

Solving the Education Crisis of Displaced Children

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Save the Children notes that 21.3 million refugees worldwide, half of them children, have left everything behind to escape conflict, violence and persecution; many have experienced profound physical and emotional traumas; some are missing years of school, severely compromising their futures.¹ This crisis is particularly acute in Syria, where half of children are no longer in school, in Burundi, Tanzania, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, South Sudan, Uganda, and in Myanmar, where violence in the Rakhine state is driving as many as 12,000 children into overcrowded and unsanitary displacement camps in Bangladesh each week.² Such a humanitarian disaster threatens not only those children and their families but all of us, as such camps can be the petri dishes of violence and terrorism in our common planet. This immense crisis demands a cooperative humanitarian response for the provision of education in emergencies and educational diplomacy has a key role to play in any successful solution.

In a complicated world filled with a multitude of challenges, this crisis of displaced children remains a critical, but poorly understood problem. The plight of these children may be invisible now, but it may well emerge as a huge threat to the next generation of innovators, thought leaders and citizens in our interconnected world. Will they be employable? Will they be able to provide for their families, contribute to the global economy, or ensure security in their homelands? Or will this next generation of refugees be a burden for a global society? Might they even be attracted to ISIS-like movements or other dangerous states? These questions require us to have more constructive conversations, determine options, and find collaborative responses to treat and restore the minds, bodies and spirits of these children, now.

The current crisis in Syria is illustrative. According to Kevin Watkins and Steven Zyck of the British Overseas Development Institute, well over half a million Syrian refugee children are out of school and “the education crisis there is fueling an epidemic of child labor and early marriage. Lost educational opportunity risks driving young people into radicalized groups. That risk is most severe in Lebanon, where just one in five school aged Syrian refugee children is in formal education – an enrollment rate below that of sub-Saharan Africa. Public schools in Lebanon cannot cope: the school-age refugee population exceeds the current intake of the country’s public schools and an over-stretched and under resourced system faces acute pressure. Donors have failed to act on commitments to ensure that there is ‘*No Lost Generation*’ of refugees; the UN’s inter-agency, regional education response is millions short of the funding levels requested for 2014.”³ Clearly the people of the world must act.

Background

Many people are aware of conflicts around the world, but few really understand their repercussions. From the exodus of the Israelites, to the rejection of the French Huguenots in the 1500s and the forced de-patriation of the Russian Revolution of the 1920s, large flows of innocent people often resulted from fighting within and among states. But since the 1990s, the number of refugees has increased alarmingly. The most recent United Nations estimate indicates that 21.3 million people are refugees, certainly the highest number since World War II⁴ and

perhaps the highest number on record.⁵ If the thought of 21.3 million individuals forced to flee their homes was not enough, 51% of these people are under the age of 18.⁶ Conflict continues daily and our society remains at risk by allowing entire populations of children to go under-educated.

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that there are nearly 65 million people who are presently displaced, over and above those classified as refugees. “A refugee is someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his (her) nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail (him/herself) of the protection of that country.”⁷ Refugee children feel discrimination and isolated, and suffer from trauma, fear and psychosocial adjustment due to their uncertain circumstances and separation from family, friends and communities. Even more sadly, these vulnerable children can expect to live in refugee camps for an average of 11-20 years before they can return to their home country. Confined to camps surrounded in barbed wire and managed by security guards, large numbers of refugees from different family units, cultural backgrounds and faiths can be housed together in containers with no beds and absolutely no privacy. If education is under threat in these circumstances, so are the futures of these children, the potential of their countries and the stability of the world.

Education is a human right; stated as such under Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War; the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Dakar World Education Forum Framework for Action; and Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most widely adopted piece of international law to date.⁸ Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights plainly states everyone has the right to education: “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”⁹ The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, states that every person is entitled to free education at the elementary level, for education allows “the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and enables all persons to participate effectively in society.”¹⁰

Our current approach, the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, views education as central to all human progress. Its expectations are stated in UN Sustainable Development Goal #4, which calls for ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning. Its specific objectives include: ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education, eliminating gender disparities in education, and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations by 2030.¹¹ So, since the international community agrees that education is essential for global stability and prosperity, why does this problem persist?

The Challenge: Few Funds and a Dearth of Learning Resources

There is an expectation that host countries will act on the responsibility to protect refugee rights to education in accordance with both the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Those agreements stipulate that refugees should be accorded the same treatment as residents of hosting nations with respect to primary education, as well as treatment “as favorable as possible...with respect to education other than elementary education.”¹² But, the situation on the ground is quite different, most predominantly due to a lack of resources.

Eighty-six percent of the world’s refugees live in host countries that neighbor their conflict-affected countries of origin.¹³ These countries are characterized by already overstretched education systems and fragile political and economic institutions.¹⁴ In contrast, less than one percent of refugees globally settle in countries with high Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, usually geographically distant from their origin, a process called “resettlement” by the UNHCR.¹⁵ Education for refugees in resettlement countries is relatively easy because the numbers of refugees are relatively small and permanence (settlement and even eventual citizenship) is assumed, by both the host government and the refugees.¹⁶ Importantly, “the degree of uncertainty that refugees face has changed since the end of the Cold War.”¹⁷ Critical for refugee education is that conflict and conflict-induced displacement are increasingly protracted.¹⁸ For example, “between 2005 and 2015, two fifths of all refugees were displaced for three or more years, and in 2014, across 33 protracted conflicts, the average length of exile was 25 years. The current length of displacement is nearly three times as long as it was in the early 1990s.”^{19,20}

So, in most of the places where refugee children are taught for extended periods of time there are severe problems. For example, “239 public schools in Lebanon currently operate in double shifts, with Lebanese children attending school in the morning and, where possible, Syrian refugee children attending in the afternoon, so increasingly overworked teachers grapple with problems of language of instruction and broader security protection issues concerning refugee children while working ever longer hours (some international NGOs have proposed to institute triple shifts, which would require refugee children to go to school in the evenings and place even greater demands on Lebanese teachers)... This same double shift system is in operation in Jordan, where to accommodate the demands of a double shift, lessons are shorter and teachers work longer hours. The strain on teachers and students is palpable. Teachers note that the education of all their charges, Jordanians and Syrians alike, is suffering.”²¹

Although international organizations and the United Nations take the leading role internationally in educating refugee children, “a new Global Education Strategy by UNHCR in 2012 enunciated a shift in the ‘locus of viability’²² for refugee education from supranational, as observed in Phase 2, to national. This new UNHCR policy emphasizes ‘integration of refugee learners within national systems.’^{23,24} Unfortunately, conflict-affected states spend far below the recommended levels of national income on education. In 2012, just 3.2 per cent of conflict-affected states’ national incomes were spent on education, when the global average was 5 per cent.²⁵ To make matters even more difficult, the historic education providers have changed their focus to concentrate on child protection rather than education, because education provision is too difficult

to monitor and evaluate in keeping with traditional government donor requirements.²⁶ Again, clearly the people of the world must come together and act.

Building Blocks for Solutions

To address the education crisis facing these vulnerable children and all of us as global citizens, several strategic improvements are needed. First, management and coordination of the international effort must ensure adequate resourcing, ongoing management and longer-term program sustainment. Second, access to the tools of a quality education need to be improved, including numbers of teachers, teacher training, curricula and pedagogical support. Finally, improvements on traditional education, such as physical fitness activity, healthcare, cultural sensitivity and societal integration programs and metrics to monitor their success need to be integrated into even the most rudimentary of education programs to ensure retention and eventual reintegration into society.

Education policy is uniquely placed to address the soft security concerns of refugee resettlement, with educators equipped to recognize, react and respond to the unique education needs and welfare of the next generation. An appropriate education diplomacy response to the refugee crisis can reduce the risk of stigma, isolation, intra-community tensions, marginalization and even radicalization.²⁷ There are currently several UN organizations specifically mandated to assist in educating refugee children; they include: the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which focuses on the education of children; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which addresses education for refugees and returning refugees; the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is focused on a wide spectrum of education needs for Palestinians; the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is technically the lead UN agency for education; and, Save the Children, an international non-governmental organization that promotes children’s rights, provides relief and helps support children in developing countries.

Quality learning must be a major focus. The World Bank determined in 2005 that “the most profound and lasting impact of conflict on education was on quality rather than on access. The deterioration in quality, which represents one of the most significant challenges to reconstruction, should be a consideration from the outset.”²⁸ Effective teacher instruction will also be essential.²⁹ The conditions under which refugee children are being educated are harsh and negligently resourced; the children themselves are often malnourished, in poor health, without benefit of traditional schooling, or all three. Such conditions require teachers of great dedication and real skill. Learner-centered pedagogy and active learning are vital, yet teacher training is traditionally a problem during the reconstruction phase of any conflict and is certainly neglected in any migrant camp environment. “Teachers are the most critical resource in education reconstruction. Conflict usually has profound and negative impact on a country’s teacher corps. Frequently dispersed, sometimes killed, and often unpaid or underpaid, teacher supply presents a complex array of problems for reconstruction.”³⁰ “Teacher development and training, largely neglected during conflict, creates particular challenges for post-conflict reconstruction as the system has to respond to the training backlog, an influx of untrained teachers, and the limited capacity of the central authorities to coordinate the wide range of private and donor-sponsored training initiatives.”³¹ On a positive note, the impact of good instruction in refugee camps can be

amazingly fulfilling. “In refugee environments children appear to benefit from an unexpected “bonding through adversity” effect in a way that children in formal education settings do not. Desks in classrooms are rarely empty and children often sit in fours rather than in conventional twos for warmth in winter. Far greater affection is visible among children and teachers than is the norm in formal education settings.”³²

Improvements on traditional education practices are required. Difficulties typically occur in camps due to the very real tensions of large numbers of refugees migrating to host countries not prepared to house and sustain them. School age children of diverse nationalities and cultural heritages come together in these stressful situations using different dialects, yet they must co-exist and be resilient. Many refugee children have been or are exposed to conflict and violence and display signs of psychosocial trauma and often withdraw socially; some students refuse to talk and need to be encouraged to engage in play-driven learning; conversely, others tend to act out in class. So, successful programs need to be child focused. Successful programs should also integrate music, art, play, sport or storytelling into conventional literacy, numeracy and language classes to assist children with retention. Physical activity and sports is also clearly an essential part of any youth refugee solution. Many studies have demonstrated the value of physical activity to the healthy mental development of children.³³ Educating displaced children can be affected by the need for drinking water, adequate food, shelter and medical care, rising security and social cohesion concerns, effective programs should also integrate health and hygiene education, often by the simple virtue of housing the most accessible water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities for children.³⁴ Only with such improvements combined with active learning methodologies can these at-risk children be assured of their basic educational needs (under such difficult conditions) and their eventual reintegration into society.

The Way Ahead

The crisis in education for displaced children is hugely important and challenging but the solutions are within our grasp. However, the people of the world must act at this defining time. The nations of the world must revamp their cooperative humanitarian response for the provision of education in emergencies regardless of ethnicity, religion or culture. Education diplomacy has a key role to play in this effort fostering the idea that education is the path to optimal human and global development to improve and maintain awareness and facilitate cooperation among partners. Partnerships must be developed to address the very real barriers to quality education in refugee camps through effective cross-sector collaboration among civil society, industry, national government stakeholders and the international and United Nations organizations that provide the great bulk of educational assistance to these children. If we act, make high quality learning accessible and a priority, and ensure the inclusion of improvements on traditional education practices, our common future should no longer be blighted by a lost generation of undereducated youth.

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Notes

- ¹ See *Save the Children* at: http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.9311443/k.5C24/Refugee_Children_Crisis.htm.
- ² Feliz Solomon, "Rohingya Refugee Children Are in Desperate Need of Aid, the U.N. Says," *Time*, October 20, 2017.
- ³ Watkins, Kevin, and Steven A. Zyck. "Living on hope, hoping for education." *The Failed Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. London: ODI (2014).
- ⁴ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization." *Educational Researcher* 45.9 (2016): 473-482.
- ⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "UNHCR Figures at a Glance," found at: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2011. *The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol*.
- ⁸ Mackinnon, Hayley. "Education in emergencies: The case of the Dadaab refugee camps." CIGI, 2014. See also Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2004 Global Consultation Report, found at: https://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/pdf/min_standards_education_emergencies.pdf.
- ⁹ United Nations General Assembly, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Resolution 217 of December 1948. Article 26, section 2, found at: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.
- ¹⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights." Article 13 Section 1; found at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.
- ¹¹ United Nations, see: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>.
- ¹² UNHCR, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article. 22.2, found at: <http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.
- ¹³ UNHCR, *Facts and Figures about Refugees*, found at: <http://www.unhcr.org.uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html>
- ¹⁴ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization." *Educational Researcher* 45.9 (2016): 473-482.
- ¹⁵ UNHCR, "Resettlement: A New Beginning in a Third Country," found at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a16b1676.html>.
- ¹⁶ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization." *Educational Researcher* 45.9 (2016): 473-482.
- ¹⁷ Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Söderbom, M. "On the Duration of Civil War." *Journal of Peace Research*, 41, 2004. 253-273.
- ¹⁸ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education in countries of first asylum: Breaking open the black box of pre-resettlement experiences," *Theory and Research in Education*, 2015. 1-18.
- ¹⁹ Crawford, N., Cosgrave, J., Haysom, S., & Walicki, N. *Protracted displacement: Uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015.
- ²⁰ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education: Education for an unknowable future." *Curriculum Inquiry* 47.1 (2017): 14-24.
- ²¹ Deane, Shelley. "Syria's Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency." *IDS Bulletin* 47.3 (2016).
- ²² Dale, R. "Specifying globalization effects on national policy: a focus on the mechanisms." *Journal of Education Policy*, 14(1), 1999, 1-17.
- ²³ UNHCR. (2012). *Education Strategy 2012-2016*, found at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5149ba349.pdf>.
- ²⁴ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization." *Educational Researcher* 45.9 (2016): 473-482.
- ²⁵ UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report, Policy Report*, June 2015, found at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002322/232205e.pdf>.
- ²⁶ Deane, Shelley. "Syria's Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency." *IDS Bulletin* 47.3 (2016).
- ²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Buckland, Peter. *Reshaping the Future: Education and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. New York: World Bank, 2005, 47.

²⁹ Mendenhall, Mary, et al. "Quality education for refugees in Kenya: Pedagogy in urban Nairobi and Kakuma refugee camp settings." *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol 1, No 1 (October 2015), 92-130.

³⁰ Buckland, Peter. *Reshaping the Future: Education and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. New York: World Bank, 2005, 49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³² Deane, Shelley. "Syria's Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency." *IDS Bulletin* 47.3 (2016).

³³ See, among many sources: Holt, Nicholas L., ed. *Positive youth development through sport*. Routledge, 2016; Donnelly, Joseph E., et al. "Physical activity, fitness, cognitive function, and academic achievement in children: a systematic review." *Medicine and science in sports and exercise* 48.6 (2016): 1197; Parizkova, Jana. Nutrition, physical activity, and health in early life. CRC Press, 2016; Eime, Rochelle M., et al. "A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents: informing development of a conceptual model of health through sport." *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 10.1 (2013): 98; Drollette, Eric S., et al. "Acute exercise facilitates brain function and cognition in children who need it most: an ERP study of individual differences in inhibitory control capacity." *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience* 7 (2014): 53-64; Khan, Naiman A., and Charles H. Hillman. "The relation of childhood physical activity and aerobic fitness to brain function and cognition: a review." *Pediatric Exercise Science* 26.2 (2014): 138-146; and, Kremer, Peter, et al. "Physical activity, leisure-time screen use and depression among children and young adolescents." *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 17.2 (2014): 183-187.

³⁴ Deane, Shelley. "Syria's Lost Generation: Refugee Education Provision and Societal Security in an Ongoing Conflict Emergency." *IDS Bulletin* 47.3 (2016). See also Phillips, Raina M., et al. "Soap is not enough: handwashing practices and knowledge in refugee camps, Maban County, South Sudan." *Conflict and health* 9.1 (2015): 39.