

Refugee Education: A Long-Term Investment

Who is best placed to guarantee education to children whose educational path has been disrupted by armed conflict and flight? Displacement situations are mostly protracted, and yet refugee education is at present mainly planned with short-term time horizons. In this brief, we argue that a substantial shift is needed that enables long-term investment in educating children in protracted refugee situations. We present ‘lessons learned’ from the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, which were established in 1991 with the outbreak of the Somali Civil War and still host refugees to this day.

Brief Points

- Short-term humanitarian planning and funding cycles clash with the long-term requirements of education.
- A child’s schooling takes place over multiple years and requires continuity.
- Refugee realities, however, are often highly unpredictable and subject to change.
- Long-term investment in education is crucial to improving the chances of not only individuals, but also communities and nation-states.
- Among the many providers of refugee education, refugee communities themselves are key.

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Refugee Education at Present

The right to education for refugees is articulated in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which provides international norms defining who is a refugee, refugee rights, and the legal obligations of states vis-à-vis refugees. Article 22 of the 1951 Convention specifies that signatory states shall treat refugees and nationals the same when it comes to primary education and as favourably as possible when it comes to other forms of education.

The right to education in crisis has also been central to global movements. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education identifies refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants as ‘vulnerable’ and calls for the elimination of disparities in access to inclusive and equitable quality education for these populations. Education is a core priority in many donor countries’ development and humanitarian policies, as it is understood as a tool for protecting children and youth from exploitation, ill health, and death; a means for fostering peaceful coexistence; and a way to equip them with skills and knowledge that can enable them to live their dreams.

Despite these commitments in principle to the right to education for refugees, in practice, refugee children are amongst the most disadvantaged in terms of having access to quality educational opportunities. The average time that these children spend in exile is increasing, which means that millions of children globally spend their entire childhoods in situations of conflict and exile with limited education. Even when refugee children do have access to education, it is often of low quality, and this jeopardizes the future of these children and their conflict-affected societies.

Education is largely funded and implemented by international donors, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), INGOs and civil society organizations. Until recently, formal refugee education was planned with the purpose of preparing students to return to their countries of origin (Dryden-Peterson 2016). Refugee students were isolated, largely in camps, and attended refugee-only schools, taught in the language of their country of origin. At present, given the protracted nature of contemporary conflicts, return to a country of origin is increasingly unlikely. In addition, an increasing number of refugees globally live in

urban areas and are less likely to be isolated from host populations.

In 2012, the UNHCR adopted a new education strategy, proposing the **integration of refugees into national education systems** as its central organizing principle. This policy decision was based in the clear reality that displacement is mostly regional and protracted, and that educational opportunities for refugees cannot wait for a return to stability. The advantages are many: 1) Integrated education may be of higher quality within a national system due to access to trained teachers and possibilities for certification; 2) education of refugees is less expensive within a pre-existing system; 3) inclusion in national schools may foster membership in the society of long-term exile and stimulate peaceful coexistence between refugees and hosts; and 4) it can guarantee sustainability of educational infrastructure.

The practice of integration of refugees, however, which is much older than the recent global focus, reflects a different reality, as the example of Dadaab illustrates. In Kenya, since 1997, refugees have followed the Kenyan curriculum. This integration into the national system has not, however, involved interacting with Kenyan national students in class, as schools are located primarily in isolated refugee camps. While Somali refugees live in both urban areas around Nairobi and in rural refugee camps, a substantial number live in the Dadaab camps, isolated from national populations. In Dadaab, education takes place in multiple settings, such as in formal national schools set up and run by international NGOs and private schools that are set up and run by refugees. Both models receive oversight by District Education Officers and are certified by the Kenyan government.

Why Education?

Education has socio-economic benefits for the futures of students, their families and ultimately their communities. Being literate and having numerical skills expands livelihood opportunities. Certified secondary and tertiary education provides students with further levels of choice in the pursuit of economic stability, irrespective of where their futures will be.

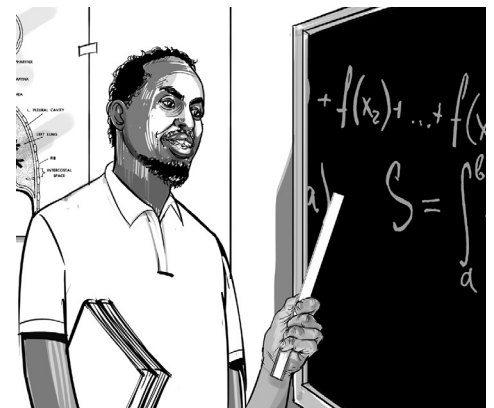
The economic potential that education may offer is crucial especially for refugees, who have often seen their hard-earned livelihoods shattered when they were forced to leave their country and

most of what they owned behind. Education is a particularly valuable asset in such a context, considering the fact that it is portable and to an extent transferable to other contexts.

Besides the relevance of basic literacy and numerical skills for socio-economic futures, there are a host of other aspects that make education crucial not just to individuals, but also to communities and nations. **Education is closely connected to citizenship**, in its holistic meaning that includes **civic rights, belonging and participation**. These aspects are particularly important in the case of education for refugees who are displaced within the region, who lost these aspects when they were forced to leave their country of origin.

Education is an impressive tool, as it can contribute to developing responsible political citizens. Furthermore, it plays a central role in the creation of nation-states and the development of a sense of national identity. Civic education has an effect on political awareness and participation and offers a hands-on approach to governments – as well as to international NGOs and donors – to directly influence the knowledge, norms and values of students. Education can also offer stability and predictability to children and youth whose lives have been fundamentally disrupted, and create opportunities for individuals with very few options.

In refugee contexts, where education takes place within a social setting with at least two but often many more national communities, teaching national histories or communicating norms and values is not a straightforward and neutral exercise. This is just one of a number of key challenges that refugees face, both within the education system itself and in their attempts to fully benefit from the socio-economic and civic-political promises of education.



Key Challenges

The majority of refugees are hosted by **neighbouring host countries** with education systems that are overstretched, and fragile political and economic institutions. Refugees are often hosted in border areas where insecurity is rampant. A further key challenge is that host governments are wary of permanent inclusion of refugees within the nation and these refugees thus rarely have a pathway to citizenship or permanent status within the nation-state. Refugee children are equally rarely citizens, even if they are born in their host country. This has important implications for (perceptions about) the value of education, as rights to education are not matched by rights to employment, property or land ownership.

Further challenges relate to the nation-state-centric nature of education, which does not do justice to those marginalized within the nation-state, including refugees. The contradictory dimensions of nation-state-building on the one hand and exclusion of groups that do not fit the national discourse on the other can be shaped through the language of instruction and the content of the curriculum, as well as the uneven distribution of educational opportunities between different groups.

For example, the national curriculum of a hosting state rarely includes the history of countries that refugees fled from. When neighbouring countries or people do appear in the curriculum, this is often done through the national lens of the hosting state. Another challenge may relate to civic education, which teaches refugee students about civic rights that they do not have access to. Also, religious education may provide challenges if refugees hold different beliefs from those taught within the national curriculum.

A description of **realities in Dadaab** illustrates the myriad of well-known challenges on a concrete and practical level. Like most of the educational programmes in protracted refugee camps across the world, education in the Dadaab camps is affected by inadequate learning resources, overcrowded classes, and limited numbers of trained teachers. Furthermore, learning programmes are still tailored for emergencies, despite the facts that the camps have existed since 1991 and the Kenyan curriculum was already introduced in 1997.

Over the many years that the camps have existed, one major challenge has been that despite the protractedness of the camps, funding, policies

and programming have changed frequently and have faced many years of uncertainty and unpredictability. This situation has worsened from 2011 due to increased insecurity in the North-Eastern Province, where the Dadaab camps are situated. As a consequence, agency-run schools in Dadaab are now back to employing largely uncertified and underpaid refugee teachers after many qualified Kenyan national teachers left the camps.

In many classroom contexts, teachers struggle with the level of motivation of students, especially those in their teens. In Dadaab, these challenges are worsened by the long distances students have to walk in its semi-desert climate to reach schools with poor teaching resources. Worse still, students may have no incentive to gain an education if they know that it cannot be used in the future. They may understand education to be a dead-end if they find their older peers still stuck in the camps after graduating, with no opportunities for further education and no right to work in Kenya.

While the introduction of the Kenyan curriculum relatively early in Dadaab's history has provided refugee youth with important opportunities, the nation-state-centric nature of education does create challenges. Children in Dadaab are taught Kenyan history and are socialized in Kenyan political systems and norms that they are unlikely to ever be able to put into practice. A number of parents have been sceptical to this education system or have prioritized their children's education in Islamic religion and philosophy.

The Role of Refugee Communities

Private and civil society actors play an important role in refugee education, often providing access to education when formal education by national authorities or international organizations is unavailable or inadequate for refugees. Research

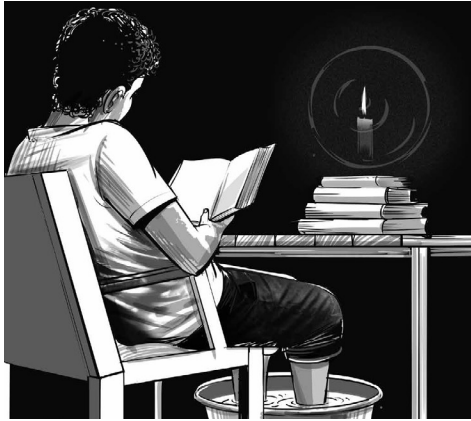


shows that in many contexts, teachers who are themselves refugees adapt curricula, pedagogy, and language of instruction to more effectively meet the needs of their refugee students. These teachers are able to help their students 'renegotiate the boundaries of identity and belonging [...] that are conducive to creating futures, rather than simply inheriting them' (Dryden-Peterson 2017).

And yet, the role of refugee communities in providing education is often not recognized in national and international debates about refugee education. This is the case even while a 'localization agenda' has been a central goal in the professional humanitarian system since the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. If, indeed, greater localization is the goal, local efforts by refugees in refugee camps need to be acknowledged, and greater levels of coordination and cooperation with these actors are required.

In Dadaab, refugee-managed schools offer accredited private primary and secondary education for an increasingly large number of students. These schools were established by refugees to provide an alternative to the UNHCR-run public schools in order to solve challenges that refugees faced in educating their children. Prior to this, refugee children whose parents wished for them to receive Islamic education struggled to attend *madrassa* (Islamic religious schools) in one location and secular primary schools in another. The refugee-managed primary schools were set up to provide an integrated curriculum, which combines the Kenyan national syllabus with informal Islamic religious education. This solution is both more affordable and more convenient for refugee families.

At primary level, the *Integrated Academies* were established in 2008. These refugee-led schools offer the regular Kenyan curriculum as well



as Islamic religious education, which includes Islamic history, Arabic, Quran, hadith, Islamic practices and behaviours, and a range of other subjects. These schools not only provide students and their parents the chance to receive both types of education in an integrated way, they also offer quality education. Due to their use of qualified and well-paid teachers – refugees and nationals – these schools produce the highest scores not only in Dadaab, but across North-Eastern Province.

The dedication of many individuals in Dadaab to education is remarkable: from the individual students who read until deep into the night by candlelight, keeping themselves awake by cooling their feet in a basin of water, to the adults who invested in refugee-led schools as founders, headmasters or teachers.

Yet the impact of this dedication could be much greater if it was a recognized part of educational policies. For example, training more refugee teachers to obtain full teaching qualifications provides a valuable investment, regardless of where these teachers will live in five or ten years' time. Furthermore, integrating refugee-led private schools within the national system, as is the case in Kenya, is another important example of how refugee resources can be utilized and supported.

A Long-Term Investment

Refugee education in Kenya is currently funded by international donors and implemented by a coalition of the host government, UNHCR and INGOs – by and large within short-term planning cycles. And yet, the Dadaab camps have existed for **thirty years**.

Regional refugees increasingly live in protracted situations where long-term investments in education are needed. After all, it takes an average of 12 years to educate a child up to secondary school level. Such investment needs to be holding two thoughts at the same time: 1) invest in local resources in a way that will be of use for decades, irrespective of whether refugees will still be there, and 2) invest in long-term flexible resources that can move with the refugees. This demands that we see refugees as assets and invest in their human capital, rather than as victims and burdens who require aid implemented by others. The longer they are denied opportunities to learn and work, the wider the gap created by violent conflict and exile.

A two-pronged regional investment strategy requires vision, boldness and innovation, as well as cross-national collaboration. In Dadaab, visionary individuals have fought tirelessly for decades to implement a long-term perspective on education, and crucial steps in this direction have been taken. One of the first such steps took place in 1997, when the Kenyan curriculum was introduced in the camps. Another enabled the establishment of certified refugee-led schools – the *Integrated Academies* – from 2008. An ongoing initiative aims to achieve full integration of refugees into national education, though questions around funding and political will make it unclear at this point whether the initiative will succeed.

Such new initiatives require the hard work, dedication and persistence of bureaucrats, teachers,

headmasters, parents and students. They also require a broader vision of education that moves beyond the narrow nation-state frame in order to recognize the larger regional relevance of educating the next generation of children in a way that enables them to claim civic rights, feel a sense of community and belonging, and be responsible citizens who participate in and contribute to society, irrespective of where they are and will be in future.

We recommend that such long-term investments prioritize investing in the refugee community as a central provider of education. INGOs and governments can enable or support refugees with relevant backgrounds to (re-) establish themselves as educators. Looking at Dadaab, it becomes clear that refugee-led schools can ensure continuity of quality learning in ways that match the needs of their community. It is remarkable how little discussed such initiatives are in international debates about refugee education. ■

References

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THE PROJECT

The project 'Refugee education: Building durable futures' (REBuild) asks how education contributes to building durable futures for refugees and their communities. REBuild is a collaboration between PRIO, Harvard University, the American University in Beirut and the University of Nairobi. The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

PRIO

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