



Keeping our promise to Syria's refugees

*Education and the 'No Lost
Generation' commitment*

A Theirworld Briefing

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Theirworld



Introduction

As the world struggles to cope with a pandemic and an economic downturn, there are many people being pushed even further to the margins of society. This is particularly true for the children of Syria. The international community may have repeatedly vowed to protect and nurture them, with assurances that there would be ‘no lost generation’, but they are more vulnerable than ever.

Among the more prominent promises made was the pledge at the 2016 London Conference that all children who had been forced to flee the war in Syria would be provided a place in school in neighbouring countries within a year.

Initially, encouraging progress was made. But four years on from that pledge, and with the Syrian conflict now in its tenth horrific year, there are currently more than two million Syrian children of school age living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. **Nearly 750,000 – or 36% – are out of education.** There are also an additional two million plus children inside Syria who are out of education – over one-third of Syria’s child population.¹

On 30 June, 2020 the fourth *Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region* will be held, virtually. This provides a critical opportunity to revive the ‘no lost generation’ commitment and to put refugee education firmly back at the centre of the agenda, where it belongs.

This briefing paper details how the promise of the London Conference, reiterated in the Brussels Conferences from 2017–2019, remains unfulfilled.

It shows that there was excellent progress between 2013 and 2016, but that worryingly, progress has stalled since then, with over a third of children consistently out of school.

While there has been some fluctuation, the numbers of children out of education have overall increased since the end of 2016, and funding commitments are falling far short of what is needed.

If progress had been maintained at 2013–2016 levels, the 'No Lost Generation' commitment would have been met in under three years. Conversely, if the performance of the past year was continued, it would take until 2037 to achieve. That simply isn't an option — we have to find the energy and commitment to reach that final third of children out of school.

This briefing makes three recommendations for how donors, host countries, UN agencies and civil society can change course, namely:

- 1 Close the funding gap**
- 2 Develop new multi-year response plans to reach all children**
- 3 Improve performance and results**

Syrian refugees haven't given up on the hope of an education. We shouldn't give up on them. ●



What is the 'No Lost Generation' commitment?

At the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference in London, 2016, there was a clear commitment made that 'on education ... there will be No Lost Generation of children as a result of the Syria crisis.'

Specifically, the conference committed to:

- a** By the end of the 2016/17 school year placing 1.7 million children — all refugee children and vulnerable children in host communities — in quality education with equal access for girls and boys;
- b** Increase access to learning for the 2.1 million children out of school in Syria itself; and
- c** Provide funding of at least \$1.4bn a year from pledges to the UN appeal and additional bilateral and multilateral commitments.²



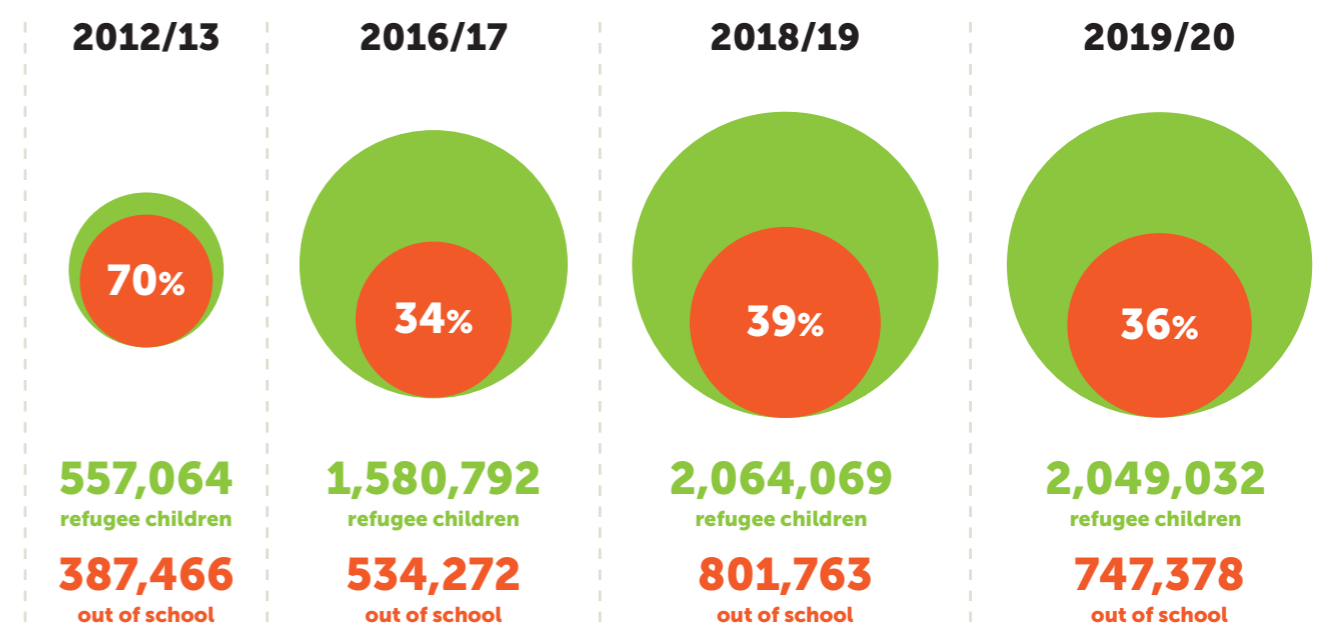
Children play at a child-friendly space in the Za'atari camp for Syrian refugees © UNICEF / Malkawi

Regional enrolment: Initial progress, but now stagnating

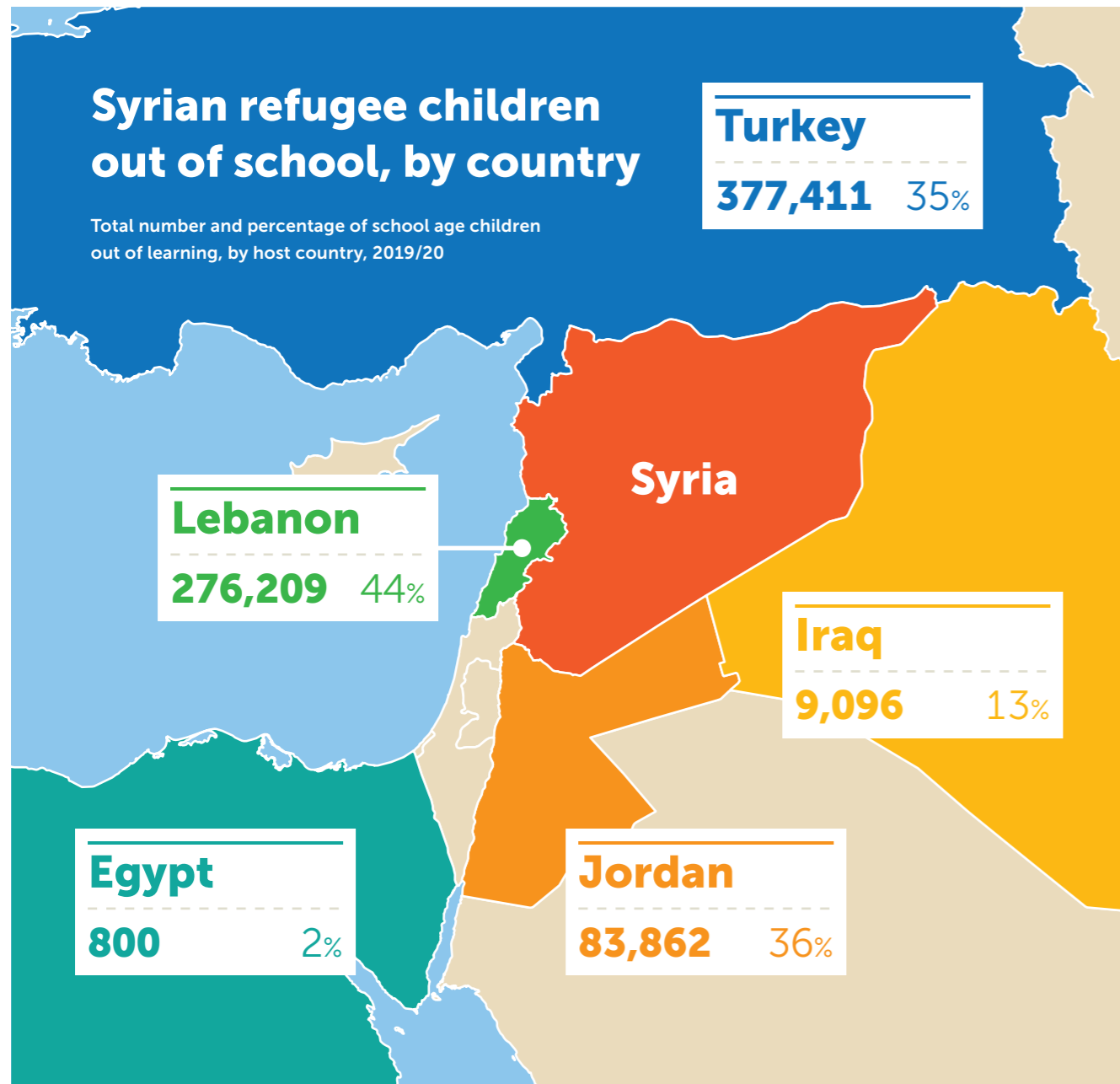
There was substantial progress between 2013–2016 by the five main host countries of Syrian refugees. These countries dealt with an increase of school-age refugees, from 557,064 in August 2013 to 1.58 million in December 2016. They managed to increase the actual number of students enrolled in education more than six-fold in that period, from 169,598 to over 1.04 million. Although the number of Syrian refugee children out of school still increased during this period (from 387,466 to 534,272), the percentage of school-age refugee children out of school fell from 70% to 34%.³

However, the numbers have sadly not been going in the right direction in recent years. Between the 2016/17 and 2019/20 school years, the number of refugee children has continued to increase (to 2.05 million), but it has not been possible for host countries to easily absorb these additional refugee children into education — resulting in 747,378 now out of education (36% of the total).⁴

Syrian refugee children out of school, regionally, by school year



Sources: UNICEF (2015); No Lost Generation (2017); No Lost Generation (2019); No Lost Generation (2020)



Source: No Lost Generation 2020

The data presented here is the most recent available (i.e. for school year 2018/19). Official data for the school year 2019/20 has not yet been published, but our informal sources suggest that the trends have remained the same.

Inside Syria, UNICEF estimates that around two million children are out of school — one-third of the school-age population. This has largely stayed constant since 2016.⁵

Over time, education systems in refugee-hosting countries are reaching capacity and struggling to further expand to provide educational opportunities to those children being left behind. Interestingly, the numbers in non-formal education are much lower and have declined since 2014/15 — from 196,110 to now 124,230 in 2019/20.⁶ While non-formal education should not be seen as a substitute, it can provide critical supplemental support to help address the needs of children being left behind and in some cases also help them integrate into formal education systems.

To break this down more, we can see that there has been an increase in the number of Syrian refugee children out of school across all five host countries between 2016/17 and 2019/20:

	Turkey	Lebanon	Jordan	Iraq	Egypt
2016/17	367,330 42%	126,732 34%	40,210 17%	0 0%	0 0%
2017/18	345,685 35%	274,882 44%	73,137 31%	2,630 4%	2,429 5%
2018/19	384,669 37%	308,933 46%	83,920 36%	20,560 31%	3,681 8%
2019/20	377,411 35%	276,209 44%	83,862 36%	9,096 13%	800 2%

Sources: UNICEF, *Syria Crisis Fast Facts*, August 2019; No Lost Generation (2017); No Lost Generation, *Investing in the Future*, March 2019; No Lost Generation (2020)

The numbers of refugee children have continued to rise in some countries — particularly Turkey and Lebanon. However, if countries returned to the progress shown from 2013-2016, all Syrian refugee children would be in education within three years. Conversely, maintaining current levels of performance means this crisis will not be resolved until 2037. It is time for urgent, renewed commitment to reach those children being left behind. ●

Barriers to an education and the need for new solutions

The numbers in the previous section demonstrate the need for a new injection of energy and effort to overcome the persistent barriers to education for Syrians. These barriers have been documented extensively by NGOs and UN agencies and continue to impede refugees' access to school.

These include:

- Cost and safety of transportation to and from schools
- Distance to schools
- Over-capacity of classrooms
- Curriculum and language
- Onerous documentary requirements for new students, such as birth certificates
- Child labour
- Gender
- Disability
- Limited opportunities for students under 5
- Safety concerns related to crossing checkpoints to reach school, coming home after dark and harassment from host communities⁷

Furthermore, the protracted nature of the conflict and the crisis is contributing to a degree of fatigue and frustration from host countries and the international community at both the lack of progress in recent years and the challenge of finding new solutions to expand capacity and reach those being left behind.

This calls for a **renewed commitment to develop fresh multi-year plans** that are nationally-owned but have wide buy-in from stakeholders. These plans should pivot from emergency frameworks to strategies recognising the drawn-out nature of the situation. Moreover, national responses and policies related to Covid-19 will require shifts in approaches to refugee education, particularly for children missing out and the most marginalised. Plans should include initiatives to test and implement new, durable solutions to this crisis to reach more children, including different pathways and approaches to support outreach, enrolment and improved quality of education.

New plans alone will not fix the problem, however. They need to be backed up by concerted efforts **to improve the performance of education responses and put a greater emphasis on results.** Host countries and donors alike should commit to specific initiatives to improve information and data-sharing and transparency. This should include building the capacity of host countries to make key data about education enrollment and other key statistics publicly available on a timely and regular basis. ●

Education Financing

There is a substantial disparity between national education sector budget needs and the levels of funding delivered by donor countries. It is worth emphasising that none of the refugee-hosting countries in the region have had their assessed funding needs fulfilled by pledging donors.

Of the assessed funding needs for 2019:⁸

- Turkey received 56% (\$175 million)^{8a}
- Lebanon received 43% (\$165 million)^{8b}
- Jordan received 77% (\$85.4 million)^{8c}
- Iraq received 33% (\$6 million)^{8d}
- Egypt received 20% (\$4 million)^{8e}

There is a similar disparity inside Syria. The 2019 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan assessed education needs at \$251.1 million in Syria, yet only \$99.7 million (40%) has been delivered by donors.^{8f} However, it should be noted that donors are restricted by domestic policies limiting aid to the Syrian regime and counter terrorism financing guidelines limiting aid to areas under opposition control.

2019 Sector funding requirements / received (in millions US\$)

	Required	Received	% Received	Gap
Turkey	310	175	56%	135
Lebanon	381	165	43%	130
Jordan	110.4	85.4	77%	25
Iraq	18.2	6	33%	12.2
Egypt	20.4	4	20%	16.4
Syria	251.1	99.7	40%	151.4
Total	1091.1	535	49%	556

UNHCR Inter-Agency Financial Tracker; 3RP 2019 Annual Report; and No Lost Generation Q3 Funding Snapshot

There are certainly discrepancies in the financial numbers reported and challenges in seeing clear and up-to-date overviews of the funding allocated to education responses. However, we can see that funding for education (across the five host countries and inside Syria) has declined from at least \$563.8 million in 2018 to \$535 million in 2019. This is well short of the \$1.4 billion annual minimum for the region detailed at the London Conference. More worrying still, it is far short of the total assessed need for the region in 2019 of \$1091.1 million, leaving a gap of \$556 million for education responses.

It is absolutely critical that donors find ways to reverse this decline in funding and close the funding gap for the refugee education responses in these countries. ●



Recommendations:

Renewed commitment to deliver the 'No Lost Generation' promises

Between 2013 and 2017, tremendous progress was made to provide education for Syrian refugee children. The school-aged refugee population more than trebled, but more and more were enrolled in school, reaching nearly two-thirds of all refugees. Then, in 2017, one year after leaders promised that every Syrian refugee would be enrolled within school within a year — the school-aged population approached two million and progress stalled. Today, nearly 750,000 Syrian refugees, over one third of the school age refugee population, are still out of school.

With the 2019–20 academic year derailed by Covid-19 and looming uncertainty for 2020–21 given the potential impact of the pandemic on humanitarian financing, the chances of Syrian children receiving the quality education they are entitled to looks far from positive.

It is not too late though. If we go back to our earlier momentum we could make education a reality for nearly every Syrian refugee within three years. Conversely, if we repeat the progress over the past year, it will take us until 2037. That's not an option — we have to find the energy and commitment demonstrated earlier in the crisis and reach the final third of children who are out of school.

As the conflict heads, tragically, towards its second decade in 2021, mass refugee returns to Syria remain a very distant possibility. Indeed, many have abandoned any hope of return. This is a set of problems that needs long-term vision and commitment, and needs it fast.

Specifically, we are calling for the following outcomes from the Brussels IV conference on 30 June:

1 Close the funding gap

- Donors must immediately address the \$556 million funding gap to ensure that host countries and organisations working inside Syria are able to meet their commitments to enrol all children in education.
- This should include fully funding countries' assessed needs for formal and non-formal education for older and marginalised children. It must also include provisions for early childhood education.

2 New multi-year response plans to reach all children

- There need to be new commitments to develop effective multi-year response plans that go beyond a year-to-year approach and test new ways to address the persistent barriers to education and the new realities of Covid-19.
- This must include increased predictability through multi-year funding.

3 Improve performance and results

- Education stakeholders, including ministries of education, should commit to improving information, data-sharing and transparency.
- Making key data about enrolment and other key education statistics publicly available on a timely and regular basis is critical to being able to retain students, respond to drop outs, and monitor progression.
- Donors should provide funding and technical assistance to build the capacity of education ministries on data and monitoring and evaluation.

Despite the good intentions of the 2016 London Conference, the international community has fallen well short of its pledge to educate every Syrian refugee child. But if it can rediscover its resolve and sense of purpose, it is not too late to keep that promise. ●

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Note on research methodology

Research conducted for this briefing included review of publicly available data, key informant interviews, primary data received from key informants, and a desk review of reports and public statements released by NGOs, the No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative, advocacy groups, and donor and host governments. This includes enrollment and financial statistics released by host countries' respective Ministries of Education, UN Agencies, pledging conference outcome statements and partnership agreements reached between donor countries, UN agencies, and refugee hosting countries, and crisis response plans.

Interviews were held with representatives from government, NGOs, UN Agencies, and donor agencies.





Front cover

Syrian children eagerly wait for the start of term at a makeshift school in Turkey

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Rosie-Lyse Thompson

Back cover

Children wait for classes to begin at Al Mtein public school in Lebanon

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