

## BACKGROUND GUIDE

# Access to Education for Refugees

## The Challenge

**Access to education for refugees is much worse than for non-refugees.**

Nearly half of school-age refugee children are out of school, and at every level – primary, secondary, and tertiary education – enrollment rates for refugee children are a fraction of what they are compared to school-age children worldwide.

Despite major investment in primary education, the rise in forced displacement around the world – including refugees, asylum-seekers, people displaced within their own borders and the stateless – means there are big gaps between refugees and their non-refugee peers when it comes to access to education.

### NATURE OF DISPLACEMENT

By its very nature, displacement disrupts children's education because of the difficulties and dangers they face in reaching safety, accessing vital basic resources, acquiring new identity documents and helping their families in often vulnerable situations.

### PROTRACTED SITUATIONS

The number of refugees and other people in need of international protection who remain displaced due to protracted situations increases every year. Refugee children are very likely to go through an entire school cycle, from age 5 to 18, in exile. Those who had begun school before being uprooted may well never return to the classroom they went to at home.

### STRETCHED RESOURCES

In the under-resourced regions in which millions of refugees are located, there may not even be a school to attend. The majority of refugees are hosted in low- or middle-income regions. Where schools exist, they may already be stretched to breaking point – overflowing classrooms, a lack of teachers, a shortage of basic facilities such as water, sanitation and hygiene, and insufficient teaching and learning materials.

### LACK OF DOCUMENTATION

The chaos attending forced displacement also means that many people flee home without the documents – birth certificates and other forms of identification, educational records and exam certificates – that grant them entrance to a local school in a new country. Even when they have those records, a school in another country will not always accept them.

## THE GROWING GAP

The contrast between primary and secondary enrolment is stark. Secondary education costs more than primary. Subject learning is more advanced, with some subjects requiring better facilities and learning materials, and secondary studies demand better qualified teachers. The gap widens even further when students reach university age where language barriers, tuition costs, and the ability to travel create additional barriers to access.

## PRESSURE TO EARN

As they grow up, refugee adolescents come under greater pressure to support their households. In this regard, girls are often at an even greater disadvantage in terms of “opportunity costs” – perceived losses in terms of income and domestic duties. Collecting water or fuel, taking care of younger siblings or older relatives, and carrying out household chores are all tasks that fall heavily on girls. Such domestic contributions are often seen as more valuable than any investment in their education. As they reach adolescence, girls can face added pressures to give up educational ambitions so that they can marry early or start earning an income instead.

## PARALLEL SCHOOLING

Uncertified parallel systems persist as a temporary response to refugee emergencies, even though they are usually of poor quality, are far less likely to follow a formal curriculum, and result in unrecognized certification. An extreme example might take the form of an open-air school run by adults who are educated but not trained as teachers, improvising a curriculum; in other cases, refugee children might be refused access to the curriculum and national education system and be taught the curriculum of their home country, even though there is no way they can sit official exams and thus be rewarded with certification for their endeavours. Both examples reduce a refugee student’s chances of progressing to a formal secondary education.

## Why It Matters

### **Education is the key to the future of individuals, communities and countries**

Education is a basic human right, enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the **1951 Refugee Convention**. It is protective and empowering, giving refugees the knowledge and skills to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives. It provides a route to employment and selfsufficiency. It provides new generations with leaders, doctors, scientists, engineers, writers, historians and spokespeople.

## EDUCATION AS PROTECTION

UNHCR considers school to be fundamentally protective. It provides displaced children, many of whom will have witnessed or experienced violence, hunger, isolation and other stressful situations, with a place of normality and routine. It shields them from adult cares and responsibilities that should not be part of their lives. It also provides a physical barrier to anyone seeking to exploit children such as people traffickers, criminal gangs, armed groups looking to forcibly recruit children, and others.

## ADVANTAGES FOR GIRLS

Education reduces girls' vulnerability to exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and child marriage. According to UNESCO, if all girls completed primary school, child marriage would fall by 14%. If they all finished secondary school, it would drop by 64%. Other UNESCO research shows that one additional year of school can increase a girl's earnings by up to a fifth – bringing benefits for the girls themselves, their future families and their communities. However, at secondary level enrollment for boys continues to outpace that of girls. Furthermore, there are not enough female teachers to act as role models and encourage families to send their girls to school.

## HIGHER EDUCATION CRISIS

The effect of low enrollment rates at the secondary education level – especially in the upper grade levels – has been to keep refugee enrollment in higher education at abysmally low levels. The percentage of refugee youth enrolled in university or in a technical or vocational course remains in the single digits. For those refugees who have succeeded in making it all the way through secondary school, there are some recurrent barriers keeping them from progressing: certification, languages and cost. Educational certification is often lost during the chaos of flight, or it may not be recognised for entry into an institution in another country. Advanced courses call for advanced language skills. And the high cost of tertiary education can deter or exclude many students – especially if, as is the case in some countries, refugees are required to pay the higher international student rates.

## Responses and Solutions

### INCLUSION ON THE RISE

The continued, slow rise of refugee enrollments in primary education reflects a commitment by an increasing number of host governments to include refugee children and youth in their national education systems. The rise is particularly noteworthy given that overall refugee numbers are constantly increasing. Inclusion is key to boosting enrolment. Providing all learners with a proper curriculum and school certification is the pathway to progressing to secondary and higher education, and onwards to employment

- In Rwanda, for instance, thousands of refugee children have been enrolled in primary schools thanks to progressive government policies and targeted funding from donors.
- In Uganda, 23,000 over-age learners who were previously out of school are now participating in primary education thanks to accelerated education programs.
- Turkey has implemented a turkish-language program – along with new learning materials, subsidized transport, additional teacher training and other measures – to prepare refugee children for the transition from unofficial temporary schools to Turkish ones.
- Ecuador has passed legislation to make school enrollment much more accessible for Venezuelan refugee children and youth, even in cases where they do not have the required documentation.

## MUTUAL BENEFITS

Inclusion also creates conditions in which refugee children and youth can learn in peaceful coexistence with each other, and with local children. Host communities should always be considered in education planning. For example, between 2009 and 2018, the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas initiative in Pakistan invested more than US\$45 million in over 730 educational projects. Of the nearly 800,000 children who benefitted, 16% were Afghan refugees while the rest were local Pakistanis.

## DEALING WITH COSTS

The cost of tuition, exam fees, uniforms, learning materials and transport can all act as deterrents.

**Cash transfers** not only give families the ability to prioritize what they need (and benefit the local economy to boot), they also reduce the likelihood of their turning to child labor and forced marriage as ways of finding an income. They have improved access, attendance and participation in schools in a range of countries, including Kenya, Turkey, Chad and Egypt. In the latter case, a project implemented by Catholic Relief Services that is tied to proof of enrollment and attendance – but with no restrictions on how the money is spent – has helped improve refugee children's school attendance, particularly at secondary level.

**Scholarships** can also help young refugees overcome financial barriers to accessing education. programs such as DAFI offer scholarships that provide undergraduate refugee students with scholarships that cover a wide range of costs, from tuition fees to study materials, food, transport, accommodation and other allowances. DAFI scholars also receive additional support through language classes, psychological support, mentoring and networking opportunities.

**Connected learning programs** can also help refugees access higher education, especially from remote areas. The Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium, encourages universities to provide online education in contexts of conflict and displacement. This allows refugee students to complete university degrees by following courses and interacting with their professors and fellow students online, usually from computer labs.

## CATCHING UP

The realities of displacement can mean that refugee children miss out on significant periods of schooling. Also, many refugee children come from countries where education was already difficult to access – meaning that their new environment as a refugee could be their best or even first chance to go to school. Increasingly, aid and development agencies and educational organisations are using accelerated education programs – flexible, ageappropriate programs, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aim to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth – particularly those who missed out on education or had it interrupted because of poverty, marginalisation, conflict and crisis. In most cases, the idea is to enable children to enter or re-enter the standard school system at the correct level for their age and ability.

## Questions to Guide Debates

- How can host countries provide more educational opportunities for refugee populations? How can they be helped to achieve this?
- What is more important: teacher numbers, textbooks and other learning materials, school buildings, sports facilities, scholarships, language learning, water and sanitation/hygiene (WASH) and gender-appropriate facilities? What would you prioritize?
- What can universities, schools, professors and students do to support access to education for refugees?
- Can online learning help refugees access education, especially in remote areas? If yes, under what conditions? How to incentivize governments, universities and tech companies to expand online learning opportunities for refugees?
- How can families be incentivized to ensure their children get a full education when the costs of lost income and domestic care are high? How can refugee families be better involved in school life?
- In some regions, communities can be culturally resistant to educating girls. How can they be persuaded that the advantages outweigh the perceived disadvantages?

## Useful Resources

- [UNHCR 2025 Refugee Education Report](#)
- [Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education, UNHCR](#)
- [Global Compact on Refugees Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Securing Sustainable Futures, Towards a Shared Responsibility to Uphold the Right to Education and Include Refugee Children in National Education Systems](#)
- [Global Compact on Refugee Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Achieving 15% Enrollment by 2030 to Expanding Refugee Access to Higher Education and Self-Reliance](#)
- [Global Compact on Refugees Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Expanding Connected Education for Refugees through the Refugee Connected Education Challenge](#)

## Contact Us

If you have any questions about this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact [lindner@unhcr.org](mailto:lindner@unhcr.org).