

BACKGROUND GUIDE

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is launching the MUN Refugee Challenge to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

The challenge

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

Today, there are around 3.7 million refugee children out of school – more than half of the 7.1 million school-age refugee children.

- At **primary level, 63 per cent** of refugee children are enrolled in school, compared to a global level of 91 per cent.
- At **secondary level, 24 per cent** of refugees are in school, compared to 84 per cent of secondary-age children worldwide.
- At **higher level**, the figures are **3 per cent** for refugees and 37 per cent for non-refugees.

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: In 2018, almost four in every five refugees were in protracted situations, meaning that 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. In 2018, 85 per cent of refugees were located in low or middle-income regions; a third were in the lowest-income countries. 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 (63 per cent versus 24 per cent). 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.

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 self-sufficiency. 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 per cent. If they all finished secondary school, it would drop by 64 per cent. 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 there are only about seven refugee girls for every 10 refugee boys enrolled. 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 enrolment rates at secondary level – especially at the upper levels – has been to keep refugee enrolment in higher education to abysmally low levels. In 2018, only 3 per cent of refugee youth was enrolled in university or on a technical or vocational course.

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 slight rise in primary school enrolment in 2018 over the previous year 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 programmes.

- Turkey, which now hosts 3.7 million refugees, including 1 million school-age children, has implemented a Turkish-language programme – 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 enrolment 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 per cent 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 labour 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 enrolment 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. Programmes 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 programmes 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 programmes – flexible, age-appropriate programmes, 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, WASH and gender-appropriate facilities? What would you prioritise?
- 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 incentivised 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?