated, *'But we never go as a community. We are a community. We have the same interest, we are supposed to.'*

7. Unfreedoms of INGOs

Findings reveal a complex and often unpredictable operating environment, severely impeding INGOs' ability to deliver transformative, rights-fulfilling NFE. INGOs experience significant access restrictions and heightened scrutiny, exacerbated by ongoing political fragmentation in

Libya. Since March 2025 (up to data collection in mid-June), the majority of INGOs providing aid to refugees and migrants have been suspended by authorities in the western region, who claimed that such aid encourages the settlement of irregular migrants. This suspension disrupted essential services, including education and protection.

Notably, although many of these INGOs were implementing projects funded by UN agencies, respondents reported receiving limited support or advocacy from those agencies, leaving them to navigate security pressures alone.

Compounding these restrictions is the persistent lack of acceptance by host communities that respondents attributed to shortcomings in community engagement strategies and the low visibility of INGOs. Interviewee2 described this as the *'number one challenge'*:

> *There have been significant social media waves and public discourse in recent months around migration issues and the reintegration of migrants. The reactions have been intense....So, I would say the number one challenge is the limited community acceptance of migrants and refugees.*

Discussion

While INGOs aim to empower children and young people within mixed migration patterns by providing access to education and training, the approach through which they seek this empowerment falls short in operationalising the transformative dimensions within the intersecting frameworks of rights-based, capabilities, and critical pedagogies. INGOs mainly seek learner's empowerment through facilitating recovery from the traumas of displacement and migration. This is reflected in the integration of psychosocial support activities across all aspects of NFE programming.

In contrast, capability expansion through skill development is often narrowed by the prevalent short-term model—characterised by a focus on provision, resulting in tightly framed courses to meet large enrollment targets. This model offers limited scope for meaningful skill development, lacking gradual progression pathways. Given the persistent lack of educational alternatives for learners to transition into after completing INGO-provided NFE, the current programme model appears disconnected from the realities of the context. It delivers one-off educational support, premised on the assumption that the emergency of limited access to education is a short-term condition.

While restricted agency was mainly expressed in the limited decision-making power to pursue further levels of education, the issue is deeper. The limited community participation as well as weak downward accountability limits the ability of learners and their caregivers to shape the education they receive, rendering them passive recipients of aid rather than agents shaping how it is delivered. These gaps constrain the agency among the populations served, an outcome that works against the very aim of empowerment (Sen, 1999).

Capability expansion is further hindered by the limited implementation of critical pedagogies, with educators' constrained role emerging as a major gap. Drawing on the perspectives of Freire and hooks (2000; 1994), internal INGOs challenges—such as delayed teachers' payments, lack of institutional support, and the precarious nature of teachers' contracts—create significant barriers for teachers. This reveals a fundamental disconnect in programme design: educators are tasked with fostering empowerment among learners while remaining unsupported and disempowered within the very systems they serve.

Another factor contributing to the uneven expansion of capabilities is the absence of holistic and interdisciplinary planning within education programmes to respond to conversion factors. As a result, capability expansion through NFE becomes dependent on the existing capability sets of individual learners. The limitations in addressing conversion factors are further compounded by the fragmented coordination between actors across sectors, which weakens support services, referral pathways, and collective advocacy efforts to negotiate access to rights for refugee and migrant populations—efforts that could reduce dependency on INGO-led NFE provision. Despite these challenges, certain interventions—albeit not always embedded in systemic approaches—stood out for their stronger alignment with empowerment dimensions. These include vocational training for youth that enhance employability across the formal and informal economy, literacy and numeracy classes offering year-long enrolment, and partnerships with local education providers enabling the certification of learning.

Conclusion

This research makes a theoretical contribution by proposing an integrated analytical lens that combines the rights-based approach, the capability approach, and critical pedagogy to examine INGOs practices. It demonstrates how these perspectives reinforce each other to deepen understanding of empowerment through education in humanitarian settings, with particular attention to acceptability and adaptability. The study highlights links between the capability approach and critical pedagogy, showing how the latter can operationalise the former by embedding agency, relevance, and critical reflection into pedagogy. This lens was applied to analyse qualitative interviews with 12 INGO education staff from five organisations delivering

NFE across Libya, providing insights into how these programmes contribute to learner empowerment in ways aligned with the theoretical dimensions of empowerment.

While the narratives described INGO programmes as aiming to fulfil the three components of the right to education—*rights to, in,* and *through* education—the findings suggest limitations in the dimensions of empowerment, which undermine the fulfilment of *rights through education*, where the transformative potential of education lies.

INGO-led NFE programmes aim to empower learners through trauma recovery and skills development, by integrating PSS and offering education and training opportunities such as basic literacy, numeracy, vocational training, and life skills. However, these efforts are undermined by the programmes' own approach. Findings suggest a problematic prioritisation of provision—evident in high enrolment targets—at the expense of ensuring acceptability and adaptability, which are essential for genuine empowerment.

The focus on increasing enrolment was reinforced by exclusionary donor reporting mechanisms, which rendered learners ineligible for further education once they had been reported as 'unique beneficiaries'. Additionally, the lack of structured community participation throughout the project cycle restricts the space for learners to shape or influence the education they receive, thereby undermining empowerment through agency enhancement. Additionally, any capability expansion appears uneven due to insufficient attention to conversion factors, which are attributed to weak holistic programming, and limited coordination between actors. Furthermore, the cultivation of freedoms and agency through critical pedagogy is constrained by limited opportunities for reflective awareness and learner participation in co-creating knowledge, as well as by factors limiting teachers' roles, including emotional and financial burdens, lack of institutional support, and insecure contracts.

Research implications

The findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how the dimensions of empowerment—as framed by this research's theoretical frameworks—can be embedded in NFE to align with the three components of the right to education—rights *to, in,* and *through* education—particularly through upholding community agency and the meaningful support and enactment of teachers' roles. Additionally, donor pressures that risk shifting focus from impact to donor compliance, prompt interrogating the dynamics between donors and implementers and its implications on NFE's transformative potential. Similarly, limited acceptance by host communities invites inquiry into the social, political, and cultural factors shaping such responses. Finally, the constrained support and coordination from UN agencies highlights the need to investigate relationships between INGOs and multilateral actors within Libya, including how shared goals are negotiated and operationalised in complex humanitarian settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Waed Altireeki is an education specialist with over five years of experience in the humanitarian field. Her last position was within an INGO leading education in emergencies programmes. She recently completed an MA in Global Development and Education and conducted this research as part of her dissertation. Her primary interests lie in exploring the transformative role of education across diverse contexts and philosophical perspectives.

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