

Refugee education in urban settings

1. The numbers

UNHCR estimates that more than half of the world's refugees reside in urban areas and less than one third in camps¹. In 2009, the number of refugees residing in urban areas continued to grow (58% of the refugee population in 2009 and 50 % in 2008). Large numbers of internally displaced persons have also migrated to cities.

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. Women represent on average less than half (47%) of refugees in urban areas, with figures ranging from 10 per cent in Oceania to 47 per cent in Asia. It is also to be noted that forty-one per cent of refugees and asylum-seekers overall were children below 18 years of age in 2009².

In urban settings, refugees and asylum-seekers 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.

2. The issues

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% urban , compared to 29 % 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.

Between 2007 and 2008 primary enrolment increased in 20 out of 47 reporting countries with urban operations³ (e.g. Yemen, DRC, Egypt) and for secondary education, the enrolment rate increased in 15 out of 46 reporting countries with urban operations (e.g. Egypt, DRC, Rwanda).

3. Opportunities and constraints for urban refugee education

A number of challenges confront refugees as they seek education in urban settings which are the following:

3.1 Access

- 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 favorable 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

1 2009 Global Trends , UNHCR 15 June 2010, based on the data available for 8.8 million refugees

2 *ibid*

3 82 operations and 62 settings reporting

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 of coping 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:

Inter Aid, one of the education partner in Kampala provides adult education, and Jesuit Refugee Services supports English classes. Inter Aid has also identified 6 public schools attended by refugees and provide specific support to these schools. With regard to university education, Windle Trust supports students and closely monitors their academic achievements through the DAFI scholarship program.

3.2 Quality:

- 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 is 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 recognized and will not allow students to continue their education.

Good practice:

In Malaysia, where refugee children have no access to the national system, four implementing partners and 60 community-run schools provide non-formal education, mostly at primary level, based on the Malaysian curriculum. UNHCR's partner, Harvest Center, engaged in teacher training last year, benefiting volunteer teachers from community schools and other partners. The teaching methods used in this center are based on child participation.

3.3 Protection

- As some countries do not allow refugees to integrate in their education 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 labor, 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 Syria, UNHCR has established a number of Community Centers in areas where large numbers of Iraqis have settled. These Centers include Education Information Units (EIU) to provide information about education issues (enrolment procedures, scholarships, etc.) to refugees, monitor remedial classes in private institutes where children (refugees and host community) are enrolled, organize summer education activities and offer vocational training courses for the youth and adults. They also provide in-kind support to families,

carry out information, sensitization and awareness programs and follow up individual cases, with a special focus on girls and children with special needs. Education Information Units have developed a special tool to have information on children with specific needs; this could be used for monitoring purposes in other refugee operations. Education Information Units teams are comprised of refugee volunteers. Refugees can also acquire the International Computer Driving License (ICDL), an internationally recognized certificate, in these centers.

4. UNHCR Interventions to enhance the right to education

In 2010, UNHCR planned educational interventions in 50 operations for populations of concern living in urban areas. The total budget required for these activities is USD 50.5 million. Most of the activities are planned in the MENA region, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, as well as Asia (Iran, Malaysia, India). Provision of primary education represents the main activity. Implementation of measures to increase girls and boys enrolment rate represents a higher part of the budget in urban areas, as opposed to camps, where the focus is very much on school construction.

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 will 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 advocated for, along with lobbying for States to have consistent validation systems 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, bilateral donors and NGOs will be necessary 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.

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