



CURRICULUM CHOICES IN REFUGEE SETTINGS

In refugee contexts, choice of curriculum for refugee learners is one of the most controversial and difficult issues to resolve. Critical decisions with long-term implications for refugee children and communities, and for programme design and cost, revolve around a fundamental question:

SHOULD REFUGEE CHILDREN STUDY THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN CURRICULUM, OR SHOULD THEY STUDY THE CURRICULUM OF THE COUNTRY OF ASYLUM?

Decisions around curriculum are relevant in emergency contexts, as well as in protracted settings. Curriculum choice is challenging for a number of reasons. It can be a highly politicized and emotive issue for host governments and refugee communities, provoking sensitivities around identity, culture and ties to country of origin. In particular, curriculum decisions as they relate to access to examinations and certification have far-reaching implications for refugee children and their protection, including future educational and livelihood opportunities. These issues also present significant technical and planning challenges for education providers and require the development of strong partnerships between national authorities and refugee education partners.

This Education Brief is intended to assist UNHCR staff and partners in making informed decisions about curriculum for refugees. It introduces key concepts, outlines the pros and cons of curriculum choices, and provides step-by-step considerations to guide decision-making around curriculum.



This briefing note has been produced by the Education Unit, Division of International Protection, for field operations and partners as a quick reference note on key thematic education issues.

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

Curriculum in this document refers to the course of study endorsed, used and examined by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in a national education system. According to UNESCO, 'curriculum' is a description of what, why and how students should learn... The curriculum defines education content, sequencing, and characteristics of learning experiences, including methods and resources for teaching and learning, as well as assessment and examination.¹ Curriculum in many countries is available in a number of different languages of instruction and is intended to be flexible and responsive to regional linguistic, cultural and geographical diversity.

WHAT CURRICULUM CHOICES ARE AVAILABLE FOR REFUGEES?

The choice of curriculum in refugee settings typically falls into one of two categories:

- ① **Parallel system** – use of Country of Origin curriculum (traditional model)
 - Refugees access education in a UNHCR or partner-managed refugee camp setting or in NGO or refugee community schools and follow their country of origin curriculum (examples: Pakistan, Liberia, Tanzania).
- ② **Mainstreaming** – use of Country of Asylum curriculum (UNHCR Education policy)
 - Refugees are mainstreamed into national schools and follow the host country national curriculum (examples: Cameroon, Lebanon, Iran, Uganda, Yemen).
 - Refugees access education in a UNHCR or partner-managed refugee camp setting or community schools and follow the host country national curriculum (examples: camps in Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda, or Malaysia urban programme).

¹ Adapted from UNESCO IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology, 2013.

WHAT IS UNHCR'S POLICY ON CURRICULUM IN REFUGEE SETTINGS?

UNHCR encourages cooperation with national education authorities for early adoption and/or transition to use of the country of asylum curriculum in refugee settings. Displacement data shows that close to two-thirds of refugees are displaced for more than five years, and the average period of displacement is 20 years. The data suggests that in most refugee contexts, education services need to be provided for at least a medium term. Use of country of asylum curriculum provides access to accredited, supervised and accountable education services. It is generally the most sustainable and protective option in the medium to long term, ensuring safe access to examinations and certification, access to teaching and learning materials, quality assurance and improved access to national education services including options to continue education at higher levels.



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There are, without question, certain advantages to using the country of origin curriculum as shown in the chart below. And it is also true that a transition to use of country of asylum curriculum requires a significant investment of time and resources to ensure that refugee children are able to succeed in the host country system. In some countries, changing the curriculum also means changing the system, including the structure of how schools are managed and administered. Nevertheless, in most scenarios, **the advantages of sustainable, safe access to accredited certification and services associated with national systems outweigh the benefits of using the country of origin curriculum.**

THE CHECK-LIST BELOW ELABORATES SOME OF THE PROS AND CONS OF EACH CURRICULUM CHOICE:

Country of Origin Curriculum	Country of Asylum Curriculum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Familiar language with links to home culture/identity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Opens pathway for refugees to access national schools
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Politically acceptable to both refugees and some host governments	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Access to examinations and accredited certification
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Facilitates repatriation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Quality – access to curricular materials, deployment of qualified teachers, teacher training, quality assurance
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Option when country of asylum policy bars access to national system	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Monitoring and supervision by MoE for improved accountability
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Access to higher levels of education
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for social cohesion with host community
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sustainable investment in enhancement of national capacity
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Increased accountability of states to support refugee education
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Possibility to access development funding
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No long-term access to examinations and certification	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Perceived loss of country of origin language, cultural, religious identity
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No access to higher levels of education or employment due to lack of certification	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Loss of formal literacy in country of origin language can affect education/employment upon repatriation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No access to curricular materials or professional teacher training	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Language can be a barrier to successfully transition to new medium of instruction
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No access to supervision and quality assurance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discrimination and bullying in host community schools
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Isolation from host community	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Substantial investment and planning needed to ensure successful transition to new curriculum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Long term funding and capacity challenges in sustaining parallel education system	

The following sections provide guidance on how to transition to country of asylum curriculum in two common scenarios:

A) EMERGENCY REFUGEE INFLUX SETTING

In contexts where the education of refugee children and youth has been interrupted, an immediate transition to country of asylum curriculum is recommended as the most sustainable option for the medium term. Three planning steps are recommended.

❶ **Recognition of certificates:** Engage the MoE, UNICEF and UNESCO to establish an equivalency mechanism to facilitate transfer of academic achievements attained in the country of origin to the host country system. Establish a means to keep the community informed about the equivalency process so that misinformation and worries about transferability during asylum and upon return are kept to a minimum.

❷ **Facilitate safe access to examinations as a short term measure only:** In collaboration with UNHCR Protection colleagues, engage education partners, especially UNICEF, both in country and across border, to assess the feasibility of having refugee students complete the current school year from their country of origin. This includes an assessment of the availability of qualified refugee teachers, sufficient materials, and safe access to examinations. Enabling students to complete the current school year will provide a sense of purpose, continuity and opportunities for refugee students at an early stage in displacement. This kind of curricula and cross-border support should prioritize students who are in their examination years of the country of origin. Cross-border examination arrangements should be considered as a short term measure only.

❸ **Prepare refugee students for country of asylum schools/curriculum:** In collaboration with UNHCR Protection colleagues, engage the MoE, UNICEF and other education partners to evaluate the language and other academic support required for refugee students to succeed when they transition to the asylum country system. In the event children and youth do not fluently speak and write in the asylum country language of instruction, begin language classes as soon as possible. Encourage education partners to provide targeted support for subject matter that will enhance school success in the asylum country system.

If the MoE agrees to inclusion of refugees into the national system, and if refugees are located in camps, settlements or urban areas near host community schools, advocate with the local schools to allow children at the appropriate ages to enrol directly into the national schools. Advocate with school management for the presence of a native speaker volunteer in the classroom if language support is needed. In addition, work with partners to identify capacity needs of national schools, including school infrastructure, material provision, language support and teacher training. Orientation and training for both national and refugee teachers and students is recommended to facilitate successful inclusion of refugees in national schools. From an advocacy perspective, if appropriate, focus on the additional funding that will be invested in national systems rather than in parallel ones for refugees only.

For over-aged children, consider tailored support for eventual inclusion into formal education, including accelerated education programmes.



More detailed guidance on transition to use of country of asylum curriculum may be found in the guidance for protracted settings below.

GOOD PRACTICE: CURRICULUM TRANSITION FOR SUDANESE REFUGEES IN EASTERN CHAD

CONTEXT

For over ten years, more than 80,000 Sudanese refugee children and youth from Darfur followed the Sudanese curriculum in schools run by NGOs in twelve refugee camps in Eastern Chad. Although the approach of using the Sudanese curriculum seemed like the most logical approach in 2003 when the camps were established, time proved that it was no longer the most efficient or sustainable for 2012 and beyond. Given the on-going conflict in Darfur, refugees would not likely be repatriating in the foreseeable future. Refugee teachers did not have access to qualified teacher training, materials were expensive and difficult to procure, and access to examinations was problematic, leading to many protection and financial concerns. In addition, UNHCR was unable to tap into development funding for education, nor to benefit from the deployment of qualified teachers, training or the distribution of materials by the MoE. The lack of quality control and proper oversight of education delivered in the camps resulted in a parallel education system offering questionable quality education that was effectively isolated from the services and resources available in Chad.

This situation described above was exacerbated by severe funding cuts to the Chad refugee operation given new global emergencies, resulting in rapidly declining basic standards in humanitarian assistance. UNHCR Chad thus had to review its strategy and examine more innovative approaches of engaging the national system, development partners, and the refugee community in meeting protection needs. For the education sector, this meant assessing how to harmonize refugee education in the East with the national system, as was already the case for refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) in the South. Fortunately, Chad has a bilingual curriculum (French/Arabic), which meant that students could continue learning in Arabic.

CHALLENGES

But change is difficult: After more than ten years of an entrenched parallel education system, the challenges confronting UNHCR were many. How would refugees transition from an Anglophone to a Francophone education system? How would equivalency between the two systems be established? How would refugees react to the Chadian system which did not include Islamic studies as the Sudanese system, or their history and geography? What resources would be required to implement a transition? And how would the

MoE help support the transition, particularly when they had not been involved in refugee education in the East for so many years?

PROCESS

The first step that UNHCR took to pave the way for a transition was to conduct a participatory assessment in all of the twelve camps. The assessment, conducted in June 2012, consulted refugees on a possible transition and allowed them to voice some of their concerns. It also addressed questions related to the prioritization of education needs and the capacity of the refugee community. The assessment highlighted mixed sentiments regarding a transition, with refugees in some camps favouring a transition, while refugees in other camps noted concerns related to certification, education quality, a loss of national identity, culture and religion. With the assessment report serving as the basis for further discussion, UNHCR held a series of formal and informal meetings with the MoE, CNARR – the entity responsible for refugees, UNICEF, UNESCO and education partners to present the assessment results, build consensus around a transition and outline the necessary modalities. In support of transition, UNHCR enrolled 167 refugee teachers from primary schools into a professional teacher training programme in December 2012. This pool of teachers would later become key resources in schools during the transition.

In May 2013, a workshop co-led by the MoE, UNICEF and UNHCR was held with key stakeholders to elaborate an implementation plan for the transition. The workshop included experts from the various departments of the MoE, including those responsible for teacher training, textbooks and curriculum development. Working groups explored key questions surrounding equivalency, examinations, teachers, school management and structure, integration into national schools, sensitization and materials, amongst others. The workshop resulted in an Action Plan including a two-year timeline with key activities and key actors responsible. A Working Group was also established to ensure that the Action Plan was monitored on a regular basis, and that any issues were addressed. In April 2014, a roving team led by the MoE held sensitization sessions in each of the twelve camps. In addition, UNHCR, UNICEF and UNESCO drafted a joint note outlining the transition, which was subsequently shared with the Sudanese authorities in 2014.

In October 2014, the transition from the Sudanese to the Chadian curriculum was officially rolled out. Although there was some resistance initially from refugees in certain camps, UNHCR and its partners continued to work with the refugee community to manage expectations and ensure that education standards were met, and the curriculum transition has been successfully carried out with programmes running smoothly.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN CURRICULUM TRANSITION

Key elements in the successful curriculum transition include the importance of cultivating strong partnerships early on, especially with the MoE; detailed planning and resource allocation, and continuous sensitization and coordination with all stakeholders, particularly with the refugee community.

B) PROTRACTED REFUGEE SETTINGS

If refugees in your operation are likely to be, or have been, displaced for five years or more, an assessment should be undertaken to determine which curriculum and education system is most suited to medium and longer-term needs. Considerations should include the quality of education available, materials, financial and human resources, and access to examinations. In most cases of protracted displacement, a transition to use of country of asylum curriculum is recommended as the most sustainable, cost-effective option.

Curriculum transition is a challenging process requiring significant dedication of time and resources. Refugee families often resist the switch to country of asylum curriculum, which can be perceived as a threat to language, history and identity for their children and communities. Consensus on the decision to transition to country of asylum curriculum must be built with national education authorities and other education actors, and key technical components of curricular transition need to be considered and addressed. Guiding principles and key steps towards curriculum transition are outlined below:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Throughout the curriculum transition process, ensure a consultative, participatory process through:

- Strong partnership with the MoE, relevant national authorities, UNICEF and UNESCO;
- Transparent and continuous engagement with the refugee community including consultation, advocacy and clear role in the decision making process; ensure that involvement of the refugee community extends to a broad range of stakeholders, rather than limiting representation to refugee leaders;
- Regular consultation and communication with key refugee education stakeholders and partners.

Key steps:

- ❶ **Assess needs:** This could include review of current education data, key challenges in education services, strategic priorities and policy directions for the operation as a whole and education specifically, or survey of refugee community attitudes and needs regarding a change in curriculum. A needs assessment should also consider the most feasible durable solutions in the short and longer term, including resource availability for education over the next five to ten years.
- ❷ **Open dialogue with stakeholders:** Initiate dialogue on the pros and cons of curriculum transition with key education stakeholders including the MoE, curriculum development institutions, education partners (UNICEF, UNESCO and NGOs), and refugees. A range of meetings with individuals and groups can be used at this stage. Use of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis with partners may also be of use.
- ❸ **Build consensus:** Develop a document or concept note outlining the rationale for curriculum transition, including a response to anticipated counter-arguments – Who is likely to benefit and lose as a result of a transition? Who could be potential champions? How can concerns associated with a transition be addressed? Use this document to guide advocacy and consensus-building around the decision. A series of meetings with MoE, UNICEF, UNESCO, education partners and refugee community representatives are necessary. Bear in mind that curriculum can be a very emotional and political issue for refugee communities and national partners; your task is to clearly outline the pros and cons of the proposed curriculum transition to move stakeholders towards a well-informed choice. This part of the process requires significant investment in relationship building with all key stakeholders and can be very time consuming and sometimes discouraging. Persistence and patience is needed to finally reach a general agreement from stakeholders to move forward.

④ **Develop an implementation plan, timeline and budget:** Hold a consultative workshop with representatives from all stakeholders, including the refugee community, to develop an implementation plan. Ideally the planning workshop should be co-hosted by the MoE, UNICEF, UNESCO and UNHCR. The planning meeting should break down implementation of the curriculum transition into key stages with activities and an expected timeline. A budget should also be developed, with agreement from partners on cost-sharing options. Working groups may need to be formed to assess needs and develop recommendations and detailed workplans around some of the more complex issues listed below:

- a. **Sensitization of the refugee community** to generate buy-in and support for the transition and to dispel any misinformation circulating;
- b. **Establishing equivalence** between the curriculum in use and the country of asylum curriculum to determine placement/levels and facilitate cross-border recognition of certificates in case of repatriation;
- c. **Language support** for students and teachers if the curriculum transition includes a different language;
- d. **Managing teachers:** Recruitment and/or deployment of **national teachers** to fill any capacity gaps and to guide the transition at school level. Head teacher and teacher training for **refugee teachers** who will be implementing the new curriculum;
- e. **Mapping opportunities to integrate** refugees into national schools surrounding refugee camps, particularly secondary schools. Likewise, consider host community needs and the integration of host community children into schools in refugee camps; assessment of support needed to enable schools to include refugees, and negotiations

with local authorities on how best to invest available emergency funding for school support in infrastructure, materials, etc. while encouraging authorities to ensure teacher support as the most important component for long term sustainability;

- f. **Seeking flexible solutions** for refugees to continue learning their country of origin language if possible, and provide additional bridging classes or a bridging period that uses a combination of language/curricula to transition teachers and learners to the new system. Also consider any additional subjects which refugees still want to continue learning from their country of origin curriculum, such as history, geography or religious classes. This can be organized by the community in the form of after school classes;
 - g. **Integrating refugee education into national education** development plans and structures;
 - h. **Budget** for the additional, up-front investments required for a successful transition to country of asylum curriculum, such as language classes, textbooks, teacher guides and training. Ensure that accurate costing is reflected in UNHCR annual plans and budget allocation, and that cost-sharing options are agreed upon with partners;
 - i. **Anticipating possible negative effects and solutions** to problems like drop-out triggered by the transition, hostile reaction from the refugee community, etc.
- ⑤ **Agree on leadership and responsibilities:** Ensure that the implementation plan is followed up by specific focal points and is regularly monitored by a working group, or a particular agency – preferably the MoE. Include refugee representatives in monitoring the process. Ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear to ensure smooth roll out. Finally, be sure to update all stakeholders on a regular basis. Communication is key!

Sources:

- ➔ UNHCR (2012). *Education Strategy 2012-2016*, <http://www.unhcr.org/5149ba349.html>
- ➔ UNHCR (2011). *Refugee Education: A Global Review*, <http://www.unhcr.org/4fe317589.html>
- ➔ UNESCO (2013). *IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology*, <http://goo.gl/ulQbn5>