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URBAN REFUGEE EDUCATION

Advocacy Priorities for Policies and Programs

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The Global Refugee Crisis

The world is witnessing record levels of displacement. An unprecedented **65.3 million** people around the world have been forced from their homes. Among them are nearly **21.3 million** refugees who have crossed national borders. The UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that nearly **34,000 people** are forcibly displaced every day as a result of conflict or persecution (UNHCRa). About **86%** of those displaced go to, and most often remain in, neighboring developing countries in the Global South (UNHCRb).

The iconic image of tented refugee camps is no longer the reality – approximately **60%** of refugees now live in urban areas (UNHCRc). Refugees' rapid urbanization poses new and distinct challenges for governments and organizations. Yet, most of the humanitarian sectors' lessons and models were developed for camp-based settings. There is a need to better understand what urbanization means for refugee education.

Two figures are particularly important to understand how displacement is affecting refugee education. First, the average duration of displacement is now **20 years**, as intra-state conflicts are more protracted than during prior eras (UNHCRb). Second, **more than half** of all refugees are **under the age of 18** (UNHCRa). This means that more children than ever before are experiencing their entire childhood living in displacement, where their rights, including the right to education, are under threat.

It is imperative therefore that the international community, national governments, and civil society actors adopt policies and practices that ensure refugee children's access to quality education in urban settings, while also recognizing the diversity of needs across contexts.

Urban Refugee Education

The Urban Refugee Education Research Team at Teachers College, Columbia University surveyed 190 participants working for organizations in 16 countries with high proportions of urban refugees and conducted three country case studies in Lebanon, Ecuador and Kenya.

Survey data shows that urban refugees face many barriers in accessing and staying in school. Figure 1 below shows the percent of respondents stating each issue posed a major barrier to urban refugees' education:

The Case for Urban Refugee Education

Access to schooling is critical for displaced populations. Schools meet the immediate need for protection: they can create a safe space and sense of normalcy in young people's lives. They also serve long-term social and economic development aims by helping young people prepare for future participation in the labor market and their societies, regardless of the durable solution.

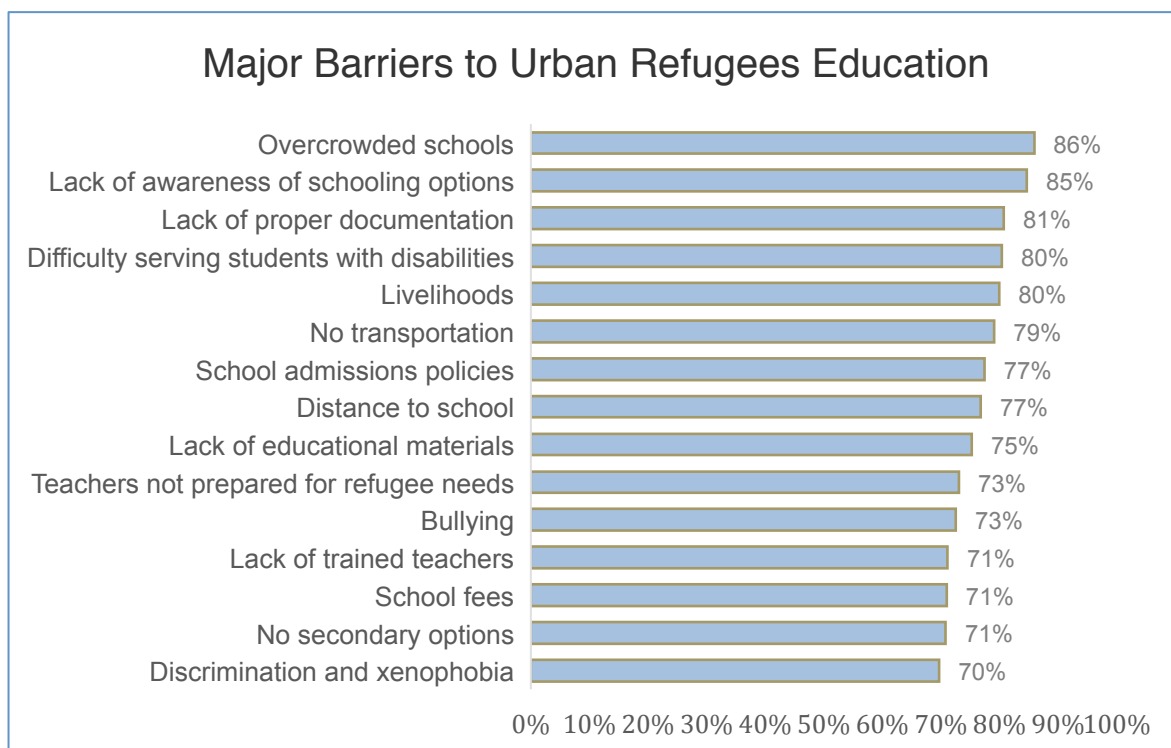


FIGURE 1: MAJOR BARRIERS TO URBAN REFUGEES' EDUCATION

Source: Teachers College Urban Refugee Education Study Survey, 2016 (n=190). See [Appendix A](#) for more detailed information on barriers.

While some barriers, such as being in crowded schools or lacking teaching and learning materials, are similar to those faced by vulnerable youth in host communities, others are exacerbated by refugees' status. For example, urban refugees often have had their schooling interrupted, lack needed transcripts or other documents, face xenophobia and have experienced trauma that affects their learning (see Appendix A for more information on the major barriers refugees face).

The specific barriers refugees face differ by country and context. For example, we found that transportation issues were most cited in Lebanon, while discrimination and xenophobia were more frequently highlighted in Ecuador. In Kenya, schools charging miscellaneous fees posed a real barrier to refugee families, despite policies guaranteeing free primary education for all learners. This points to the critical importance of **taking local contexts into consideration** when designing policies and programming responsive to refugees' needs. (See Programming Guidance for how organizations are doing this successfully).

How can we ensure that urban refugees have access to safe and high-quality educational opportunities?



Overcoming Barriers

Inclusion into Public Schools is the Priority

Ensuring urban refugees' integration into public or government schools was the top-cited policy recommendation – almost one in two (48%) respondents selected inclusion as one of their three top recommendations for promoting urban refugee education. Mainstreaming refugee learners into the national education system is recommended by UNHCR and other organizations for several reasons. First, it is a scalable solution. Secondly, mainstreaming students provides certified educational opportunities that account for all possible long-term options – local integration, repatriation, or resettlement. Third, it provides mechanisms to monitor quality of teaching and learning through the national system (UNHCRd).

...But this is not enough

Despite relatively favorable policy environments that officially accommodate refugees in national systems, many challenges remain. Our findings indicate that allowing refugees to enter public schools is not enough in itself to ensure quality educational opportunities for all. Existing policies and programs, designed for national students, rarely account for urban refugees' distinct needs.

As mentioned above, refugees often face distinct barriers stemming from their refugee status, including: language gaps, lack of needed documentation, histories of trauma, xenophobia, or a need to support their families. In addition, refugee families may not be aware of available schooling options. This means that **government policies guaranteeing access to schooling may not be adequate to provide quality education to urban refugees.**

Why Integration Isn't Enough

Simply allowing refugee students to enter the national school system is likely not enough to ensure quality educational opportunities. In addition to space and capacity challenges, existing policies are often not comprehensive or flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of urban refugees. Specific policies and programs are needed to support of teacher training, retention, psychosocial support and integration. There is an important role for civil society to play in meeting these expanded goals.



Two areas where respondents identified as needing additional support are: teacher training for teachers of refugees, and supporting community schools and/or alternative educational pathways.

Survey respondents' second most cited recommendation was to support teacher training (30%). Training is needed in areas such as psychosocial support, second language support, and host country curriculum support, among others, so that they can better meet the distinct needs of refugee learners in their classrooms. (See Programming Guidance for how organizations are doing this successfully).

The third highest ranked recommendation was to support community schools (29%). Community schools can serve as a pathway to support refugee learners in accessing formal educational opportunities or to fill gaps when government schools are at capacity or cannot meet refugees' needs. Supporting accelerated learning programs and scholarship programs were also among respondents' top recommendations. Taken together, these recommendations point to the need for both inclusive education policies and policies and programs supporting alternative educational pathways and providers.

Better Implementation is Critical

Even when good policies exist, we found that they are rarely implemented fully. Survey data showed that in every policy domain except for one, implementation posed a bigger barrier than stated policy.

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Policies are great... It's just the actual implementation is really lagging.

- INGO Representative, Lebanon.

Our data showed that implementation was difficult for host countries for many reasons, including: policies lacking clear operating procedures, poor information dissemination channels, and the significant autonomy of local actors, among other challenges. Much more must be done to ensure that inclusive policies are better implemented at the local level, including establishing better information and communication channels, creating better enforcement mechanisms, and ensuring buy-in through partnerships.



Recommendations

Recommendations for the national Ministry of Education (MoE):

- 1. Create** explicit legislation or official policies that grant all refugee learners access to the national education system. These policies should contain detailed funding mechanisms to support quality as well as access to education. See UNHCR's issue brief behind this recommendation [here](#), and the Urban Refugee Education Study's Programmatic Guidance.
- 2.** Equally important, **establish** appropriate operating procedures and mechanisms to **implement and enforce** those policies at the municipal and local levels, recognizing that policies may need to be adapted given refugees' distinct educational needs.
- 3. Maintain** a streamlined and efficient communication system concerning refugee issues between actors *at all levels of* the education sector including local school administrators. **Encourage** information sharing and transparency among all actors by engaging regularly with this communication system, and **ensure** that policy changes and implementation protocols are regularly shared with all actors.

4. **Support** schools in their efforts to integrate refugee learners into the classroom by:
 - a. **Providing** appropriate teacher and administrative support (i.e. teacher and/or school leadership training) so they can respond to refugee learners' needs, both the academic and psychosocial needs from the point of registration to graduation.
 - b. **Establish** an equivalency and assessment system so that students can earn credit for previous schooling and be placed in the appropriate grade level; when these systems exist, ensure that refugee learners are not placed below grade level when at all possible.
 - c. **Develop** a language support system specifically for refugee students so that language of instruction is not a barrier to learning (e.g. by leveraging peer support, local/community volunteers, classroom assistants).
 - d. **Support** non-formal education programming both to help integrate refugees into the public system wherever possible, provide educational opportunities outside the formal system when it is not possible, and create alternative pathways for refugees to obtain credentials.
 - e. **Leverage** the technical expertise of civil society actors while working towards all of the above points at both the national and local levels. For example, given their proximity to refugee communities, some civil society actors have a role to play in conducting community needs assessments. Others can provide teacher training, meeting refugees' distinct educational needs not met in public schools through social and psychosocial support, as well as contributing to program design, implementation, and monitoring.
5. **Reconcile conflicting policies** that often exist between various ministries to ensure that contradictions between government bodies do not hinder the implementation of inclusive education policies. The MoE should **advocate** to other ministries or agencies to encourage the granting of official documentation of legal status. They should also advocate for refugees' right to work as teachers, health care providers, and other essential positions within their communities. Governments must also actively **discourage** policies that deliberately target refugee populations in the name of security.
6. **Develop and implement** a coherent and system-wide monitoring and evaluation (M&E) program to ensure that policies are implemented at the local level. This can also act as a data collection program to monitor student enrollment and learning, teacher preparedness, and school needs. M&E should take into account both access and quality indicators to ensure that refugee learners are accessing the national system, learning, and progressing toward graduation (or degree completion).

- 7. Recognize opportunities for alignment:** our study found that in many cases the barriers urban refugees face are similar to those faced by vulnerable children and youth in host countries. What this means in practice is that **improving refugee education can actually have the effect of improving access to quality education for all children.**

Recommendations for UN agencies and international donors

- 1. Support** the MoE in creating policies and implementation mechanisms that support refugee integration into the national school system. Such policies should be aligned with international conventions (1951 Refugee Convention, International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child) when possible. Ensure that both national and local actors are held accountable for implementing these policies.
- 2. Establish** M&E and data collection requirements that are tied to funding to ensure that data on monitoring student enrollment, retention and academic achievement is collected systematically, regularly and shared widely among key stakeholders.
- 3. Encourage** policymakers to engage with schools and classrooms in a meaningful way, by making school visits, and speaking with teachers and students to see what actually takes place inside a refugee learner classroom. This insight will help policymakers better draft policies that reflect local realities.
- 4. Foster** collaborative partnerships between civil society and governmental actors. Take leadership in facilitating clear coordination and communication mechanisms between actors. Through education sector working groups or steering committees, these actors must be able to engage and collaborate with each other.





Recommendations for UN agencies and international donors

1. **Support** the Ministry of Education by providing technical expertise and acting as implementing partners as refugees are mainstreamed into the national education system. Work with the MoE to ensure that non-formal education pathways are also recognized for refugee learners who may not be ready to enter grade-level instruction.
2. **Advocate** to the government through inter-agency efforts for better legal rights for refugees according to international conventions and national policies. This should be conducted in tandem with providing continued legal guidance to refugee communities about their rights under the law.
3. **Encourage** with other civil society actors working in urban areas and form partnerships to provide an integrated approach to service-delivery. Better communication and coordination is essential in urban areas to avoid duplication of efforts.
4. **Form** private sector partnerships in order to utilize technology and other innovative practices that expand access to quality education.
5. **Standardize** metrics and process and outcome indicators across organizations. Work with MoE to ensure that such a system aligns with the national M&E effort. Ensure that proper assessment and mapping exercises are conducted to assess refugee needs, and that data is shared with donors and partners in a timely manner.

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APPENDIX A: KEY BARRIERS FACING URBAN REFUGEES AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Overcrowding: Urban refugees are integrated into local schools, which are often already at or over capacity. Lack of space serves both as a barrier for access to schools and as a barrier to retention, as overcrowding of classrooms can become an impediment to quality and teachers cannot possibly attend to the needs of all of their students. *The most commonly mentioned barrier to education mentioned across all survey respondents and all regions was lack of space or overcrowded classrooms, cited by 86% of respondents.*

Legal status and documentation: Refugees may lack legal status depending on the policies of the country of asylum; refugees may also lack the necessary ID (e.g. birth certificates and other documents) required to register for school, prove prior learning, and be placed in an appropriate grade. *81% of survey respondents noted that documentation was a major barrier to accessing schools for refugee students.*

Distance to school and lack of transportation: Refugees in urban settings may live far from schools and may lack affordable transportation options for accessing schools safely. Students and families may be fearful of moving around the city and/or sending their children unaccompanied to school due to lack of documentation and fear of physical, sexual and gender-based violence. *Distance to school and lack of transportation were cited as barriers by 77% and 79% of survey respondents, respectively.*

Language: Refugees often do not speak the language of instruction in their host country. While this challenge is not exclusive to urban refugees, it is worth noting here as it intersects with gaining access to national schools in city centers. Not only do refugees need to adapt to a new curriculum, but in order to be successful they need to learn a new language. Not speaking the language of instruction also leads children to leave school. There continues to be serious shortfalls in providing language support to students transitioning into new schools with different languages of instruction. *Language of instruction was mentioned as a barrier by 53% of survey respondents.*

Discrimination and xenophobia: Refugee students encounter different forms of discrimination, xenophobia, stereotyping, and bullying from teachers, peers, and the community. *70% of survey respondents mentioned discrimination and xenophobia as a barrier to education.*

Psychosocial support and help transitioning back into school: Refugee children and youth experience displacement and trauma differently, but many students need additional assistance as they begin school for the first time or begin attending again after a prolonged absence. National teachers in public schools may not be equipped to support their refugee learners as they struggle to adapt to a new curriculum, language of instruction, and classroom expectations. The support they receive in their classrooms, or the lack of support, will greatly influence these learners' interests in continuing their schooling. *73% of survey respondents mentioned that teachers are not prepared to address the needs of refugee students.*

Livelihoods in urban spaces and de-prioritization of education: Urban residents face a higher cost of living than those in camps or rural settings; they must rely on existing social services and make ends meet among limited livelihoods opportunities. For refugees who are struggling to provide basic needs for their families, it can prove difficult to prioritize education for their children, especially in the event that school and other fees are expected for enrollment and retention. Children may also be expected to work rather than attend school. *80% of survey respondents mentioned livelihoods as a barrier to education.*