

Refugee education during COVID-19: Crisis and opportunity

Key messages and outcomes from the INEE refugee round tables



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“COVID-19 has taken away any certainty or ability to plan for the future.”
“This crisis is a brake on dreaming.”
(Refugee students, July 2020)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a global education crisis, leading to school closures impacting 90 percent of the world’s students in early 2020, with full or partial closures still affecting 60 percent of children who were in school prior to the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). As children and young people around the world face disruption to their education because of COVID-19, it is essential to ensure that refugee children and youth are not left behind. Refugee children and youth have a right to quality education. Education offers the opportunity to reach their full potential, and brings hope and the ability to dream and plan for a different future.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all children and youth around the world, refugee children and youth risk being disproportionately affected, left further behind despite the commitment of world leaders to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (UN, 2015). The impact of this global education crisis on refugee children and youth is as yet unknown. However, estimates suggest that the number of out-of-school refugee children and youth is set to increase as many who were in school may never return. It is estimated that as many as 50 percent of refugee girls (and in some cases 100 percent where enrollment was low prior to COVID), who were in secondary school may not go back to school once they reopen. If this becomes a reality then less than 14 percent of refugee girls will be able to access secondary education.¹ For children and youth whose lives have already been uprooted, quality education is key to their future.

In December 2019, UNHCR organised the first ever [Global Refugee Forum](#) (GRF) with the aim of strengthening action to deliver on the [Global Compact for Refugees](#). INEE joined the GRF Education Co-Sponsors group and also co-lead the GRF task team on education emergencies, contributing to the [Global Framework for Refugee Education](#). Among the 4 pledges INEE made at the GRF was a commitment to “[s]trengthen inter-agency support for inclusive and equitable quality education during displacement through global advocacy, capacity building, knowledge management, and evidence generation” (INEE 2019). To help consolidate INEE’s actions on its GRF pledges, and with the support of UNHCR, INEE hosted a series of virtual round tables in multiple languages, providing an opportunity to hear from young refugees and their teachers on the impact of COVID-19 on their education.

The round tables, held in INEE core languages of Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish **between 20-24 July 2020**, shone a light on shared experiences of young refugees, highlighting the increased barriers to education during the global pandemic and a desire for continued education in the midst of this global education emergency. These discussions - which brought together refugee youth and teachers, together with ministry of education officials, civil society actors and UN agency representatives - called for practical solutions to address the additional complexity facing refugee education in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The objectives were to:

¹ UNHCR data shows that only 27% of secondary school-aged refugee girls were in education in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020), a 50% reduction would mean only 13.5% of refugee girls enrolled in secondary education.

- (i) To meaningfully engage and amplify the voices of displaced persons, including refugee youth;
- (ii) To better understand the challenges of how COVID-19 has affected education in displaced population settings and to share best practices and evidence-based solutions;
- (iii) To collect messages, examples, and recommendations that can be shared with UNHCR and co-sponsorship alliance as part of INEE's GRF pledge.

Key messages

This paper presents the synthesised outcome of these refugee round tables, highlighting challenges and recommendations and giving voice to the young refugees themselves. The events highlighted the following key messages:

- **Listen to refugee children and youth and enable them to participate in decisions affecting their education** in line with principles of community engagement set out in [INEE's Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response and Recovery](#).
- **Ensure equal access to quality education for all refugee children and youth, including access to quality distance education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.** The right to education is not suspended in emergencies or as a result of forced displacement. Refugee and IDP children and youth have the right to education and hope for a better future.
- **Hosting governments should ensure that documentation and certification for refugees and migrants are not a barrier to access education.** This could for example include adopting the [UNESCO Qualifications Passports for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants \(UQP\)](#).
- **Refugee and migrant supporting agencies should ensure greater universal access to digital technologies for refugees and migrants and ensure equitable access to technology for girls and women.** This could for example include having camp-wide free wifi zones, or freely accessible computer centres, for example the [Giga project](#) which aims to provide connectivity to every school in the world. Organisations could also sponsor training in the use of digital technologies for teachers, parents, and students to ensure quality distance education.

Strengthening inter-agency cooperation on refugee education

As mentioned above as part of its GRF pledge to strengthen inter-agency support for education during displacement, INEE's Advocacy Working Group (AWG), with support from UNHCR, organised a series of multilingual virtual refugee round table events in Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.² A central aim of the round tables was to hear from displaced youth - and refugee teachers - experiencing the impact of COVID-19 on their education. The 5 round tables saw the participation of over 348

² The notes from each round table in their original languages can be found [here](#).

participants, including speakers and facilitators, The participants consisted of refugees, migrants, and Internally displaced people (IDPs), as well as members of civil society, UN agencies and International Non-Government Organizations from different regions of the world. Among many others, participation included refugees and displaced participants from Angola, Burundi, Iraq, Lebanon, Kenya, Palestine, Rwanda, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen and Venezuela.

What was refugee education like before and after COVID-19?

Across all five round table discussions there were consistent issues that affected refugee, IDP, and migrant communities accessing education before and after COVID-19. These could be categorized into the following:

- **Inequality of access to quality education before COVID-19 and to quality distance education after COVID-19:** Most participants highlighted that the existing challenges (e.g. poor quality education, lack of infrastructure, limited resources, poor teaching quality, etc.) were exacerbated after COVID-19. As one participant said, *“While everyone across the globe has been affected by COVID-19, some are more affected than others.”* The inequality of access manifested itself in the different availability and cost of the technologies required to use the learning materials (e.g. radio, television, or internet). For example, a refugee from Syria highlighted, *“We don’t have the ability to do online schooling because of shortage of electricity and poor internet connection.”* Or from Lebanon, *“Before COVID it was possible to go to school and give face to face lessons, but after COVID19 and the shut down, we could now longer do this. We had to go to online classes. This is a big problem in Lebanon as there is often no electricity or internet access. This problem has actually become worse due to COVID 19 - everything is chaotic in Lebanon.”* The lack of connection and electricity can also be because of poverty, *“...education is in the background because they now fear being evicted or running out of food”*. Often living in rural or isolated locations means refugee or IDP students are particularly disadvantaged. Many participants also spoke of the lack of available equipment. For example, *“...they do not have access to devices, radio or TV; and they have to share with several siblings for example a cellphone.”* Children with special needs also had unequal access (and sometimes no access) to distance education. *“In Kenya people with disabilities had a lot of challenges, such as physical, hearing, sight, etc. It is difficult for a blind child or children with hearing impairments to gain computer literacy.”*
- **Lack of preparedness:** *“Education systems are paralysed and are unable to respond technically.”* The lack of preparedness for teaching quality distance education was reiterated across the discussions, for example, *“In the Honduran education system we were not prepared for this transfer to a non-class based education. Making timely decisions plays an important role.”* Many participants spoke of the lack of knowledge of teachers, parents, and children in using the technologies to access education and poor training of teachers in teaching distance education, exacerbating inequality. For some participants the lack of preparedness also implied the limited guidance or policies coming from governments. This translated into poor coordination, for example, *“In Uganda there is no coordination for the exams. We can choose any radio or TV programme to study and they are all different.”*

- **Issues of integration:** For some participants the main issue in terms of effective integration into host countries was the problem of certification or documentation, which limited their access to education even before COVID-19, “*Procedures and requirements of certificates and documents limit or delay the process of access to education*”. There was a concern that in some cases governments were using this to not comply with the human rights of refugees to education. Also the different languages and different education systems made it even harder after the onset of COVID-19 to access/navigate distance education. As one participant said, “*Language is a challenge. It is difficult to understand the academic curriculum in a different language.*” It also resulted in children being placed in grades that were lower than those they had attended in their home country.
- **Psychological impact of COVID-19:** The anxiety, stress and sense of isolation resulting from various aspects of COVID-19 was mentioned in all of the round tables. For example, “*Students live in difficult psychological conditions due to cancelled exams and not knowing their fate.*” For many students in particular this led to a loss of hope and a sense of frustration and anxiety that opportunities that would have been available before COVID-19 would not be available after. For one participant, “*COVID-19 has taken away any certainty or ability to plan for the future.*” and for another, “*This crisis is a brake on dreaming.*”

Gender issues in relation to COVID-19

While not all discussions highlighted all of the potential gender issues associated with COVID-19, many participants did discuss the increase in domestic violence that had occurred since COVID-19. For example, “*In a situation of confinement, the domestic tasks are even more the responsibility of women, and the man sits all day at home. This leads to an increase in physical and sexual violence against women.*” The protection for many female students that was provided by education has also been lost, and as a result “*...some girls are being married off and many will not return to school.*” The gendered access to technology was also highlighted by some participants, for example, “*Parents won’t let their daughters use cell phones.*”

Quality of the COVID-19 response

Several participants raised concerns over the lack of preparedness in advance of the pandemic and the lack of coordination of different government departments to meet safety standards, for example when some schools were allowed to reopen. “*How can you safely return to school during COVID with such overcrowded classes?*” The fact that many of the coordination activities for the COVID-19 response took place online meant that this left out many actors, particularly local actors who may have had less access to technology. It also precluded the engagement of refugees, as “*Most refugees don’t have smartphones or the ability to pay for megabytes.*” Because of the lack of preparedness, some participants felt that there was a dependence on humanitarian partners to provide distance education as there was a lack of knowledge in the refugee camps on how to provide it. In some contexts, there has been no response at all, a whole year of learning is 'lost'. For example, in Kakuma Refugee Camp, it was reported, no actions (or at least very limited) are taken on education, meaning many children and youth could not continue their learning.

Nothing about us, without us: the voices of displaced people count

“Very often there is a lot of discussion concerning refugees but we do not give them the floor. Here we could hear it from the refugees in the language of their choice”
(participant, INEE Refugee Round Table, 2020)

Reflecting on the outcomes of the round tables, there were some key highlights that emerged and were greatly valued.

Hearing refugee voices: The fact that refugees were given a voice to speak was appreciated by all participants. For example, one refugee student said, *“Thank you INEE for this amazing meeting. It's a relief to feel that you are not alone in facing these difficulties!”* The richness of the debate came from the fact that participants came from diverse and different backgrounds, in terms of ages, geographic locations and included academics, teachers and students. There was a sense of excitement at the ability to speak out. In addition, there was also a sense that participants were happy to be taken out of stress of their current routine which was heavily affected by COVID-19. This was an additional highlight and outcome that was reached, as they felt supported and part of a global community of refugees who were all affected by the different impacts on COVID-19 on their lives and education.

An equal discussion: There were some excellent conversations between groups of people who came from all types of economic and cultural backgrounds, some of whom lived in refugee camps or were members of agencies that support refugees. These were conversations that would not normally take place — for example between Ministry of Education representatives, senior UNHCR officers and refugee students or teachers. Despite differences in levels of education, work experience, age, etc. there was a sense that an equal discussion was taking place between all participants.

Partnerships: Some strong partnerships were formed between the teams organizing the round tables in the different languages. The round tables would not have had the same success without the active participation of UNHCR at both a global and regional level. Strong partnerships for example were formed between the Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR), UNHCR Mozambique country office and INEE in the Portuguese round table. In the Spanish Round Table, the partnership with the DAI, Norwegian Refugee Council, Refugee Education Trust and the UNHCR Regional Office were particularly effective. In the French round table, the Advocacy Working Group member Right to Education supported the French round table with direct involvement in the preparation and facilitation by a French speaking colleague.

Recommendations for action

While many of the young displaced participants highlighted the disruption that the closing of schools and lack of access to distance education has caused, and the strain that COVID-19 crisis had brought, they had not lost hope. Across the 5 round tables, regardless of contexts a number of shared experiences emerged. The young displaced youth - and other participants - were clear that urgent action was needed and the following recommendations emerged:

- 1. Ensure equal access to quality education for all, including quality distance education and opportunities for tertiary education.**
 - a. Improve access to technologies suitable for providing quality distance education. For example, provide free data/wifi/equipment, etc. in refugee camps and for urban migrants and other displaced people and access to technology in remote rural locations.
 - b. Train teachers in how to deliver quality distance education, including through the use of technology and support parents and caregivers to be able to support learning at home.
 - c. Have a more individualised system of provision for distance education that is inclusive of children with special needs.
 - d. Develop multiple strategies for delivering distance education to include, no-, low-, and high-tech options — online, radio, TV, recorded lessons, paper copies, etc.
 - e. Improve opportunities for refugees to access tertiary education. This includes extending scholarships and funding students who have already started in tertiary education.

- 2. Prepare for future emergencies and for reopening schools.**
 - a. Include refugee, IDP, and migrant communities, teachers and parents, in decision making for future emergencies. Use local radio networks for communication.
 - b. Improve the education system to cater for future crises and to handle distance education. This includes building teachers capacity in digital modalities.
 - c. Assess the needs of different population groups and adapt responses to fit them.

- 3. Resolve documentation/certification issues for refugees and other displaced people.**
 - a. Ensure that displaced children and youth are integrated into the national education system of the host community, according to the academic ability and grade of their home country education regardless of lack of certification or birth certificates.
 - b. Teach local languages when developing distance education materials for refugees and other displaced people, so that they can have access to national curricula.

- 4. Strengthen cross-sector and psychosocial support (PSS) approaches.**
 - a. Develop and implement inclusive policies and prioritise support for vulnerable groups including those with special needs.
 - b. Strengthen and build on existing PSS assets, for example, the "Socio Emotional 100" project in Colombia developed with the ministry of education.
 - c. Expand social protection programs (health, nutrition, school feeding, protection) to families to ensure that students remain in the educational system, focusing on vulnerable areas.

- 5. Strengthen gender responses to COVID-19.**
 - a. Focus back-to-school campaigns particularly at girls, including those of school age who have been forced into early marriage and/or are pregnant/have young children.

- b. Keep schools open [with safe hygiene and social distancing] as a form of protection for girls and young women at risk of physical or sexual violence, early marriage or pregnancy. This includes ensuring better WASH facilities, not only for girls, but for all students.

6. Improve coordination of the COVID-19 response between all actors.

- a. Collaborate with refugee youth, teachers and community leaders.
- b. Coordinate actions to avoid duplicating efforts and reaching areas where typically support does not reach.

Need for sustained action

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected children and young people, their parents and carers, teachers and communities in nearly every country in the world. The resulting global education crisis will have widespread and long-term impacts. For all communities affected by crisis and for all those forcibly displaced from their homes the current crisis is compounding already challenging and often traumatic circumstances. Inclusion of refugee/IDP/migrant children and youth in education systems, should therefore be accompanied by system strengthening, which requires support from both humanitarian and development actors.

Urgent action is needed from governments as primary duty bearers to protect and fulfil the right to education for IDP, migrant and refugee children and youth.