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UNICEF WORKING PAPER

Education solutions for migrant and displaced children and their host communities

Key Messages

- **Every child has the right to go to school and learn - regardless of their legal status, nationality or citizenship. Yet, huge numbers of migrant and displaced children are out of school.** Of the 30 million children who have moved across borders, many face legal or practical barriers to education and learning – especially those who are undocumented. At the same time, only half of all 12 million child refugees are enrolled in primary school, less than one-quarter in secondary school, only one percent in college or university, and only a tiny fraction in early childhood development (ECD). An estimated additional 16 million internally displaced children and forcibly displaced children without refugee status, either lack access to education, or face multiple barriers to beginning or continuing their education. 58 per cent of respondents to a UNICEF global poll who self-identified as migrants or refugees, aged 14 to 24, had lost one or more years of school.¹
- **Education is a major driver of migration.** Families migrate in search of better educational opportunities for their children, but well-trained citizens also leave their home countries in pursuit of better job opportunities abroad. Many children and young people traveling alone also cite education as the primary motivation for their journey – they dream of obtaining a university degree and then returning home to share their skills.² Education solutions for migrant and displaced children need to take into account the role education plays as a motivating factor for movement, as well as its part in supporting successful integration.
- **Access to quality inclusive education brings major economic, social and health benefits to countries and communities of origin and destination.** Education can increase social cohesion and integration and is a vital tool in fighting prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination. By improving livelihood opportunities and supporting socioeconomic development for all migrant and displaced children and their communities, education also has the potential to address some of the causes of displacement and prevent future crises.
- **Governments and partners from both low-income and high-income countries are already developing innovative solutions to provide inclusive education for migrant and displaced children.** The solutions exist – and even a small investment in improving education and learning for migrant and displaced children could yield huge economic, social and development benefits.

1. UNICEF, 2018, A Right to be Heard: Listening to Children and Young People on the Move, p.6, available at: [link](#)

2. UNICEF, 2017, In Search Of Opportunities in West and Central Africa, p.8, available at: [link](#). For example, for 38 per cent of children who left home with the objective of reaching Europe and were interviewed as part of a UNICEF-REACH survey in Italy in 2017, education was the most important factor in their decision to migrate. See [link](#) and [link](#)

Education Statistics, Migrant, Internally Displaced and Refugee Children

While more than half the world's countries have achieved (or nearly achieved) universal primary education,³ progress towards the inclusion of out-of-school children has stalled.⁴ In particular, refugee, internally-displaced, asylum-seeking, and migrant children, who face multiple barriers to beginning and continuing their education, are falling through the cracks.⁵

As of 2016, 28 million or 1 in 80 children were living in forced displacement - this includes 12 million child refugees and child asylum seekers, and 16 million children living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence.⁶

Access to education for refugees is severely lagging: a refugee child is five times more likely to be out of school than a non-refugee child,⁷ with only half of all refugee children enrolled in primary school and less than one-quarter in secondary school. The gap is even greater at tertiary level, where only one percent of refugees are enrolled in college or university, while global enrolment rates stand at 36 per cent. Girls are particularly affected: for every ten refugee boys in primary school, there are fewer than eight refugee girls; and for every ten refugee boys in secondary school there are fewer than seven refugee girls.⁸ Access to pre-primary education is available only for a fraction of refugee children under the age of eight.⁹

And yet, refugee children represent *just a portion* of the children whose education is disrupted by displacement and migration. For forcibly displaced children without refugee status, internally displaced children and children of asylum seekers, as well as migrant children more broadly, no reliable global data exists on access to safe, relevant quality education.¹⁰ Available national data points to major gaps in the provision of education to internally displaced children. For example, in Iraq, only 32 per cent of internally displaced children had access to any form of education in 2015.⁷ In

addition to the 28 million forcibly displaced children, another 20 million children who are international migrants, also face significant barriers to education. As natural and man-made disasters are likely to cause new displacements in coming years, the number of displaced and migrant children out-of-school is likely to remain high.¹¹

Education as a Driver of Migration

Migration and education interact in numerous ways, creating challenges and opportunities for communities of origin, destination and migrants themselves. Access to better education is a major driver for internal and international movement. Movement is likely to enhance educational attainment, especially among children. And those who are more educated are more likely to migrate in search for better job opportunities – especially where local labour markets cannot absorb well-educated young people.¹²

For countries of origin, when young emigrants are afforded the opportunity to become productive members of their society, their higher incomes down the line can provide benefits both financially and through innovation and social remittances. Families of migrants are more likely to send their children to school, using remittances to pay fees and other costs. For example, in Guatemala, internal migration has been found to increase educational expenditure by 45 per cent, particularly on higher levels of schooling.¹³

Yet migrants tend to be overqualified and their skills are often not fully recognized or utilized in their host countries and communities. Many may have experienced interruptions to their schooling and be unable to provide official proof of educational achievements, or they may have attended non-accredited schools. Critical to supporting migrant and displaced children to reach their full potential, is creating a culture in which learning outcomes are identified, documented and recognized in education systems across borders.

3. UNICEF, 2019, Data on Primary Education, available at: [link](#)

4. Ibid.

5. UNHCR, 2019, Refugee Statistics, available at: [link](#)

6. UNICEF, 2017, Children on the Move Key Facts and Figures, available at: [link](#)

7. UNHCR, 2019, Refugee Statistics, available at: [link](#)

8. UNHCR, 2019, Refugee Statistics, available at: [link](#)

9. UNHCR, 2018, Global Strategic Priorities Report, available at: [link](#) (Situation Overview: percentage of children aged 3-5 yrs enrolled in early childhood education)

10. UNESCO, 2019, Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, Not Walls, available at: [link](#)

11. ODI, 2015, Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises, available at: [link](#)

12. Burrone, S. D'Costa, B. and Holmqvist, G, 2018, Child-related Concerns and Migration Decisions: Evidence from the Gallup World Poll, *Innocenti Working Papers* no. 2018-17, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti.

13. ODI, 2018, Migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, p.59.

From Learning to Earning

Quality, inclusive education and skills development are critical for every child, regardless of legal status, nationality or citizenship.¹⁴ These skills must be labour market-relevant and include ‘foundational’ skills (literacy, numeracy, and increasingly digital skills that are essential for further learning, productive employment and civic engagement); ‘transferable’ skills (to function effectively at home, school, and the community); and ‘job specific’ skills (also known as technical and vocational skills that are associated with one or more occupations). The broader the skillset, the more flexible and responsive a young person can be in a changing labour market.¹⁵

In countries of origin, even when children do go to school, education may not necessarily lead to decent employment and equip children and young people with the skills they need for sustainable livelihoods. Education can be viewed as ‘irrelevant’ in local communities, and inadequate to connect young people with available employment opportunities in either formal or informal sectors. Investment in learning and skills that are gender-sensitive and relevant to the labour market should be a priority – to ensure children and young people are prepared to succeed and adapt to changing realities and economic opportunities.



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Barriers to Education

Migrant and displaced children face significant challenges in exercising their right to education, from infrastructure, capacity and resource constraints to persistent insecurity, social tensions and discrimination. Girls and boys also face their own specific barriers. Girls are often expected to stay at home and support their families by taking care of their siblings, particularly if they are the eldest child, which puts greater pressure on them to drop out of school. Early or forced marriage and pregnancy are also barriers, particularly during humanitarian crises when parents may send their daughters off to be married or cared for by another family. Boys are often obliged to work to supplement their families’ income rather than go to school.

When children settle in new homes and communities, language barriers, social norms, xenophobia, unclear legal and administrative processes, lack of identification documents, or recognition of previous educational attainment, are common barriers that keep children out of classrooms. In many countries, the absence of firewalls – policy frameworks that prohibit the sharing of information between immigration authorities and service providers – can prevent undocumented children from accessing education for fear of detection, detention or deportation.

At the same time, countries of origin deal with poor education systems and infrastructure in rural areas, and children left behind, who may have access to better education due to remittances, but no incentive to invest in education because they plan to migrate to join their parents.¹⁶

Yet despite these challenges, education remains an extremely high priority for both children and their families. Across a variety of contexts, when families are given unrestricted cash transfers in the wake of an emergency, education is consistently a top spending category for parents.¹⁷ Families know the value of education, and when possible, will prioritize an education for their children.

14. UNESCO, 2019, Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, Not Walls, pp 13 and 57, available at: [link](#)

15. World Bank, 2019, World Development Report, available at: [link](#)

16. UNESCO, 2019, Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, Not Walls, available at: [link](#)

17. UNICEF, 2016, Uprooted – the Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children, p. 40, available at: [link](#)

The Case for Investment - Benefits for Governments and Host Communities

In today's mobile and interconnected world, there is a compelling investment case to expand learning opportunities for all migrant and displaced children as a global public good. Educational attainment and employability benefit both host countries and countries of origin: in the host country, it facilitates social integration¹⁸, and is linked to more positive attitudes towards immigration among host communities.¹⁹ And migrants who return to their country of origin after developing skills abroad, create independent businesses and job opportunities for fellow citizens.²⁰

There are five key arguments to justify investments in education systems for migrant and displaced children and their host communities:

- 1. International agreements on education for migrant and displaced children:** The 2018 Global Compact on Migration (GCM) stresses the importance that states take measures to *"provide inclusive and equitable quality education to migrant children and youth, as well as to facilitate access to lifelong learning opportunities, including by strengthening the capacities of education systems and by facilitating non-discriminatory access to early childhood development..."*²¹ The right to education and professional training is also emphasized in the Global Compact on Refugees²², the Convention on the Rights of the Child²³, and the Sustainable Development Goals [SDG].²⁴
- 2. Investment in education brings high economic returns:** Education yields massive economic return on investments. Each additional year of education is associated with between 13–35 per cent higher national GDP per capita.²⁵ Realizing that the association between education and economic growth is driven

by effective learning outcomes more than access or enrolment alone²⁶, the World Bank has recently reiterated that *"... providing students with basic cognitive skills could massively boost economic outcomes, especially in developing countries."*²⁷ In particular, Early Childhood Development (ECD) interventions provide the opportunity to mitigate developmental inequalities within society. Increasing enrolment in just one type of ECD programme (preschool) in a low- to middle-income country can result in a benefit-to-cost ratio of 6.4 to 17.6.²⁸

- 3. Lack of investment may increase the risk of conflict and exploitation:** Research has shown that education inequality more than doubles risks of violent conflict between groups, whereas greater equality in educational attainment between boys and girls reduces violent conflict risk by 37 per cent.²⁹ Studies also show a link between education and a lower risk of being exploited. For example, 90 per cent of adolescents travelling along the Central Mediterranean migration route, without any education, reported exploitation, compared with about three quarters of those with primary or secondary education. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, the proportion of adolescents reporting exploitation, while lower overall, is also higher among those with lower levels of education.³⁰
- 4. Education yields not only economic, but also health and social benefits:** While education benefits are often measured in economic terms, such as increased income and reduced poverty, further benefits have been shown relating to health and social welfare. Educated people and the children of educated parents tend to be healthier, more empowered regarding their own lives and their society, and socially more tolerant and resolution-seeking. Many of the observed social impacts are linked to women's education, hence, the importance of ensuring education for girls.³¹

18. UNESCO, 2019, p. 155.

19. Ibid, p. 82.

20. Ibid, p. 107.

21. Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), para 31(f), Obj.15; see also para 32 (i), Obj.16) available at: [link](#)

22. Global Compact on Refugees, available at: [link](#)

23. Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, available at: [link](#)

24. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, available at: [link](#)

25. Thomas and Burnett, 2013, and Patrinos and Psacharopoulos, 2013, cited in UNICEF, 2015, The Investment Case of Education and Equity, p.7, available at: [link](#)

26. World Bank Group, 2018, Learning. To realize education's promise, p. 46, available at: [link](#)

27. Ibid.

28. Heckman J, 2014, The Heckman Equation: The economics of human potential, available at: [link](#); Engle P, Black M, Behrman J et al, 2007, Strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world, Lancet, 369(9557), pp 229-242.

29. Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC), 2016, Education Inequality and Violent Conflict, Evidence and Policy Considerations, p.3, available at: [link](#)

30. UNICEF, 2017, Harrowing Journeys – Children and Youth on the Move Across the Mediterranean, p.33, available at: [link](#)

31. UNICEF, 2015, The investment case of education and equity, p.7, available at: [link](#)

5. **Diverse classrooms can bring benefits to all:** In too many contexts, separate systems catering exclusively to refugee and migrant children present a missed opportunity to foster relationships between host and migrant communities. Further, parallel systems often suffer from lack of qualified teachers, and incompatible certification standards. Joint schooling opens opportunities for social integration, where not only children from host and migrant groups, but also their caregivers from diverse backgrounds, can participate in their school communities. Evidence clearly demonstrates that migrant and displaced children – and the generations that follow them – are better equipped to thrive and contribute to society when they have opportunities to learn and advance wherever they are.³²

Taking Action - Inclusive Quality Education for Migrant and Displaced Children

Providing equitable access to education is possible. Governments and their partners around the globe, have shown that even in countries with stretched resources, policies and programmes can effectively support migrant and displaced children to learn – in their countries of origin, as they transit across borders, and upon reaching their destinations.



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Recommendations

1. **Facilitate social integration:** Integrate, develop and implement inclusive policies at the national, regional and local levels to ensure all children are included in the national education system.

*In 2017, **Colombia** created a Special Stay Permit enabling 180,000 Venezuelan migrants, who had entered through formal border points, to remain in the country. The national authorities also registered more than 442,000 irregular migrants. Venezuelans who have registered or acquired the Special Stay Permit are entitled to remain in Colombia for up to two years with access to basic rights, including employment, health, and education.³³*

*Since 2018, **Serbia's Ministry of Education** called for schools in the country to develop and implement plans to support migrant children. These include support to adapt and manage stress and learn the Serbian language. A new Expert Manual for the Inclusion of Refugees/Asylum Seekers in the Education System provides guidance for teachers and schools.³⁴*

*In the **United Kingdom**, local authorities facilitate immediate access to a 15 hours/week education programme (including English, Math, Science, Music, Art, Physical Education, and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The programme has been shown to foster interaction and relationship building between asylum-seeking children and host community students.³⁵*

*In many parts of **Greece**, UNICEF and partners offer non-formal learning opportunities aimed at preparing migrant children to join the formal education system. This programme offers Greek, English, and life-skills and basic literacy classes taught in different languages (Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish). Psychosocial support and early childhood education is available for younger children.*

32. MPI, Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?, p.7; OECD, 2015, Settling In - Indicators of Immigrant Integration, p. 23-24.

33. UNHCR, 2019, Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, available at: [link](#)

34. Government of Serbia, Mistry of Education, 2018, available at: [link](#)

35. UNICEF UK, 2018, Education for Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children; Access and Equality in England, Scotland and Wales, available at: [link](#)

2. Remove learning barriers: Host country governments, donors, humanitarian and development partners must ensure that all children, regardless of status, learn; that learning opportunities are accessible for all, are of quality, safe and relevant, with a focus on foundation skills to lay the groundwork for future learning, prevent dropout and reduce grade repetition.

*In **Lebanon**, in response to the arrival of Syrian refugees, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education launched the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) plan in 2013. RACE has doubled student enrolment in Lebanon's public school system compared with enrolment in 2011. In 2017, 204,000 Lebanese and about 195,000 non-Lebanese children attended public school. The increase in students required that the system address barriers to education such as space, enrolment costs, and transportation. But there were also efforts to improve the quality of education with teacher training and curriculum guidance; and to establish alternative learning programmes for children who had missed two or more years of schooling.*

*Recognizing the importance of making jobs accessible to Syrian refugees, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes have been established in **Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan**, in the areas of tailoring, welding, hairdressing, computing, information technology and cosmetology, as well as labour market orientation, and entrepreneurial and cross-cultural communication.³⁶*

SOS Children's Villages International and Deutsche Post DHL Group are partnering to empower and support young people aged 15-25 in 29 countries, to develop job skills and get ready for employment or entrepreneurship. The partnership was launched under the umbrella of Deutsche Post DHL Group's 'GoTeach' programme in 2011.³⁷ Employees of Deutsche Post DHL Group volunteer to mentor young people in their transition to work. Activities include: (a) Job orientation to help young people understand the job market; (b) soft and basic skills training to improve employability; (c) Access to a professional working environment to gain initial work experience.

3. Collaborate and coordinate with partners: All actors – from the humanitarian and development sectors, governments, donors, private and philanthropic – must collaborate over multiple years, based on their comparative advantage, towards achieving collective education outcomes.

*In **Germany**, the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth coordinated a "National Initiative to Protect Women and Children in Refugee Accommodation Centres"; which included 15 key national and international stakeholders. They developed Minimum Protection Standards for Children, Adolescents and Women in Refugee Centres, which were published in July 2016, and provide technical support, coaching and training of managers, coordinators and frontline workers in refugee centres. A comprehensive toolbox and training package - covering human rights, diversity, the prevention of violence, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, Child Friendly Spaces, ECD, early-learning and play and parent support – was rolled out to 100 centres nationwide.*

*In **Uganda**, Congolese refugees created their own school called 'Coburwas'. Refugees engaged in their own education situation analyses before developing community-owned education plans for creating a 'homelike' education environment for refugee children. In only 10 years, Coburwas evolved into an academic institution with 530 primary and secondary students and has been recognized as one of the best-performing schools in Uganda, ranking among the top four schools in the country on national examinations, according to the Ugandan Education Ministry.³⁸*

*The **Government of Burundi** and UNICEF supported the construction of classrooms in communities predominantly consisting of returnees from Tanzania, with support from community members who provided land or contributed labour. As a result, returnee children were able to access education alongside host community children. As returns continue to be a source of concern in a number of provinces – with many returnees having lived abroad for more than two decades – education programmes have proven to be a*

36. UNESCO, 2018, p. 155.

37. Deutsche Post DHL, Teach for All, available at: [link](#)

38. UNHCR, 2019, Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, available at: [link](#)

meaningful platform to build relationships and support reintegration.³⁹

4. Support government education interventions for host and migrant and displaced communities:

Host country governments, with financial and technical support from the international community, should continue to strengthen national and local policy frameworks for including refugees in national education systems, scale up local services, and provide alternative educational opportunities when needed. Integrating migrant and displaced children into national education systems with multiple pathways to re-enter formal learning opportunities should be a priority.

Education Cannot Wait – a Fund for Education in Emergencies, aims to reach more than 13.6 million children and youth living in crisis situations, such as conflict, natural disasters and disease outbreaks, with quality education over the next five years – and 75 million children and youth in desperate need of education by 2030. The Fund aims to transform the way the global education sector and the broader humanitarian community respond to children’s education needs in crisis, creating a more agile, connected and faster response.⁴⁰

The **Global Partnership for Education** provides funding and technical assistance for countries in emergencies recovering from crisis, while simultaneously focusing on the longer-term goal of strengthening their education systems. Together with UNHCR, it supports efforts to ensure the needs of refugees and displaced persons are reflected in national education sector plans.⁴¹

5. Create data platforms that document education services for the forcibly displaced:

Member States should monitor access to education for refugees, returnees, migrants and host communities as part of their road maps for reaching Sustainable Development Goal 4. This should be reported on during High Level Political Forums.

In the absence of reliable data, the risks and vulnerabilities facing migrant and displaced children remain hidden and unaddressed. Even in high income countries, the number of refugee and migrant children out of school is unknown. **UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, Eurostat and OECD** have called on Member States to prioritize actions to address these evidence gaps, and to ensure that data platforms on migration and displacement include child-specific considerations.⁴²

6. International systems of academic recognition:

Create and approve internationally recognized curricula, systems and certifications of academic recognition for migrant and displaced children to ensure that all children can continue to learn, regardless of their geographical location.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has called for cross-border recognition of academic certificates, and the design of education systems that cater for children on the move.⁴³ UNICEF is currently exploring the feasibility of “Learning Passports” that would allow refugee, IDP and migrant children to integrate into national systems when possible; return home or cross borders with valid evidence of their learning progression; and provide valuable recognition of prior learning.

Leaving No One Behind – Every Child Learns

Greater investment in the education of migrant and displaced children could yield huge economic, social and development benefits. It could create new opportunities for countries of origin and destination, receiving communities and young migrant and displaced people themselves – fuelling growth, innovation and entrepreneurship, and providing migrant and displaced children, with better prospects to reach their full potential.

Whether a migrant, refugee or internally displaced, a child is a child. And every child has the right to an education.

39. UNICEF Peace Building Education and Advocacy Programme, available at: [link](#)

40. Education Cannot Wait, available at: [link](#)

41. Global Partnership for Education, available at: [link](#)

42. UNICEF, 2018, A Call to Action – Protecting Children on the Move Starts with Better Data and Evidence, p.2, available at: [link](#)

43. IGAD, 2017, Djibouti Declaration on Regional Conference on Refugee Education in IGAD Member States, available at: [link](#)