

# Refugee Education in urban settings

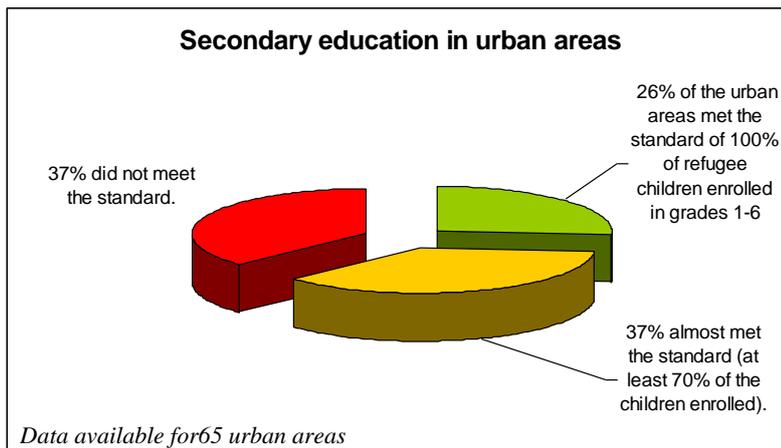
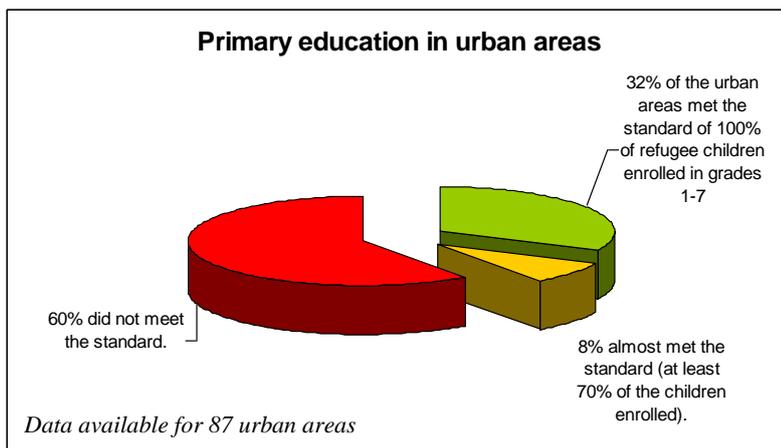
## 1. The Issue

According to UNHCR's most recent statistics, almost half of the world's 10.5 million refugees now reside in cities and towns, compared to one third who live in camps. Large numbers of internally displaced persons have also migrated to cities, both large and small. Beyond increasing in size, the world's urban refugee population is also changing in composition. In the past, a significant proportion of the urban refugees registered with UNHCR in developing and middle-income countries were young men who possessed the capacity and determination needed to survive in the city.

Today, however, large numbers of refugee women, children and elderly people are also to be found in urban areas. They are often confronted with a range of protection risks: the threat of arrest and detention, *refoulement*, harassment, exploitation, discrimination, inadequate and overcrowded shelter, as well as vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), HIV-AIDS, and human smuggling and trafficking.

UNHCR considers urban areas to be a legitimate place for refugees to enjoy their rights, including those stemming from their status as refugees, as well as those that they hold in common with all other human beings. Access to education is one of these rights.

In 2008, primary school enrolment met the standard in 29 of the 87 urban areas for which data on school enrolment of refugee children was available (i.e., 32%, compared to 29 % in camp settings). For secondary education, the figure was 37% (data available for 65 urban areas). This means that there is slightly greater access to education in urban areas, due to integration into local systems, than in camps.



## 2. Opportunities and constraints for urban refugee education

A number of challenges confront refugees as they seek **access** to education in urban settings:

- Not all States are party to the **1951 Convention**, which stipulates that hosting states should accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to primary education, as well as treatment as favourable as possible with respect to education other than elementary level.
- **Registration** is a prerequisite to benefit from access to the national system where refugees are entitled to it.
- **ID documents and certificates** detailing previous education are also required. Access to the documents is not always feasible due to long displacement periods and armed conflict in the country of origin.
- **Distance from schools** and lack of or high cost of transportation as well as other school-related costs such as uniforms and school materials.
- Very often, the **lack of livelihoods** support and opportunities is a cause for drop-out and non-enrolment. The difficulty to cope with different social problems (access to health, child-headed households) is also an obstacle.
- A major gap is apparent as regards **post-primary education** opportunities, especially with regard to secondary education and vocational training; this applies to camp-based as well as urban refugees.

### Good practice:

The government of Jordan granted free access to formal education in 2007, and UNHCR supported the Ministry of Education to increase the local absorption capacity. UNHCR also strengthened community based approach to ensure non formal and informal education opportunities and provided material support to refugee families.

## Quality of education is also a concern:

- a high increase in enrolment may lead to lack of sufficient **infrastructure** and high ratio of students-per-class, potentially leading to poor academic achievements.
- Insufficient number of **teachers** and limited training is also an issue. As a consequence, educational staff are not able to ensure that the specific needs of refugee children are taken into consideration. Education is one of the crucial ways to prepare for self-reliance and trauma healing, but the lack of a **child-friendly environment** may impact the quality of education received.
- Lack of stationery, textbooks and other essential **materials** can also have a negative impact on academic achievement and retention rates.
- Refugee communities sometimes start their own schools but without achieving the **national standards** required to register as public or private schools. The education received in these institutions is thus not recognised and will not allow students to continue their education.

### Good practice:

UNHCR distributes school supplies to Iraqi refugees in Damascus in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). In 2008, the distribution of uniforms, shoes and school materials before the start of the Syrian school year benefited 30,000 children from Damascus and rural Damascus. By reducing the financial burden on Syria's increasingly impoverished Iraqi refugees and informing them of the education opportunities available, UNHCR hopes to encourage them to continue their children's education. In 2006-2007, the Syrian Ministry of Education counted 33,100 Iraqi children and adolescents at school; by 2007-2008 there were 49,132.

UNHCR has established Community Centers in areas where large numbers of Iraqis have settled. These Centers include education cells, which provide advice and appropriate education solutions for refugees whose children are not enrolled in school and/or who are encountering difficulties accessing education opportunities. The Centers have directly provided remedial classes and skills training (computer classes). Summer schools activities will also be taking place in these Centers and include literacy and numeracy classes (with a focus on out-of-school children and youth) and recreational activities.

Some **protection** challenges are also specific to, or exacerbated in, urban-based education:

- As some countries do not allow integration in their national system, refugee children and youth have their education disrupted. In urban settings, without access to education, children, adolescents and youth are more likely to face **violence and abuse** and be exploited through child labour, sexual exploitation, or become addicted to drugs or other illegal substances.
- In urban areas, transportation to and from school can imply **safety risks**.
- Refugee children may face **discrimination and racism** in schools.
- Lack of livelihoods and money can force children to engage in survival sex, or other **illicit activities** related to economic exploitation to cover school-related fees.

**Good practice:**

In Uganda, Parents-Teachers Associations exist in the different schools in which refugee children are enrolled. Refugee parents are involved in these associations, thus supporting better integration in local schools. In cases of disciplinary problems related to specific refugee children, they are usually solved at the school/community level, thanks to the involvement of parents and of the refugee community.

### 3. UNHCR Interventions to enhance the right to education

UNHCR's strategic approach to education in urban areas includes three major principles:

1. The establishment of parallel education structures should be avoided, and the focus must be on **integration into national public education systems**. This will imply strengthened collaboration, coordination and liaison with the line ministries, mainly the Ministry of Education (MOE). Where feasible, joint needs assessment will be undertaken for joint planning of the educational needs and support. In countries not party to the 1951 Convention, alternative models may need to be explored.
2. UNHCR promotes a **holistic approach**, supporting national structures and population needs through the construction and rehabilitation of schools, water/sanitation facilities, equipment, teaching and learning material, as well as teacher training to enable the public system to absorb an increased number of students. Free primary education should be a requisite, or at the least advocated for, along with lobbying for States to have consistent validation systems of learning attainments for the recognition of foreign school certificates. This approach will be coupled with remedial classes, accelerated learning programmes and language courses to facilitate integration for refugees. Vocational training opportunities should be sought at national training centres, making slots available for refugees and providing the support they need.

3. Lastly, **partnerships** with other UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO, and bilateral donors will be imperative for complementary and specialized education interventions. Particular efforts will be made to enhance existing agreements with these sister agencies having educational expertise and resources. In addition, sectoral linkages are critical, in particular with **livelihoods** programmes, so that parents can afford the cost of their children's education.