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Issue Brief

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New UNHCR Report: Refugee Education in Crisis

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The plight of refugees in any part of the world hardly comes as a surprise, with health and education being the primary areas of concern for them. However, the recent UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) report released in September 2017 titled, *“Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis”* sheds light on the plight of refugee children and



Source: [unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)

their bleak prospects for education. The report gives a detailed account of the state of education of refugee children displaced as a result of conflict. This report is a crucial reminder for the international community to take initiatives for the future of a very vulnerable generation of children, who have had to flee their homes and leave school due to instability. As the world struggles with an increasing number of refugees, the worst sufferers in terms of education are children, who have bleak prospects of attending school.

As the right to education is a fundamental right, so it is necessary for empowerment, enlightenment and for protecting the uncertain future of refugee children. According to the report, the reality that there are now 17.2 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate – half of them under the age of 18, is very discouraging, as these refugee children find themselves unable to continue with their education. The report also states another shocking fact that 11.6 million refugees were living in protracted displacement at the end of 2016; of this number, 4.1 million had been in exile for 20 years or more.¹ For millions of young people, these are the years they should be spending in school, learning skills and acquiring an education deemed to secure their future. Yet, these millions of children are being robbed of valuable time and are lagging behind. The case for education is obvious as it gives refugee children, adolescents and youth a place of security amid the chaos of displacement. It amounts to an asset in the future, creating and refining individuals for jobs.

Internationally, 91 per cent of children attend primary school. For refugees, the figure is far less, at only 61 per cent – and in low-income countries it falls short of 50 per cent. The proportion of refugees in primary school in 2016 was up stridently as compared to the previous year (from 50 per cent), thanks largely to measures taken by Syria’s neighbours to enroll more refugee children in school and other educational programmes, as well as increased refugee enrolment in European countries that are better able to enlarge capacity. The UNHCR suggests that it must be declared that education must be an

¹ Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis, <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/59b696f44/behind-refugee-education-crisis.html>

integral part of the emergency response to a refugee crisis. The report also suggests that a child's schooling must not be shortened whenever a new emergency arises elsewhere and the emergency response moves on. UNHCR calls for sustained, predictable investment and a holistic approach to supporting education systems in refugee hosting countries like Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey. This needs to benefit both refugees and their host communities – most of which are located in low and middle-income countries that may struggle with inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of capacity.²

Hence, the UNHCR suggests that in order to square this circle of emergency response and long-term need, it must be ensured that refugee children and youth are integrated in national education systems. Refugees, like all young people around the world, deserve an education of worth – to follow a curriculum that is accredited, and to take exams that lead to the next phase of their schooling. UNHCR has learned from decades of experience in the field that equivalent systems are poor substitutes and indeed, they are counter-productive, resulting in poor learning that stops children from moving ahead. Some countries have embraced this principle of refugee inclusion despite their limited resources; others have yet to do so, perhaps because they need more support and help from the international community. The report calls upon the international community to take effective measures to ensure that every refugee child goes to school and these refugee children are included in national systems so that they are equal benefactors and are not deprived of their basic right to acquire education.

² Ibid. p. 9.