



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

STEPPING UP

REFUGEE
EDUCATION
IN CRISIS



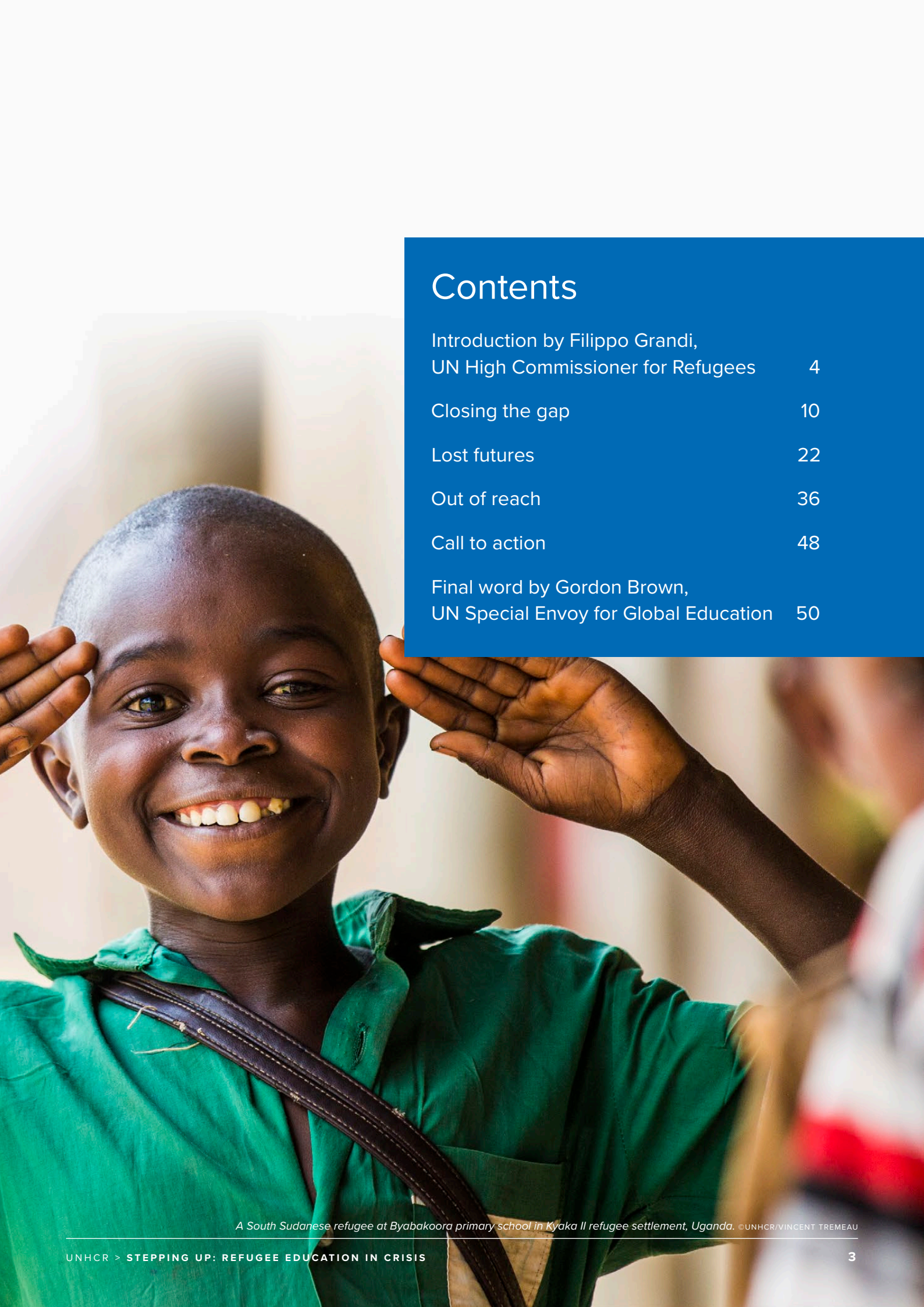
About this report

This report tells the stories of some of the world's 7.1 million refugee children of school age under UNHCR's mandate. In addition, it looks at the educational aspirations of refugee youth eager to continue learning after secondary education, and highlights the need for strong partnerships in order to break down the barriers to education for millions of refugee children.

Education data on refugee enrolments and population numbers is drawn from UNHCR's population database, reporting tools and education surveys and refers to 2018. Age-disaggregated data is not available for the whole refugee population. Where this data is not available, it has been estimated on the basis of available age disaggregated data. The report also references global enrolment data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics referring to 2017.

Cover: After finishing top of her class in primary school, Hina was not able to get a place in secondary school for the simple reason that out of 500 available places, only one could be allocated to a refugee. Refusing to give up, she applied to a private college and won a scholarship. But to get to university she faced exactly the same problem: out of 200 available places, there was only one reserved for refugees. Once again she won through thanks to her excellent grades. Today, her DAFI scholarship is helping her to finish her degree. ©UNHCR/GORDON WELTERS





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A South Sudanese refugee at Byabakoora primary school in Kyaka II refugee settlement, Uganda. ©UNHCR/VINCENT TREMEAU



INTRODUCTION

INVESTING IN HUMANITY: WHY REFUGEES NEED AN EDUCATION

BY FILIPPO GRANDI,
UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

How can you invest in a refugee, and what do you get back for your investment?

In today's world of business and finance, making an investment – whether in shares and bonds or property, gold, lottery tickets or the latest start-up – is quick and easy. The big trick is getting more back than you put in.

But when it comes to real people, the dividends are not so clear. How would you measure your gains, or cash in on your investment? And what would represent a good return?

You might be doubly wary of investing in people if you knew they had been uprooted from their homes, stripped of their livelihoods and possessions, perhaps separated from their families, had lost loved ones, and were having to start their lives all over again.

But in a world of conflict and upheaval, we as an international community are missing out one of the best investments there is: the education of young refugees. This is not an expense, but a golden opportunity.

3.7 million refugee children are out of school.

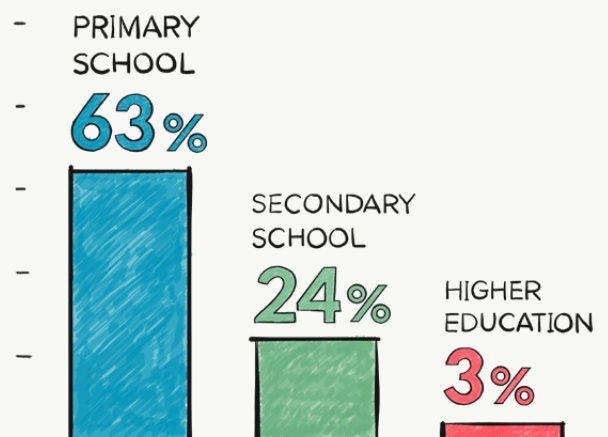


Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, meets young Rohingya refugee students in Kutupalong refugee settlement, Bangladesh © UNHCR/WILL SWANSON

For most of us, education is how we feed curious minds and discover our life’s passions. It is also how we learn to look after ourselves – how to navigate the world of work, to organize our households, to deal with everyday chores and challenges.

For refugees, it is all that and more. It is the surest road to recovering a sense of purpose and dignity after the trauma of displacement. It is – or should be – the route to labour markets and economic self-sufficiency, spelling an end to months or sometimes years of depending on others.

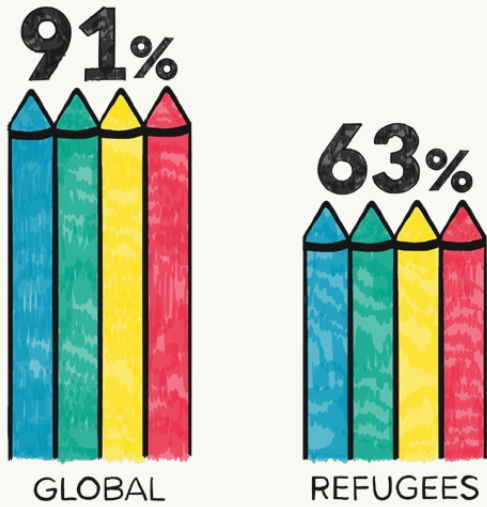
ENROLMENT OF REFUGEES IN EDUCATION



SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)

PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT

SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)



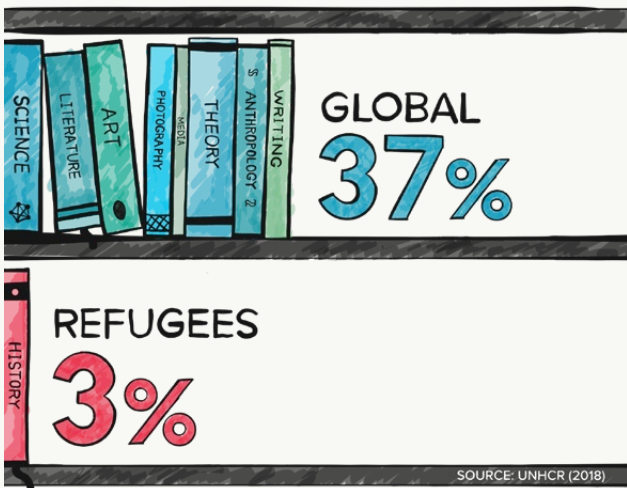
SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT

REFUGEES
24%

GLOBAL
84%

SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLMENT



SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)

Compared to the trillions of dollars wasted on conflict, and the cost to societies and economies when ordinary civilians are forcibly displaced en masse, this is a no-brainer investment.

The gains in educational enrolment revealed in this year’s UNHCR report on refugees and education, small as they are in percentage terms, still represent life-changing opportunities for tens of thousands of refugee children, adolescents and youth. Refugee enrolment in primary school is up from 61 to 63 per cent, while secondary level enrolment has risen from 23 to 24 per cent. I particularly welcome the increase in numbers of refugees accessing higher education – a rise to 3 per cent after several years stuck at 1 per cent.

Higher-level education turns students into leaders. It harnesses the creativity, energy and idealism of refugee youth and young adults, casting them in the mould of role models, developing critical skills for decision-making, amplifying their voices and enabling rapid generational change.

The gains in primary and higher education cannot mask the huge shortfall in places and the yawning gap in opportunity, especially at secondary level. The proportion of refugees enrolled in secondary education is more than two-thirds lower than the level for non-refugees – 24 per cent, compared to the global rate of 84 per cent.

The effect is devastating. Without the stepping stone of secondary school, progress made over the past year will be short-lived, and the futures of millions of refugee children will be thrown away.

Young refugees such as Gift, a South Sudanese boy now living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who was so determined to go to school that he learned French and constructed his own solar-powered light to study after dark. His hopes of progressing to secondary level are likely to be dashed because there is quite simply no school in his area for him to attend.

Young refugees such as Hina, who excelled at primary school in Pakistan but found that, out of 500 places at the secondary school in Peshawar she wanted to attend, only one of them was for a refugee.

I myself have seen the same phenomenon in Bangladesh: refugee children still unable to join official schools and follow a recognized curriculum. It is a profoundly dispiriting situation.

This failure to improve the provision of secondary education for refugees does not just kick away the ladder to higher, technical and vocational education and training. As well as its countless other benefits, education is fundamentally protective. Children in school are less likely to be involved in child labour or criminal activity, or to come under the influence of gangs and militias. Girls are less likely to be coerced into early marriage and pregnancy, and can study and socialize in safe spaces.



Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, with pupils at Al Shuhada School in Souran, Syria, where UNHCR is assisting former refugees and displaced people who have returned home. © UNHCR/ANDREW MCCONNELL



Young students read in a girl-only room at Paysannat L school in Mahama refugee camp, Rwanda. The school welcomes around 20,000 children. Eighty per cent are Burundian refugees and the rest come from the host community. © UNHCR/GEORGINA GOODWIN

Schools should be safe havens. That is why we must all condemn the acts of violence against schools, pupils and teachers that continue to be carried out in countries affected by conflict. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, there were 14,000 such incidents in 34 countries between 2014 and 2018, including bombings, partial or total occupation by armed groups, abduction, rape and forced recruitment. Such unpardonable violence against innocents must stop.

Furthermore, without ensuring access to an inclusive secondary education, the international community will fail to meet several of the Sustainable Development Goals – not just SDG4, which is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, but also commitments to eradicating poverty, promoting decent work and reducing inequality.

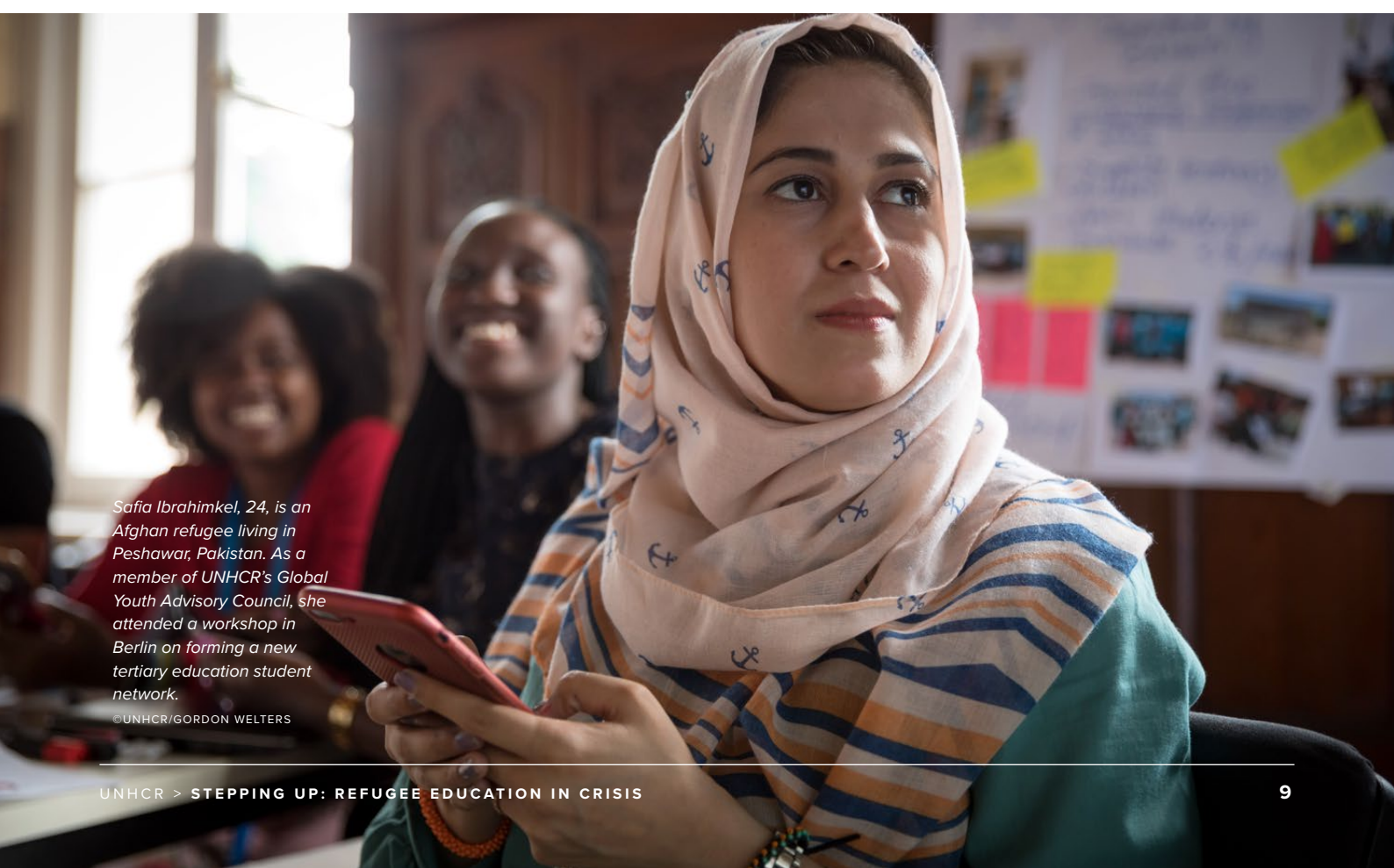
That is why UNHCR places such importance on the inclusion of refugee children in national education systems, leading to recognized qualifications and certification. This creates conditions in which refugee children and youth can learn, thrive and develop their potential in peaceful coexistence with each other, and with local children. In a world in which conflict appears to come more easily than peace, these are invaluable lessons.

Investing in a refugee’s education is a collective endeavour with collective rewards, requiring the involvement of all levels of society to make the biggest gains. Governments, business, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations must unite to improve the provision of education at all levels, particularly secondary, and to allow refugees the same access as host-country citizens. Our ambition over the next decade, set out in UNCHR’s Refugee Education 2030 strategy, is to have refugees achieving parity with their non-refugee peers in pre-primary, primary and secondary education, and to boost enrolment in higher education to 15 per cent.

I am therefore proud to announce a new initiative to improve secondary education opportunities for refugees. After pilot projects in Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Pakistan since 2017, the initiative will ambitiously expand over the coming years with a focus on investing in teachers and schools, community schemes to encourage enrolment and financial support for refugee families. This programme is aimed not just at refugees but the community at large, so that all children will benefit from new opportunities. By boosting secondary-level enrolment, we aim to get more refugees and host community peers to progress to higher studies. And we hope to show them that a full educational cycle is possible, motivating more of them to come to school and stay there.

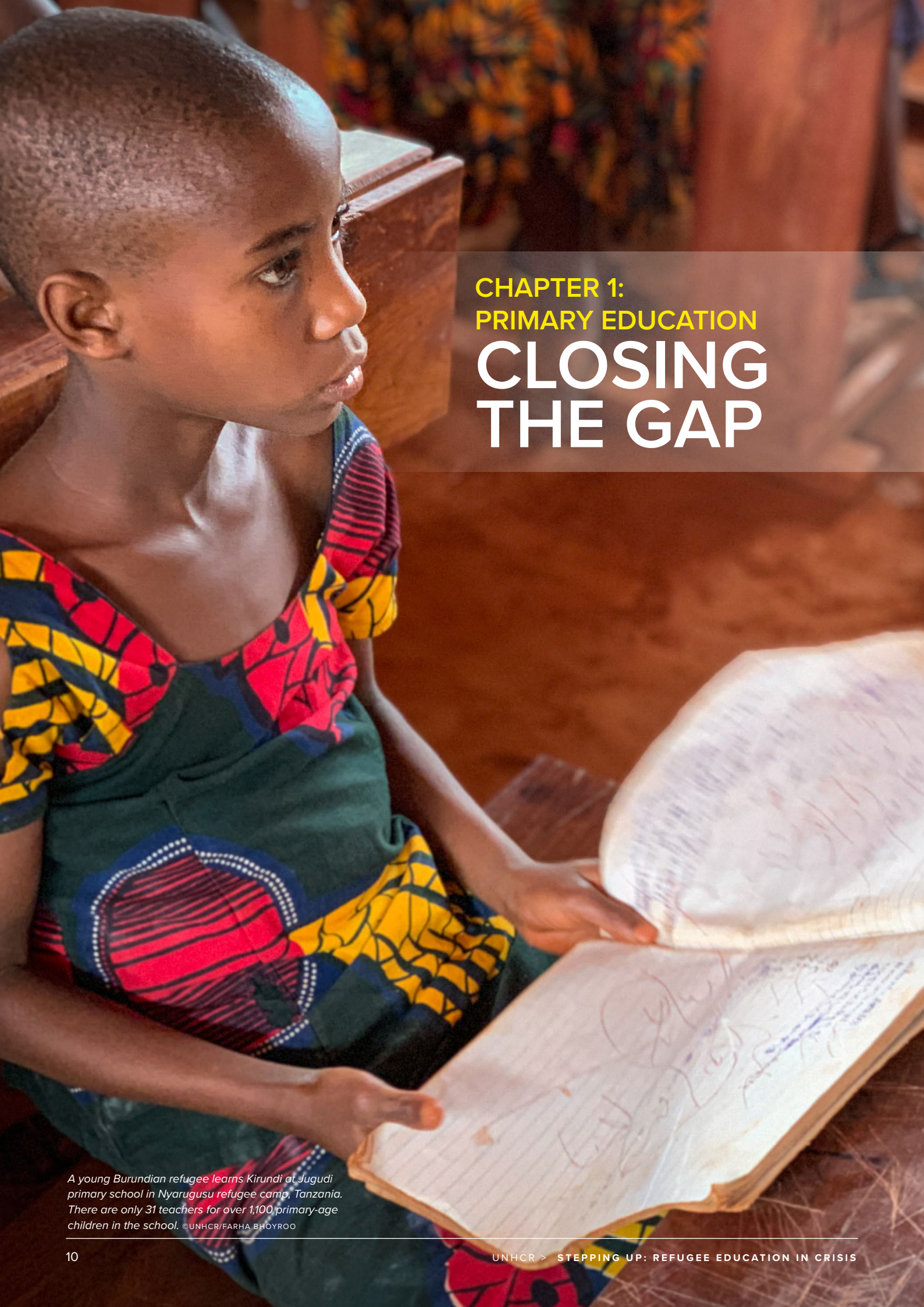
It is my hope that at the forthcoming Global Refugee Forum, governments, the private sector, educational organizations and donors will unite to give their backing to this initiative – in the spirit of responsibility-sharing and collaboration that lies at the heart of the Global Compact on Refugees.

These are ambitious targets, but they come with incalculable rewards. Education will prepare refugee children and youth for the world of today and of tomorrow. In turn, it will make that world more resilient, sustainable and peaceful. And that is not a bad return on our investment.



Safia Ibrahimkel, 24, is an Afghan refugee living in Peshawar, Pakistan. As a member of UNHCR's Global Youth Advisory Council, she attended a workshop in Berlin on forming a new tertiary education student network.

©UNHCR/GORDON WELTERS



CHAPTER 1:
PRIMARY EDUCATION
**CLOSING
THE GAP**

A young Burundian refugee learns Kirundi at Jugudi primary school in Nyarugusu refugee camp, Tanzania. There are only 31 teachers for over 1,100 primary-age children in the school. © UNHCR/FARHA BHOYROO

Millions of refugee children and youth are missing out on a fundamental human right: **the right to a quality education.**

Today, there are around 3.7 million refugee children out of school – more than half of the 7.1 million school-age refugee children.

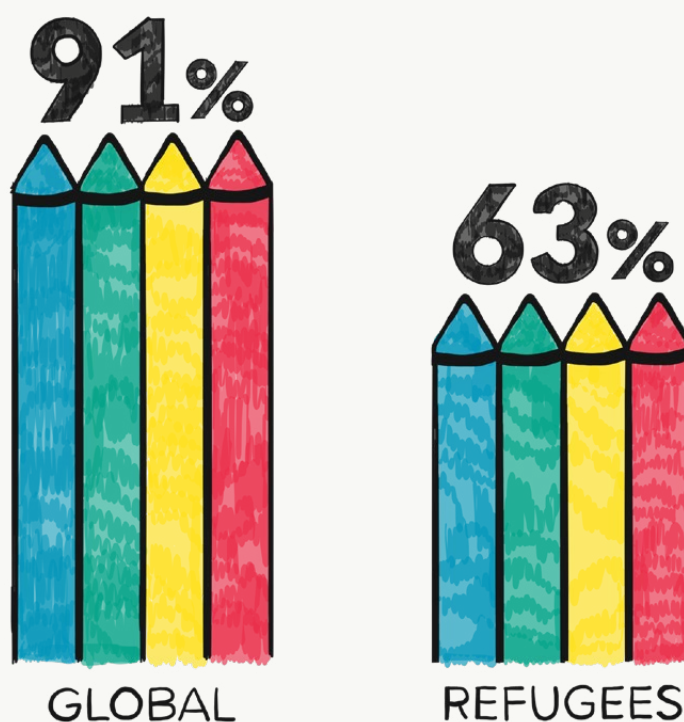
Despite major investment in primary education, the inexorable rise in forced displacement around the world – including refugees, asylum-seekers, people displaced within their own borders and the stateless – means there are big gaps between refugees and their non-refugee peers when it comes to access to education¹.

At primary level, the number of refugee children enrolled in school in 2018 was 63 per cent, up two percentage points on the previous year. That compares with a global figure for all children of 91 per cent.

1 [UNHCR: Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018](#)

PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT

SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)





Alamuddin, 16, an unaccompanied child refugee from Ethiopia, was able to join an accelerated education literacy class in Yemen thanks to the Educate A Child programme. Three years on, his Arabic skills allowed him to enrol in the 7th grade in a national school. ©SDF/MAJED AL-ZOMALY

Turning the tide

The small gains are thanks to impressive efforts by host states, donors, UNHCR staff and partner organizations to get more refugee children into the classroom. A range of countries have made significant progress, from Uganda, Chad, Kenya and Ethiopia in sub-Saharan Africa to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Mexico – giving refugees access to schools, making school timetables more flexible, offering special help to children to catch up on missed schoolwork or to learn new languages, training more teachers, providing more educational materials and helping children adjust to the challenges of life as a refugee.

The rise also reflects a commitment by an increasing number of host governments to include refugee children and youth in their national education systems – the essential, fundamental strategy for boosting enrolment. Providing all learners with a proper curriculum and school certification is the pathway to progressing to secondary and higher education, and onwards to employment. In Rwanda, for instance, thousands of refugee children have been enrolled in primary schools thanks to progressive government policies and targeted funding from donors. In Uganda, 23,000 over-age learners who were previously out of school are now participating in primary education thanks to accelerated education programmes.

Turkey, which now hosts 3.7 million refugees, including 1 million school-age children, has implemented a Turkish-language programme – along with new learning materials, subsidized transport, additional teacher training and other measures – to prepare refugee children for the transition from unofficial temporary schools to Turkish ones. Ecuador has passed legislation to make school enrolment much more accessible for Venezuelan refugee children and youth, even in cases where they do not have the required documentation.

These and many similar initiatives led to gains that were further supported by an ambitious partnership between UNHCR and Educate A Child, which implemented education programmes across a dozen countries that resulted in the enrolment of more than 250,000 children in primary school in 2018.

Yet this commitment to giving refugee children and youth the same access to the full range of educational opportunities – from pre-primary right up to higher, as well as technical and vocational education and training, and non-formal education that leads to recognized certification – is not universal. Uncertified parallel systems persist as a temporary response to refugee emergencies, even though they are usually of poor quality, are far less likely to follow a formal curriculum, and result in unrecognized certification. As a consequence, children who have worked with dedication and courage in temporary learning centres finish their studies with no official qualifications and little hope of progressing to a formal secondary education. As long as refugee children are shut out of national systems, the gap in enrolment will remain.

Even countries that have made robust efforts to have all children included in education systems can be hindered by shortfalls in resources or undermined by conflicting policies. For instance, over the past two years Greece has set up official kindergartens and increased the number of special reception classes in primary and secondary school to integrate refugee children into state-run schools on the mainland. On the islands, by contrast, where thousands of refugees reside in often overcrowded conditions in five reception centres, little progress has been made in enrolment. Asylum-seekers are expected to stay only temporarily in island facilities but the process of moving them to the mainland can take months, and in the meantime children are unable to access formal education. With the additional issue of the language barrier, some refugees miss out on several years of school.

Evidence suggests that building and broadening the capacity of national education systems benefits local communities and refugees alike. It not only strengthens existing education services for all children and youth but also promotes social cohesion and tolerance of people from different backgrounds. Between 2009 and 2018, for instance, the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas initiative in Pakistan invested more than US\$45 million in over 730 educational projects. Of the nearly 800,000 children who benefitted, 16 per cent were Afghan refugees while the rest were local Pakistanis.



©UNHCR/CLAIRE THOMAS

Morsal, 12, was a refugee in Pakistan and returned to her native Afghanistan in 2016. She is the only girl in her sixth-grade class. Over the years, all the other girls – along with many boys – have dropped out to help with household responsibilities, start working or get married.

Morsal managed to stay in school but has had to battle huge odds, from a lack of infrastructure to cultural pressures. “I love science and English,” she says as the wind blows dust around the 520 students gathered in the field where this makeshift school stands.

The difficulties facing Morsal and her fellow students – including 200 other girls – are representative of the many challenges plaguing the education system in Afghanistan. Children in a village north of Kabul hope a UN-funded school building will encourage parents to allow more of them to stay in education.

2.9 MILLION SCHOOL-AGE REFUGEE CHILDREN LIVE IN JUST FIVE COUNTRIES



SOURCE: UNHCR (2018)

An entire childhood in exile

In 2018, almost four in every five refugees were in protracted situations – up sharply on the previous year². As a result, children who have been forcibly displaced across borders are likely to remain there for much if not all of their childhoods. That means refugee children are very likely to go through an entire school cycle – from age 5 to 18 – in exile, while those who had begun school before being uprooted may well never return to the classrooms with which they were once so familiar. Given that nine refugee situations joined the “protracted” list last year, more and more children face missing out on school if their education is not prioritized.

Education is such a priority for refugees not least because children under 18 comprise about half of the global refugee population. And there are parts of the world where children far outnumber adults, especially in the low- and middle-income countries that host millions of refugees. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan

and Uganda, more than 60 per cent of refugees are under 18. Because 84 per cent of refugees live in developing countries – including 6.7 million in the least developed ones – it is clear that those regions are host to high concentrations of refugee children. Yet these are the very areas that struggle to provide enough schools for their own populations, let alone the sudden influx of tens of thousands of new arrivals.

The importance of pre-primary schooling should not be overlooked, either. Very few refugee children participate in pre-primary programmes even though the benefits are long-established, with plenty of evidence to show how much they help children to develop socially and emotionally as well as to make a better start in primary school. If every refugee child could spend their early years playing in a safe place, happy and cared for, they would reap benefits for a lifetime.

Obstacles at every step

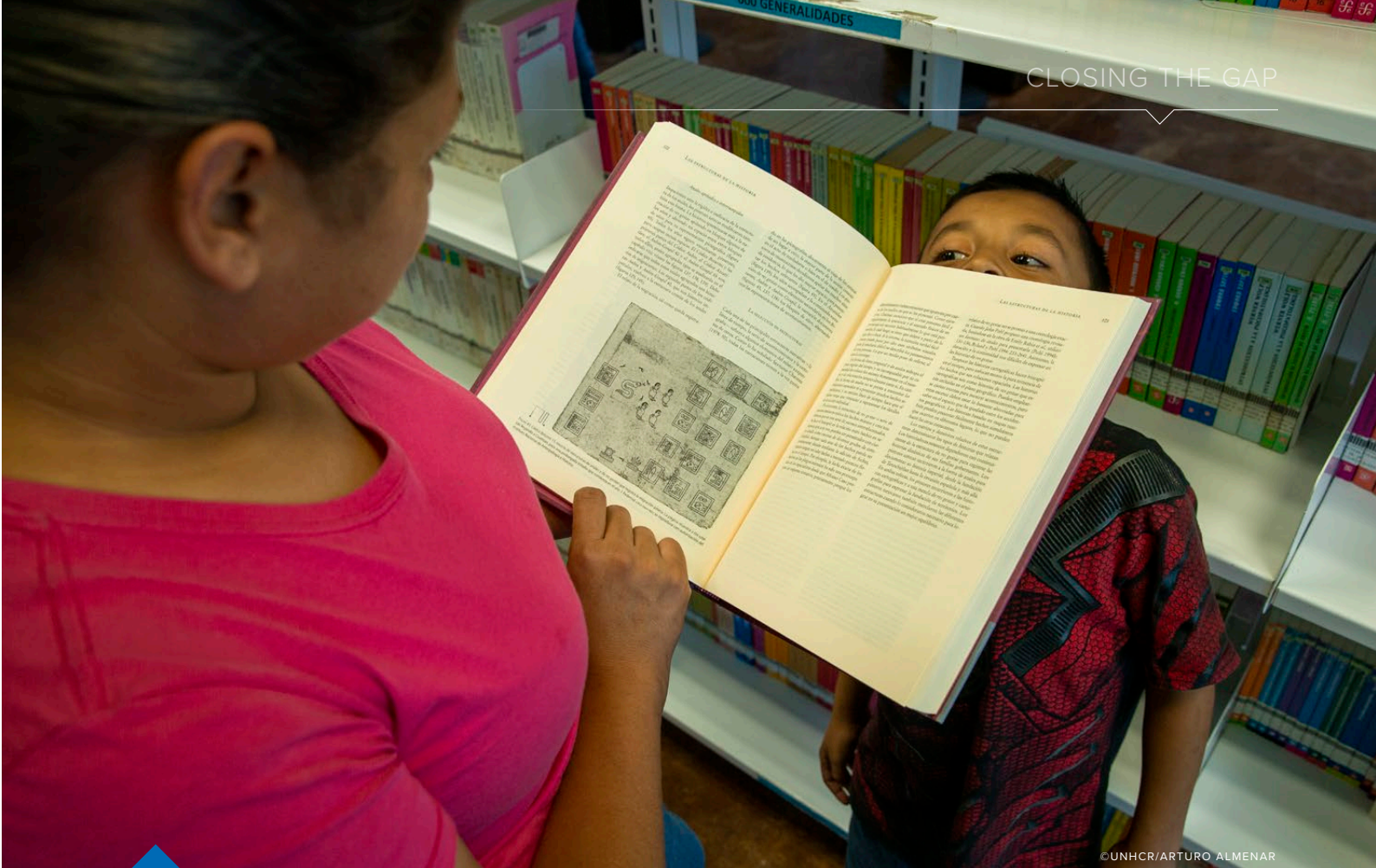
By its very nature, displacement disrupts children's education because of the difficulties and dangers they face in reaching safety, accessing vital basic resources, acquiring new identity documents and helping their families in often vulnerable situations. Compounding this are numerous other obstacles that stop refugee children from resuming school.

First, in the under-resourced regions in which millions of refugees are located, there may not even be a school to attend. Where one exists, it may already be stretched to breaking point – with overflowing classrooms, a lack of teachers, a shortage of basic facilities such as water, sanitation and hygiene, and insufficient teaching and learning materials.

The chaos attending forced displacement also means that many people flee home without the documents – birth certificates and other forms of identification, educational records and exam certificates – that grant them entrance to a local school in a new country. Even when they have those records, a school in another country will not always accept them. Despite Ecuadorian efforts to make school enrolment more accessible, a recent survey found that missing documentation was one

of the main reasons why refugee children were not in school in the first year (while the biggest barrier in the second year was lack of funds). And school enrolment is only half the battle. As primary-age refugee children get older, fewer and fewer manage to stay the course. In Mahama refugee camp in Rwanda, for example, only one in four of refugees who started primary school made it to the end.

There has certainly been progress at primary level, but the grim statistics at secondary and higher levels reveal how the barriers to the classroom get bigger and bigger – just as the pressures to quit school increase.



©UNHCR/ARTURO ALMENAR

Claudia* fled El Salvador following a barrage of death threats. She left her son Samuel*, 7, with her mother. Samuel missed more than a year of school as his grandmother tried to protect him from the gangs targeting the family. He was reunited with his mother in Saltillo, Mexico, after a harrowing journey.

In 2017, UNHCR estimated that in Mexico's southernmost states -- where most of the Central American refugees seeking safety from gangs wreaking havoc in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are concentrated -- only 18 percent of refugee children attend school. This is despite legislation that guarantees all children on Mexican soil have the right to enrol in state schools, regardless of their immigration status.

But in Saltillo, it is a different story. For refugees relocated here, UNHCR identifies suitable jobs for adults, assists in enrolling children in school and provides psychosocial support. Refugees also get legal help in acquiring naturalization, which normally happens within two years, and in obtaining their own home, which happens within three. Some 92 per cent of the refugees who moved here have been successful in finding a job. All children are enrolled in school.

*Names have been changed for protection reasons.

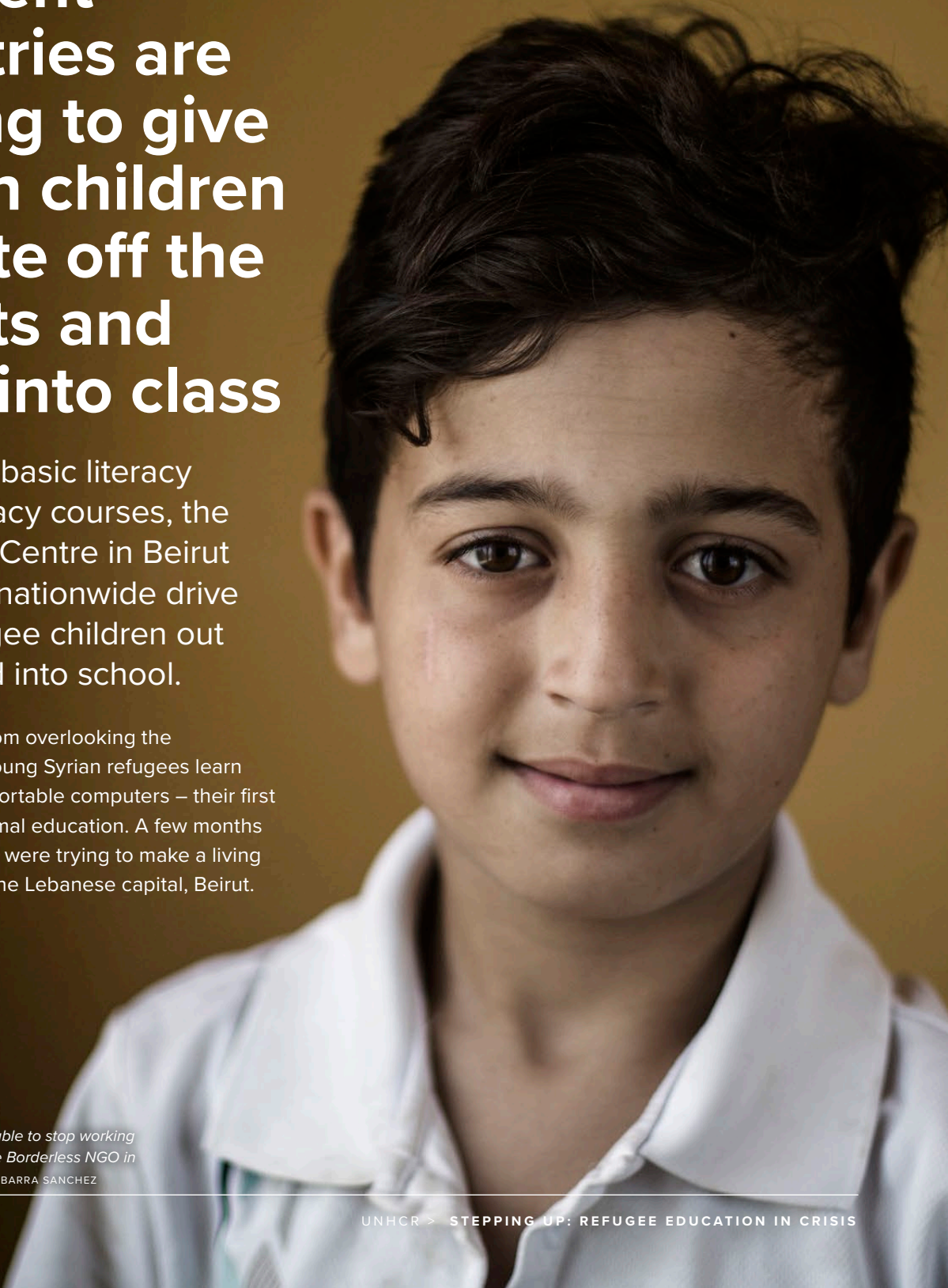
CASE STUDY: LEBANON

Friends from different countries are uniting to give Syrian children a route off the streets and back into class

By offering basic literacy and numeracy courses, the Borderless Centre in Beirut is part of a nationwide drive to get refugee children out of work and into school.

In a small classroom overlooking the Mediterranean, young Syrian refugees learn mathematics on portable computers – their first steps towards formal education. A few months ago, most of them were trying to make a living on the streets of the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

Fahed, 11, a Syrian refugee, is able to stop working and start learning thanks to the Borderless NGO in Lebanon, Beirut. ©UNHCR/DIEGO IBARRA SANCHEZ



One of the pupils, Fahed, was just 10 when he started working at a vegetable store to help his mother make ends meet. He put in 10-hour shifts for just US\$3 a day. Originally from Aleppo, he fled to Lebanon with his family in 2015 during the brutal battle for control of Syria's second city.

"My employer used to beat me," Fahed recalled. "If I couldn't carry something, he would beat me and tell me I should."

Earlier this year, however, Fahed enrolled at a learning centre run by the Borderless NGO in the Ouzai neighbourhood of Beirut, and has since stopped working. "It's very nice here. I learn, study and laugh with my friends," he said. Every day from 8am until noon he learns Arabic, English and mathematics.

"What we do is get them here, give them a basic education and try to catch up with their levels of education, and ultimately send them into the formal schools," explained Lina Attar Ajami, a co-founder of the Borderless Centre, herself originally from Damascus.

Lina set up the centre with a Lebanese friend, Randa Ajami. They share not only the same surname, but also many values. As mothers whose children are now grown up, they know the importance of education for youngsters.

"Education is a lifeline for all of us, but especially the young at the right time," said Lina.

Located in an underprivileged neighbourhood in the city's suburbs, the community centre runs basic literacy and numeracy classes for more than 150 Syrian children. The classes are a route into formal education, giving refugee children the basic learning they need to enter government-run catch-up programmes.

"Most of them [have not] been to school before because of their situation," explained Samah Hamseh, who teaches English here. "They come in order to have the chance to go to school. They want to get out of the conditions they are living in."

Lebanon hosts more than 935,000 registered Syrian refugees, the highest concentration of refugees in proportion to the national population, which is just over six million people. More than half of Syrian refugee children in the country do not attend formal education, even though the Lebanese authorities have organized special afternoon shifts in state-run schools for Syrian students.

Many children have also missed years of schooling and struggle to meet the minimum educational levels required to enrol.

To address this, the Lebanese Ministry of Education has published a framework for non-formal education that is designed to give children who have been out of the classroom for at least two years – or never been at all – a chance to enter public schools.

This is achieved through accelerated education programmes, aimed at helping children who are out of school to catch up with the curriculum. A minimum level of learning is required to attend accelerated education programmes, which is where community centre programmes offering basic literacy and numeracy classes, such as the Borderless centre in Beirut, have a role to play.

Over the past two years, more than 90 children from the centre have gone on to enrol in public schools.

Even where children are unable to enrol because of a lack of places or funding, the programme still provides important benefits, said Vanan Mandjikian, Assistant Education Officer for UNHCR's Mount Lebanon field office.

"This programme is essential for the future ... because basic literacy is something very important for every child," she said.



See video
youtu.be/drITCzqTiro



CASE STUDY: GREECE

Majority of refugee children on Greek Islands are out of school

Greek islands are struggling to provide schooling for thousands of asylum-seeking children.

More than three quarters of the 4,656 school-aged children on the Greek islands who are asylum seekers and live in reception centres do not attend school.

It is a situation UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, wants to improve.

“Every child should have real access to formal education as early as possible. More should be done if they are to avoid falling behind,” said Philippe Leclerc, UNHCR Representative in Greece.

Around 1,800 asylum seekers live in the reception centre on the Greek island of Kos in the southeastern Aegean Sea, and conditions there are difficult, in part because it was set up for a temporary stay and for just 800 people.



Samir, 11, is a refugee from Afghanistan in the Pyli Reception and Identification Centre on the island of Kos, Greece. He takes Greek lessons at the KEDU non-formal education centre. ©UNHCR/SOCRATES BALTAGIANNIS

Many of the refugees say they are angry about the poor conditions and overcrowding at the centre, which does not even have enough toilets. Accommodation includes makeshift shelters held together with sticks, while some recent arrivals said they did not have mattresses. Several people said overcrowding and lack of facilities meant the centre was not safe. For the children this is a particularly stressful situation.

“The camp is awful,” said Samir, 11, who is concerned about growing frustration among people at the reception centre.

Like most other refugee children, Samir and his friends want to get back into school as soon as possible and make up lost time before the gap becomes too large to bridge.

However, Samir, who arrived on Kos from the Afghan capital Kabul, knows he is one of the lucky ones.

Even though his overall education was disrupted because of the security situation in Afghanistan and he again missed school during his journey overland to Turkey and on to Greece by boat, he is back at school.

He has started to learn Greek by gaining access to KEDU, a non-formal school on Kos that is run by a Greek NGO, the Association for the Social Support of Youth, and supported by UNHCR.

Asylum-seekers are expected to stay only temporarily in island facilities and those who complete procedures or are particularly vulnerable are authorized to move to the mainland. But in reality the process can take many months. Priority is given to competing humanitarian needs. The low population of local children on tiny islands means that often the schools are too small to cope with this sudden new demand.

Around 112 children attend KEDU daily. There are no exams or homework, but the school uses

projects and fun to introduce young asylum seekers to Greek. As an informal school, there are no certificates to show the progress.

According to UNHCR, a certified school that is based on the national curriculum should be accessible for all refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece.

School routine helps restore normality after the trauma many young refugees have endured and starting quickly helps them return to a form of normality. Beyond that, young refugees - just like any other child - need school to achieve their potential.

But unfortunately it is not that easy.

The language barrier makes integration hard. The Greek government provides some afternoon classes to help asylum seekers cope with the transition to a new system and local non-governmental organizations have stepped in with support for homework.

UNHCR says more is needed. The government has tried to include all asylum-seeker and refugee children in formal education, but the islands face particular challenges. Even those asylum-seekers on the Greek islands who are eligible for the move to the mainland are often unable to leave because there is not enough accommodation ready for them, while new arrivals outpace the rate of transfers, exacerbating the overcrowding issue.

“Most refugee children on the Greek mainland are enrolled in formal education as the school year begins. Greece has made important progress in granting access to kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools. Now the Government must expand and consolidate its efforts, with the continued support and funds from the EU, so that all refugee children can enter a classroom,” Leclerc said.

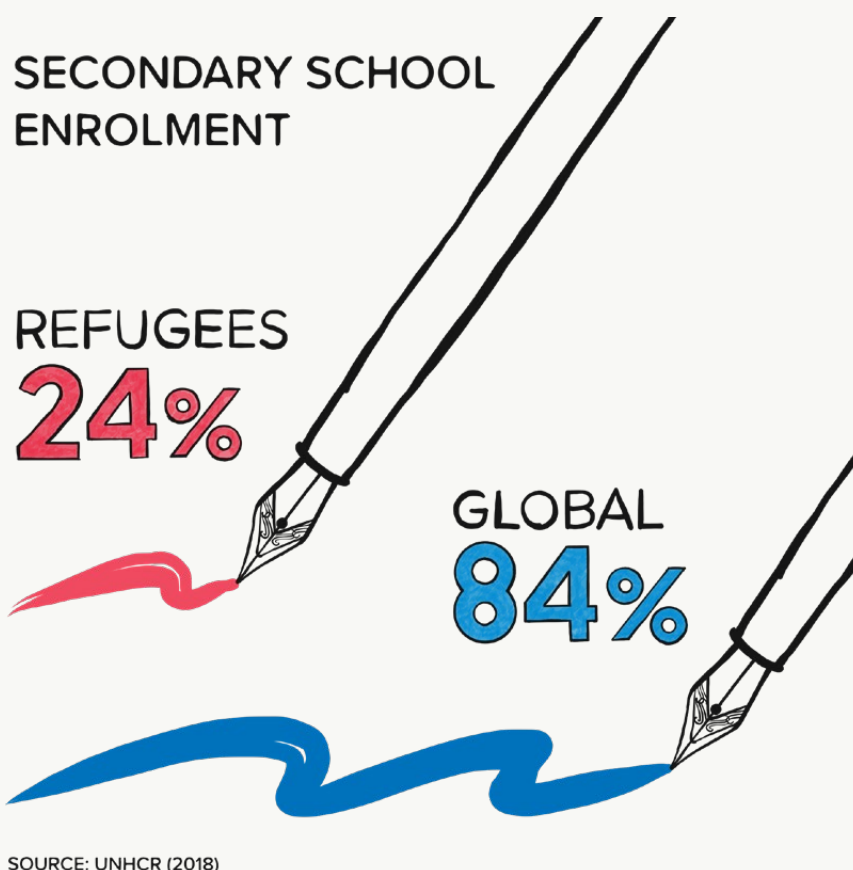


CHAPTER 2:
SECONDARY EDUCATION
**LOST
FUTURES**

Somali girls share a joke during class at Ifo secondary school in Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya, home to more than 200,000 refugees. Since 2016, a total of 572 students have accessed higher education, representing just 13 per cent of eligible post-secondary students. ©UNHCR/VANIA TURNER

As each year passes, the likelihood of a refugee child progressing to the next academic grade drops sharply. That continual fall in enrolment is true of primary school, but the effect is especially marked in the transition to secondary. While close to two-thirds of refugee children are enrolled in primary education, less than one-quarter of refugee adolescents make it to secondary. Put this next to the global average of 84 per cent, and it is immediately clear that refugee adolescents are at a huge disadvantage as they strive to take the next step on their educational journey.

Given that secondary school is the gateway to further education and improved employment opportunities, this deals a crushing blow to a young refugee's dreams of a brighter future. Progress in this area has been painfully slow: secondary enrolment for refugees rose by just one percentage point in 2018, to 24 per cent. Yet this rise, modest though it may seem, does still represent tens of thousands of new places in the classroom for refugees. Every single effort by host governments, donors, UNHCR and partners can transform a child's life.



Competing demands, tougher choices

A big part of the problem is the sheer lack of secondary schools in many refugee-hosting areas, making the transition from primary a practical impossibility. Where schools do exist, getting into them can already be a challenge for local youth in developing regions, so the addition of hundreds or thousands of new arrivals only intensifies competition for classroom space.

The shortfall in physical infrastructure is evident in Kakuma refugee camp, in northern Kenya, which has one of the sharpest drops in enrolment from primary to secondary – a phenomenon that affects children from the host community as well as refugees. There are only seven secondary schools in the region, compared to 26 primaries. Even those who pass primary examinations with flying colours can find they have reached the end

of their school careers. The worst case is in Bangladesh, where less than one per cent of refugee youth in the two formal Rohingya refugee camps set up in the early 1990s have access to a formal lower secondary education. The rest – including the majority of those who fled their homes since August 2017 – must make do with a limited access to informal education without any form of accreditation.

There are many reasons for the shortage but at the heart of the problem is the simple fact that secondary education costs more than primary. Subject learning at secondary level is more advanced, with some subjects requiring significantly better facilities and learning materials. In addition, secondary studies demand better qualified teachers. The right teacher equipped



Dalal Assah, 18, a Syrian refugee, graduated top of her class from her secondary school in Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan. Dalal dreams of studying English at university.

© UNHCR/MOHAMMAD HAWARI



Karox Pishwan (right), now 18, arrived in Serbia from Irbil, northern Iraq, as an unaccompanied child. He is doing his homework with the help of tutors at the Jovan Jovanovic Zmaj home for children in Belgrade. ©UNHCR/DANIEL ETTERI

with the right tools can make a child positive and enthusiastic about the school day; conversely, poor teaching and supervision can be highly demotivating, which, when added to myriad other pressures at this age, leads to high dropout rates.

These financial demands have an impact not just on education ministries and local authorities, who must find the necessary funding, but on refugee families as well. As they grow up, refugee adolescents come under greater pressure to support their households. In this regard, girls are often at an even greater disadvantage in terms of “opportunity costs” – perceived losses in terms of income and domestic duties. Collecting water or fuel, taking care of younger siblings or older relatives, and carrying out household chores are all tasks that fall heavily on girls. Such domestic contributions are often seen as more valuable than any investment in their education. As they reach adolescence, girls can face added pressures to give up educational ambitions so that they can marry early or start earning an income instead. If a refugee family has limited resources and must choose which siblings can continue with their education, boys are often prioritized because they are seen as having the greater earning potential.

Some of the costs are slightly more disguised but no less real. For instance, longer distances to and from the school gates make reaching school more expensive and, in areas of instability, potentially more dangerous. And in some regions, refugees have limitations placed on their freedom of movement, preventing them from going to schools that are far from their homes.

All these pressures are magnified if the educational “pathway” is unclear. For many refugees, becoming a teenager is also the moment where the educational journey comes to an end. If there is no hope of continuing one’s studies much beyond primary, families are more likely to question the usefulness of sending their children to secondary school.

Secondary education plays a crucial role in the protection of young refugees when they are at a particularly vulnerable age. If they have nothing to occupy their day and no clear employment prospects, adolescents are more vulnerable to exploitation and more likely to turn to illegal activities out of desperation.

Give girls a chance

For girls, the risks of being excluded from school can be particularly grave – but the rewards of an education can be huge.

Education reduces girls' vulnerability to exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and child marriage. According to UNESCO, if all girls completed primary school, child marriage would fall by 14 per cent. If they all finished secondary school, it would plummet by 64 per cent. Other UNESCO research shows that one additional year of school can increase a girl's earnings by up to a fifth – bringing benefits for the girls themselves, their future families and their

communities. Just as importantly, the further girls progress with their schooling, the more they develop leadership skills, entrepreneurship and self-reliance – personal qualities that will help their communities flourish as they strive to adapt to their host countries or as they rebuild their own homes.

A refugee girl's time in exile should, therefore, be considered an excellent opportunity. So it is a travesty that, globally, at secondary level there are only about seven refugee girls for every 10 refugee boys enrolled. According to a World Bank report, limited educational opportunities for girls



Young Afghan refugee students attend a photography course at the Technical and Vocational Training Organization (TVTO) in Mashhad, Iran. ©UNHCR/ANDREW MCCONNELL



© UNHCR/ NESTOR HEINDAYE

“I remember, during my first and last year of high school, I had a great biology teacher. She was very dedicated and made me love science”, says Nassima Hissein Abdelalaziz, 29, from Central African Republic. But war interrupted Nassima’s life and almost put an end to her dreams of becoming a doctor.

In December 2013, she and her mother had to flee to Chad when she was in her fifth year of medical school. Thanks to the support of UNHCR and encouragement from her mother, Nassima was able to resume her studies at the medical faculty of the University of N’Djamena. She is currently in her 7th year and is busy preparing her final doctoral dissertation.

“Now that I am at university, I actually have 10 female professors, which is about one quarter of all professors. It is so inspiring,” she said.

and barriers to completing 12 years of education are costing countries between US\$15 trillion and US\$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings³.

A vital ingredient in improving these statistics is increasing the numbers of female teachers. For girls, a lack of female teachers can spell the end of their secondary education as parents in some conservative communities will not allow their daughters to be taught by a man. Female teachers also help girls to feel more comfortable in the classroom, especially should they need to report incidents of sexual harassment or abuse. Most

important of all, a female role model can inspire and support girls to complete their studies – and even motivate them to become teachers themselves.

But the gender gap is not only present among students: the number of female teachers in schools teaching refugees decreases between pre-primary and secondary education. For example, in Chad 98 per cent of teachers in pre-primary are female, but at secondary school this figure drops drastically to only 7 per cent.

3 [World Bank: Not Educating Girls Costs Countries Trillions](#)

Closing the gap

With secondary education in such a depleted state, including refugee children in national education systems must be central to all efforts to improve the picture.

By developing inclusive systems in which refugees and their non-refugee peers learn side by side, education ministries and their supporters are building durable, long-term resources. These could serve generations of students, whether during refugee emergencies, protracted situations or after refugees have returned home, settled elsewhere or integrated into their host countries.



Kedro Sahane Yusuf (left), 17, Fartun Sahane (centre), 18, and Ikra Mohammed Abdul (right), 19, Somali refugees, in class at Dicac Secondary School in Bokolmanyo, Ethiopia.

©UNHCR/GEORGINA GOODWIN

Increasing secondary school provision has a significant “multiplier effect” as it potentially benefits millions of local children as well as refugees. In north-eastern Mozambique, for example, the government’s decision to build Maratane school, next to the camp of the same name, will mean that both the local community and refugees will have access to secondary education for the first time. Demand is expected to soar when the school is finally equipped and up and running, with spaces allocated for up to 500 refugees.

In order to include refugees in their plans for secondary education, national education ministries need the requisite resources – material, technical and financial. That means reliable, multi-year funding to ensure education systems are equipped to handle both local and refugee children.

As of January 2019, UNHCR offices in more than 20 African countries were collaborating with national education authorities, other UN agencies and civil society organizations to support refugee inclusion in education sector planning, such as by advising on providing education in emergency refugee situations. To make real and long-lasting progress, every country that hosts refugees should follow this lead.

But funding is also required to support refugee families who would otherwise rely on financial support from their teenagers, and thus to enable them to take full advantage of secondary school opportunities that come their way. The cost of tuition, exam fees, uniforms, learning materials and transport can all act as deterrents, so reducing or eliminating these costs removes those barriers. Cash transfers not only give families the ability to prioritize what they need (and benefit the local economy to boot), they also reduce the likelihood of their turning to child labour and forced marriage as ways of finding an income. They have improved access, attendance and participation in schools in a range of countries, including Kenya, Turkey, Chad and Egypt. In the latter case, a project implemented by Catholic Relief Services that is tied to proof of enrolment and attendance – but with no restrictions on how the money is spent – has helped improve refugee children’s school attendance, particularly at secondary level.



To support such projects and policies and close the yawning gap in opportunity, UNHCR is in the process of setting up a new initiative dedicated to improving secondary education prospects for refugee children and youth. Named the Secondary Youth Education Programme, it is aimed at increasing school enrolment and at boosting retention and completion of secondary education. It has been successfully piloted on a small scale since 2017 in Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Pakistan and will significantly expand in the coming years. UNHCR is working with education ministries to identify the main factors that have been shown to support the successful transition from primary to secondary school, particularly for

girls. These include placing advisors within education ministries, increasing the number of female teachers, building and refurbishing infrastructure, and providing cash directly to households, allowing them to cover the cost of sending their children to school.

Children have the right to a full education cycle. With inclusion at the heart of national policymaking, proper planning, reliable funding and engagement with both refugee and host communities, the stubborn barriers to secondary school can finally be broken down – opening new routes to higher education.

Prince-Bonheur, 22, and his cousin Gothier, 23, grew up together in Mougoumba, Central African Republic, but conflict separated them in 2013. Prince crossed the Ubangui River and made it to Boyabo refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while Gothier jumped onto the nearest boat and floated down towards Betou in the Republic of Congo.

Like most children their age who flee conflict, a lack of secondary schools, teachers and education materials in the camp meant neither of them would be able to continue their studies.

“Losing five years of schooling has taken me so many steps back,” said Gothier. “But that’s the only way I can restart my life. Education is the key.”

He was finally able to return home in 2018, when UNHCR assisted the government with the voluntary return of nearly 4,500 Central Africans in the Congo to the Lobaye region. He enrolled in secondary school and is now doing his best to catch up on everything he missed.

Prince, however, hasn’t been able to return to Mougoumba and remains a refugee in DRC. “Ever since I left home five years ago, I haven’t been to school. I stay idle, without studying.”

As more Central Africans return from exile, the country will need money to build and expand schools, train more teachers and supply additional learning materials.





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CASE STUDY: BANGLADESH
Young Rohingya refugees strive to keep dreams of an education alive

Most Rohingya children have no access to education at all, but are prepared to overcome almost any obstacle for even the smallest opportunity to learn.

They don't have desks or chairs. But in a bamboo-built room decorated with posters and paintings, 30 female Rohingya teenagers aged 15 and older are sitting on the ground, bent forward and writing intently into their workbooks, as a mathematics formula is posted on a blackboard.

These are some of the lucky ones. Few girls are able to continue their studies once they reach adolescence. In addition, there are only a small number of temporary learning centres in the sprawling refugee settlements in south-eastern Bangladesh that provide any learning opportunities at all for children over 15.

Some 55 per cent of refugees in the Rohingya settlements are under 18. All are barred from following the Bangladesh national curriculum.

Shehana, 16, a Rohingya refugee, is one of the girls studying at the Diamond Adolescent Club. She longs to be admitted back into formal education. ©UNHCR/IFFATH YEASMIN

Shehana, a bright but shy 16-year-old, knows she is better off than many, but still longs to be admitted back into formal education. She is one of the girls studying in the bamboo hut, known as the Diamond Adolescent Club, set up by UNHCR's partner CODEC nearly two years ago.

"Back in Myanmar, I was in grade 6. I wanted to be a teacher and to be able to go to college. I love teaching. And I'm happy to be here," she said.

"We learn new things almost every day. I think I'm lucky, but I try to tell others why education is important and to convince them to let girls study – how it can help with better opportunities in the future. Some of our relatives have listened to me and they now send their daughters to school."

Shehana comes from a family where education has always been highly prized. Her brother, Mohammed Sharif, 17, studies at the same adolescent club with other boys in the afternoon, while one of her older sisters, 21-year-old Jannat Ara, teaches children aged four to five at a home-based learning centre, bringing along her own five-year-old daughter.

It soon becomes clear where this passion for education comes from. Shehana's father, Nur Alam, 43, was a former senior teacher at a school of around 450 pupils in Maungdaw, in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

When the family fled the violence in Myanmar two years ago and arrived at Kutupalong refugee site, Nur Alam volunteered to teach youngsters at a mosque set up in the settlement. He picks up his phone and shows me a photo of his former students – a group of boys and girls – at his old school.

"I feel like crying when I see this," he said. "I miss my students very much. Many of my old students who completed grade 6 are in the camp here. Many have positions as volunteers working with organizations in the camp... when they see me,

they greet me. They tell me that because they listened and learned, it helped them get these opportunities and they are better off now."

Temporary learning centres in the refugee settlements, which cater for youngsters aged 6-14, operate three shifts a day and give their students only a few hours of learning Burmese, English, maths and life skills. But they are a far cry from proper schools.

There are plans to introduce Bangladesh government-approved informal learning programmes across all refugee sites from August, with the aim of giving refugees a standard of learning comparable to what other children would achieve through a formal curriculum.

But there is still no system of recognized qualifications for refugees. Nor is there any age-appropriate education for students older than 14, even though many children of this age had their schooling curtailed when they fled Myanmar.

Shortages of qualified teachers are another problem, despite efforts by UNHCR, sister agencies and partners to boost teacher training.

The net result of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya children in Bangladesh being barred from following the national curriculum is that the Sustainable Development Goal 4, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" is not being reached.

"The education system in the settlements is not really focused on proper education, but more on keeping children busy and safe," said Nur Alam.



See video
youtu.be/ksoH-o6N4Ic



**CASE STUDY:
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
OF THE CONGO**

Top of his class and hungry for more, a young refugee battles the odds

On the run from South Sudan's civil war, a boy named Gift is determined to continue his education. But his ingenuity, brilliance and determination may not be enough to keep him in school.

Gift, 10, has been top of his class for the past three years. That may not be enough to keep him in school.

"When I grow up, I would like to become a teacher. I would like this job because I like to help those who have less knowledge," he said of the ambition that has driven him forward against the odds.

Those odds were considerable. Gift fled the war that was ravaging his homeland, South Sudan, a conflict that had claimed the life of his father. Determined to succeed, he learned French from scratch and even designed his own light from spare parts of a broken solar lamp so he could study at night.



Gift, 10, a South Sudanese refugee, is top of his class in Uboko primary school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But lack of places in secondary schools mean he may not be able to continue his education. ©UNHCR/JOHN WESSELS

Despite all his hard work, a huge cloud hangs over Gift's future. The talented teenager is in his last year of primary school in the eastern stretches of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where secondary school places are few and far between.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, helps refugee children such as Gift go to school by providing cash grants that help families to pay fees, and to purchase schoolbooks, supplies and uniforms. But both funds and opportunities are limited, particularly at secondary school level, which means Gift and thousands of other South Sudanese child refugees may have to call a premature halt to their studies.

Gift and his uncle – who became his legal guardian after his father was killed and he lost touch with his mother – sought safety in Biringi settlement, in the DRC, in 2016.

The boy well remembers his first day in Uboko primary school, where 800 local Congolese and refugee children study together after the school was rehabilitated by UNHCR. He was excited and thankful for a new opportunity to learn again.

“The war makes a lot of people suffer – I had to quit school because of the war. When I found out I was going back to school, it made me happy,” he recalled with a smile.

Mastering French, the main language of instruction in the DRC, was achieved by attending language courses provided by UNHCR – with Gift even winning a province-wide spelling contest.

Then he had a practical problem: no electricity meant he had no light by which to study at home at night. His solution? To design his own solar-powered lamp. “I had to build this,” he said, holding out a flimsy light made of three bulbs and a solar battery held together by tape.

As South Sudanese children continue to seek refuge in Congolese territory, the education gap is only increasing. Only 4,400 out of 12,500 South Sudanese children in the DRC have access even to primary education. Until recently, they had no secondary opportunities whatsoever.

In 2019, UNHCR started a small programme to enrol refugees in secondary school. It also helps to construct and refurbish school buildings.

Even so, of the more than 6,000 South Sudanese secondary-age refugees, a staggering 92 per cent still do not go to school.

Gift knows the odds are stacked against him. And he fears he will be regarded as worthless in the eyes of both his host community and his fellow refugees if he cannot get an education. It is vital to both his hopes of becoming a teacher, he says, and of becoming a voice for others in his position.

Yet he simply cannot imagine life without education. “It would be horrible if I couldn't go to secondary school,” he said. “There should be a way for everyone to study.”

Ann Encontre, UNHCR's Regional Representative in the DRC, said there are “extraordinary talents” among the young refugees she has met. “When you talk to them, you see how eager they are to learn.”

Secondary school gives refugee adolescents a sense of purpose, a vision of the person they can become, and the knowledge that will one day help them rebuild their homes, she adds.

“The alternative to school is waiting around with no clear options for the future. This is why we are doing all we can to keep them in school.”



See video
youtu.be/C2Hi3gooDMg



CHAPTER 3: TERTIARY EDUCATION OUT OF REACH

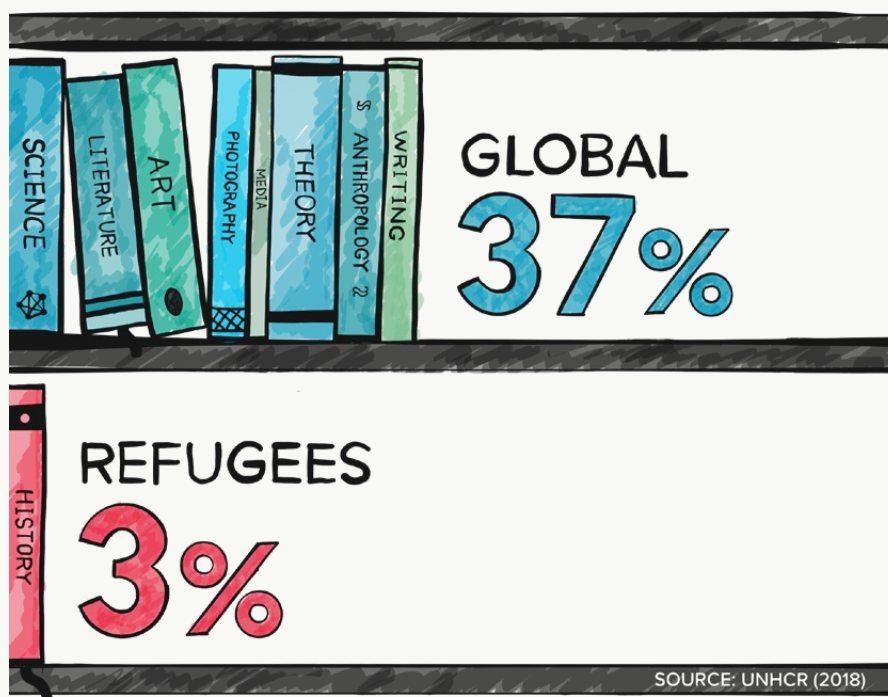


Weam (left), 19, and Diala (right), 18, Syrian refugees, arrived in Lebanon in 2015. Weam is completing her first year in computer science at Lebanese University and Diala is a first-year biology student, both thanks to a DAFI scholarship. ©UNHCR/ANTOINE TARDY

It should be cause for celebration: in 2018 there was a sharp increase in the number of refugees going on to higher education. In reality, the rise in enrolment from 1 to 3 per cent, while certainly a move in the right direction, pales in comparison to the global figure of 37 per cent. The gap in secondary education opportunities for refugees compared to non-refugees is so wide that the knock-on effect on higher education continues to be dramatic.

Over the past three years, the data has pointed to an apparently intractable problem: only 1 in 100 refugees of the relevant age was enrolled in some form of post-secondary education, a figure that seemed impossible to budge – until now. The small but significant shift to 3 per cent enrolment in 2018 means that there are now a total of 87,833 higher education refugee students. With secondary education provision largely static, this improvement is largely attributable to a greater acceptance on the part of states, higher education institutions and their partner organizations of the importance of higher education in nurturing leaders among the refugee population.

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLMENT





© UNHCR/GORDON WELTERS

Just a year after he arrived in Berlin, Germany, in 2015, Ehab Badwi, 26, a Syrian refugee, set up the Syrian Youth Assembly, an online network that gives would-be students access to higher education. Three years later, around 40,000 young Syrians belong to the network's Facebook group and 12,000 people have completed online courses.

“We are trying to build peace in Syria in a non-political way. We speak about how education and development can be key to that,” he says.

Connected higher education, where digital programmes are combined with teaching and mentoring, continues to extend opportunities for those who cannot access a university. And data collection on refugee enrolment is improving as the issue rises up the agenda.

All this has led to increased investment in, and greater numbers of, scholarships, grants and innovative connected learning programmes. As such opportunities expand, education providers are also fostering a more welcoming environment for refugee students.

Even so, 3 per cent compares poorly to the global statistic for the world's youth. And it is still a long way off UNHCR's target of seeing 15 per cent of the eligible refugee population in higher education by 2030⁴.

Yet among those who have managed to navigate the many daunting obstacles and have completed their secondary education, demand for degrees, connected education and vocational programmes remains high. For example, the DAFI programme⁵, funded by the German government and other partners, is able to award scholarships to only 1 in 5 applicants. Without question, the appetite for higher education among refugees is strong and remains largely unmet.

For refugee girls and women, the prospect of attaining higher education is even slimmer.

Forty-one per cent of refugees who enrol in DAFI scholarship programmes are female – by contrast, according to UNESCO data there were more female than male graduates from higher education in three-quarters of the world's countries. Some progress can be seen for Syrian refugee students, where enrolment stands at 52 per cent for girls – but much more needs to be done to help them battle the social and cultural conventions that prevent them from reaching their potential.

4 [UNHCR: Tertiary Education](#)

5 [UNHCR: DAFI Programme](#)

Obstacles at every step

Certificates, languages and cost comprise some of the biggest barriers to higher education for those who make it through secondary school. During flight, many refugees lose or damage the documents that prove their qualifications or prior learning, while the countries where they seek refuge may not formally recognize certificates issued by their homeland. Secondly, the academic demands of higher education call for advanced language skills. It can take months or even years



Iqra Ali Gaal, 25, a Somali refugee, attends English classes as part of the language instruction for newcomers to Canada programme at College Boreal in Hamilton, Canada. ©UNHCR/CHRIS YOUNG

to master a new language to this level. Thirdly, the high cost of tertiary education can deter or exclude many students – especially if, as is the case in some countries, refugees are required to pay the higher international student rates. When weighing such costs against competing (and often more pressing) obligations to work, it is easy to see why such a small number of refugees make it to higher education.

Yet access to higher education is life-changing. It opens new horizons and creates opportunities that seemed to have disappeared in the chaos of displacement. It is a powerful agent for sustainable development when linked to the right to work, offering as it does a route to socio-economic inclusion in host countries and a reduced dependency on humanitarian aid – in short, turning refugees from financial and social dependents into self-reliant contributors to society.

As of 2018, however, around 50 per cent of refugee-hosting countries did not allow refugees to work⁶, a self-defeating policy which means that refugees who have overcome all odds to access and complete higher education find themselves back in a state of limbo, unable to use their skills and fulfil their potential.

To break down this wall, the DAFI programme is expanding to a scheme called DAFI+, which aims to engage national authorities, business and labour organizations in helping refugees overcome this barrier. DAFI+ is piloting in Pakistan with the support of the German Corporation for International Cooperation, GIZ, and in 2018 placed dozens of refugee graduates into work and internships. The ambition is to inspire similar projects all over the world.

6 [UNHCR: Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion 2019-2023](#)



Farzana, 21, an Afghan refugee, was granted a DAFI scholarship in 2016 that enabled her to complete her bachelor's degree in pharmaceutical studies in Islamabad, Pakistan. She graduated in 2018 with excellent grades, finishing second in her final exams. Thanks to DAFI+, Farzana is now able to put her skills in practice in an on-the-job training as a clinical pharmacist at Islamabad Medicure Hospital. ©UNHCR/ASIF SHAHZAD

Closing the gap

To bring the 2030 higher education target within reach, first and foremost refugees must have far greater access to a quality secondary education. After that, as a minimum those who complete secondary school must be allowed to apply for, and enrol in, higher education under the same conditions as nationals.

Furthermore, refugees need additional support to meet the daunting cost of education. Universities and other institutions that offer scholarships, bursaries and support services for students from marginalized backgrounds should extend them to refugees. Scholarships for refugees in their host country and abroad should consider the full cost

of tuition and living – including the potential economic impact on the student's family when they are studying full time and unavailable to work.

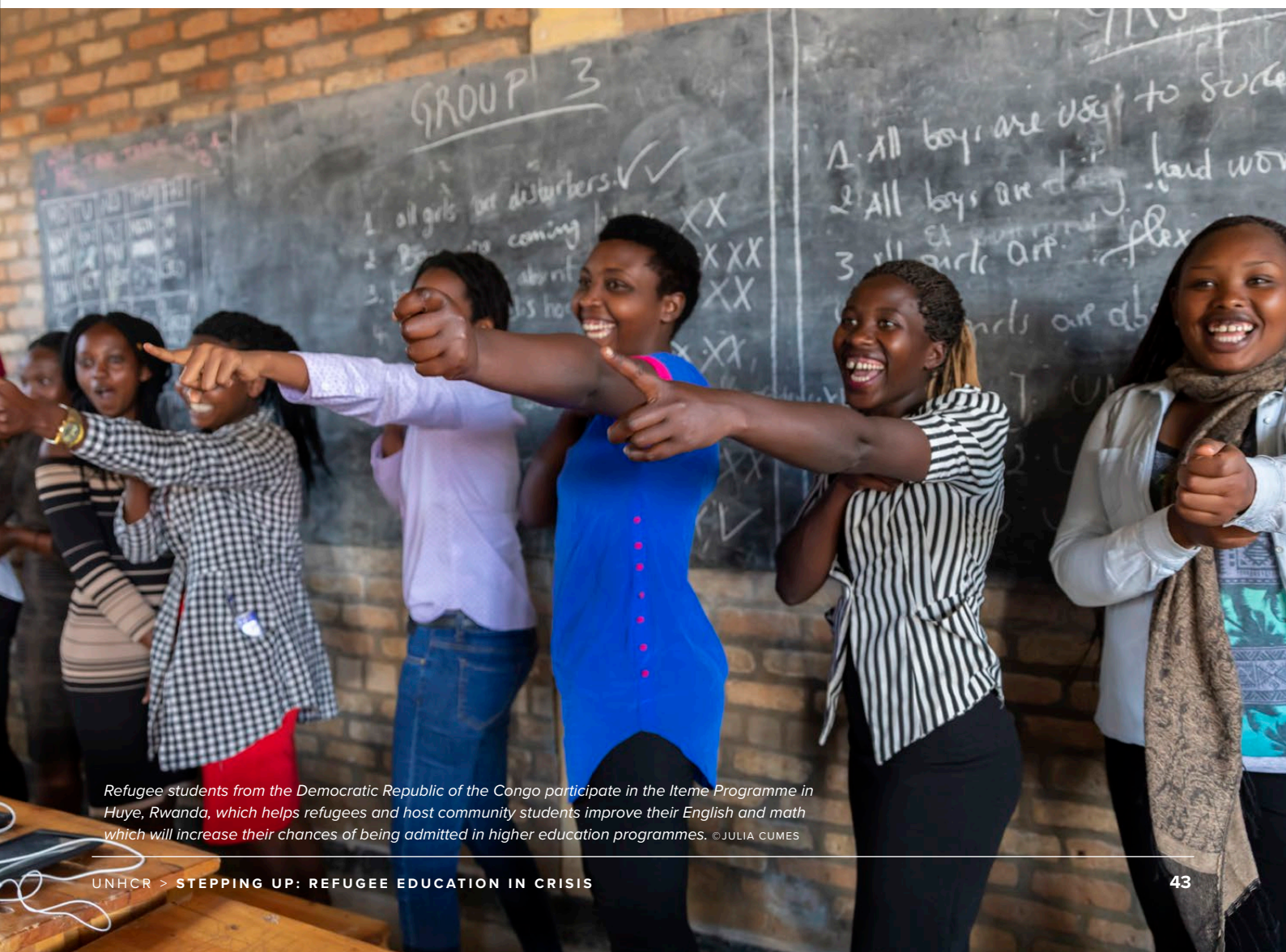
The private sector has a role to play, too, by becoming key investors in higher education for refugees. In 2018, only 10 per cent of the DAFI budget was funded by the private sector⁷. The private sector could go further by helping refugee graduates find suitable employment opportunities – offering them internships, mentoring programmes, career guidance and, where possible, jobs.

The social and economic barriers that hold girls back at every stage are also a reality at the level of higher education, and demand extra efforts if they are to be overcome. In Rwanda, for example, the Iteme (“Bridge” in Kinyarwanda) programme helps secondary school girls make the transition to further education by giving them extra training in English, mathematics, and information and computer studies to improve their chances of conquering the admissions process, while also assisting them when they apply to tertiary education opportunities in Rwanda. Iteme served around 140 students in 2018, 40 of whom were Rwandans from vulnerable backgrounds. By the

end of the year, 40 per cent of the student cohort had successfully enrolled in further education.

Higher education is not a luxury – it is an essential investment for today and for the future.

It gives young refugees the perspectives, maturity and experiences they need to become peace builders, policy makers, teachers and role models. It gives women the platform to participate in society on an equal footing with men. And it forms the people who contribute to their host communities, act as the voice of their fellow refugees and, one day, rebuild their home countries.



Refugee students from the Democratic Republic of the Congo participate in the Iteme Programme in Huye, Rwanda, which helps refugees and host community students improve their English and math which will increase their chances of being admitted in higher education programmes. ©JULIA CUMES



CASE STUDY: KENYA

Technology connects Somali refugee with university in Canada

Despite being thousands of kilometres away, a group of refugees in Kenya’s Dadaab refugee camp are studying at Canada’s York University. From seven master’s students, the programme is now expanding to 60 learners.

Abdikadir Bare Abikar, 29, is on the verge of completing his Master’s of Education from York University in Canada.

That fact may be not particularly remarkable. What is remarkable is that he is doing it 12,000 kilometers away from Toronto. Since 2013, Abdikadir has been studying online from Dadaab’s remote Ifo refugee camp in Kenya. He is one of only seven refugee students enrolled in a master’s degree in a camp of more than 200,000 people.

Abdikadir Bare Abikar, 29, a Somali refugee, is pursuing a master’s degree in education from Canada’s York University. He is studying online from Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, where he lives with his wife and three daughters. ©UNHCR/ANTHONY KARUMBA

Every day, Abdikadir walks for almost two hours on the sandy, rocky roads of Dadaab to the computer lab, where he connects to the online learning platform that allows him to speak to his classmates and professors.

“Education changes a person. It has transformed me,” says Abdikadir, who is now a teaching assistant for the new cohort of students at the camp. He has recently co-authored an article in the *Forced Migration Review*, a journal edited by the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University, and is busy writing a chapter for a book to explain how Dadaab has benefited from technology.

His professors at York University could not be more proud. Don Diplo, Professor of Education at York, explains: “The refugees that have been trained are now in a position to replace the faculty that taught them years ago.” He adds with a smile: “I long for the day when Abdikadir will be my professor and I will be his teaching assistant.”

Abdikadir knows he is defying the odds. Globally, only 3 percent of refugees are able to access university. The road that has taken him there has been a harrowing one.

By the age of 10, he was an orphan. His father passed away from illness and his mother was killed by members of a militia in Somalia. Fearing for their safety, Abdikadir’s older brother Adam, who was only 15 at the time, fled with him to Kenya. They found refuge in Dadaab. That was 20 years ago.

As soon as he arrived at the camp, Abdikadir enrolled in primary school. With his brother’s help, he excelled in his studies. But even for those who make it all the way through secondary school - an achievement in itself - accessing higher education from somewhere as remote as Dadaab isn’t easy.

Technology provided a solution. Studying online, Abdikadir obtained a teaching diploma from Kenya’s Kenyatta University, one of 23 universities that are part of the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium,

co-chaired by UNHCR. Today more than 12,000 students worldwide are on courses supported by the Consortium.

Abdikadir didn’t stop there. Determined to keep going with his education, he applied for a Bachelor of Arts programme at York University, another member of the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium, and was accepted. He is now also doing his master’s there.

Abdikadir stresses that studying online does not leave him disconnected from the university campus experience. He follows most of his courses face-to-face with his professors and constantly interacts with his fellow York students. “We learn from each other and exchange ideas on the learning platforms. The PhD students also kindly help proofread my assignments,” he explains.

He has even been elected as one of the representatives of York’s Graduate Students Association. “I am the information technology coordinator. All the way from Dadaab, I help improve the social media protocols of York University.”

Abdikadir has high hopes for his future and that of his three daughters, aged three and a half, four and five. “As soon as they reach four years old, I will take them to school.

He wants to use his education to make a difference. “One day, I will be a changemaker and go back to my homeland, Somalia. I want to apply new ideas and help bring education to communities outside cities,” he says.

“Without education, a person’s eyes are always closed.”



See video
youtu.be/75oLr-YxMrA



CASE STUDY: COLOMBIA

Daniela's dreams of becoming a doctor on hold as she struggles to provide for family

While many Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia have enrolled in school, without the right papers, they cannot be issued diplomas and may not sit the national college entrance exam, putting their future at risk

All her life Daniela Puente dreamed of becoming a doctor. Four years into medical school, it was almost within her grasp. Then came Venezuela's crisis. Her life was thrown into turmoil and like 4.2 million of her compatriots she had to leave. Uncertainty now clouds her future.

Her dreams began to fade the penultimate year of medical school in Merida, Daniel's hometown in western Venezuela.

Suddenly the university cafeteria stopped serving its usual copious breakfast of eggs, arepas, pancakes, and fruit. Instead, students got a glass of warm milk.

It was a symbol of the crisis that had turned her university into a shadow of its former self, deserted by faculty and students alike, and reduced her middle-class family to penury. Meals were becoming so scarce her younger brother was wasting away. Daniela knew she had no choice but to flee.

Daniela Puente, 22, fled Venezuela in 2018, when she was just a few courses away from graduating from medical school. She currently works as a waitress in Bogotá, Colombia, hoping to make enough money to one day go back to university. ©UNHCR/HELENE CAUX



“My family is the most precious thing in my life, so I knew I had to walk away from all my dreams to make sure they survived,” said Daniela, now 22.

That also meant dropping out of medical school even though she had worked so hard to get there, juggling a demanding class load with a part-time job as a waitress. If she managed to get to Colombia, she reasoned, perhaps she could register at a Colombian university to finish the few classes she still needed to get her degree.

In February 2018, Daniela slipped across the border, using nearly all her savings to buy a one-way bus ticket to the Colombian capital, Bogotá. She arrived with just 10,000 Colombian pesos, about US\$3, to her name.

Her plans hit problems immediately. Public universities required a student visa and notarized copies of her high-school diploma and her medical school transcripts – official documents that are all but impossible to obtain in Venezuela. The private universities were more flexible on documentation but the fees put them out of reach.

Daniela’s problems are faced by many of the four million Venezuelans estimated to have left their country amid the ongoing crisis, which has taken a heavy toll on economic stability, public security and basic healthcare.

A recent UNHCR report, based on interviews with nearly 8,000 Venezuelans, revealed that less than half of the children were attending school. The report cited the reasons as being “lack of documentation to enroll, limited space in (host country) public schools and lack of financial resources to cover the fees.”

In Colombia, which hosts the highest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, the authorities have made some progress towards removing these barriers. Some primary and secondary schools are enrolling Venezuelan children regardless of their documents or legal status. The Bogotá region recently reported an increase of more than 600 per cent in the number of

Venezuelans enrolled in its public primary and secondary schools – from around 3,800 in August 2018 to 23,000 the following May.

But this decision does not solve everything. Without the right papers, students cannot be issued diplomas and may not sit the national college entrance exam, for example.

That’s the issue facing Andrea González, 17, who fled Venezuela in late 2017 with her family in the first term of her final year of high school. After settling in Cúcuta, a Colombian city near the border and a major point of entry for Venezuelans seeking safety, Andrea and her mother started lobbying the director of the nearby public school to allow her to attend classes. Like Daniela, she lacked proper documents.

Eventually the director relented, although she was then placed in the ninth grade, two years behind where she should have been.

Undaunted, Andrea said she saw this not as a demotion but as “a chance to learn more and hone my skills”. Now in tenth grade, she’s top of her class and has set her eyes on university.

But unless the law changes in time, Andrea’s legal status in Colombia will prevent her from sitting the entrance exam that is a prerequisite to get into any Colombian university. She is staying optimistic, saying: “I think things will change by the time I get there and that I’ll be given a chance to make the most out of my life by going to college.”

Daniela is similarly hopeful. At present, she is a waitress in a Bogotá restaurant, earning slightly more than the monthly minimum wage of around US\$250 – the lion’s share of which she sends home to her family.

“There are so many of us young people who have been forced to abandon our dreams,” she says.

“But I know that one day, I’m going to finally become a doctor. I don’t know how, and I don’t know when. But I know it’s going to happen.”

CALL TO ACTION

Refugee enrolment in school will not improve without a combined and coordinated effort at all levels of society – governments, businesses, schools and universities, charities, and members of the public.

GOVERNMENTS

- Allow refugees to enrol in schools under the same conditions as nationals
- Include refugees in national education systems; ensure they follow national curricula
- Give refugees access to school without documentation or certification
- Design policies and allocate budgets for refugee education in national plans
- Ensure refugees can sit for national exams and earn recognized qualifications
- Ensure refugee girls have equal access to education
- Ensure host communities also benefit from education funding

SCHOOLS

- Ensure refugee children feel welcome
- Provide language courses for refugees who do not speak the language of instruction
- Offer catch-up programmes to refugees who have been out of school for months or years
- Establish a dialogue with the families of refugee children and engage them in school life
- Give teachers the relevant training to integrate and educate refugee children
- Educate other children about the lives and experiences of refugees and the forcibly displaced

UNIVERSITIES

- Offer scholarships and other awards to refugee students
- Create and develop connected learning programmes
- Support and partner with universities in the top refugee-hosting countries
- Encourage student groups to welcome and support refugee students

BUSINESS

- Offer internships, apprenticeships, training and job opportunities to refugees
- Partner with UNHCR to invest in refugee education initiatives
- Offer technological expertise to boost education projects
- Fund and provide in-kind resources

DONORS

- Embed education funding in core planning for all refugee operations
- Fund education programmes that follow formal national curricula rather than parallel courses of study
- Ensure reliable multi-year funding
- Support teacher training, including refugee teachers
- Invest in school infrastructure and supplies

PUBLIC

- Support the work of UNHCR and its partners through donations
- Lobby governments to support the inclusion of refugees in national systems
- Help refugees learn new languages and skills
- Volunteer with NGOs that support refugees

A young student at school in Paraguachon, Colombia, that welcomes Venezuelan refugee and host community children.

©UNHCR/VINCENT TREMEAU



FINAL WORD

by Gordon Brown,
UN Special Envoy for Global Education

Gordon Brown, the former British prime minister and UN special envoy for global education, visits a public school in Beirut, Lebanon, that runs a double-shift system for Syrian refugees. ©THEIRWORLD



For Shehana and her family, education is in the blood.

Before the violence against the Rohingya drove them from their home, Shehana's father taught at a school in Myanmar's Rakhine state. One of her older sisters now teaches pre-primary children in the vast Kutupalong refugee settlement, in the far south of Bangladesh. Shehana, now 16 years old, dreams of continuing this family tradition.

But without a proper school, without formal examinations or any hope of gaining recognized qualifications, her chances look bleak. Shehana and a few other teenagers do their determined best in one of Kutupalong's informal learning centres, but the full-time education they enjoyed at home is now only a memory.

And although Shehana is constantly exhorting friends and relatives to ensure their children are studying, for more than 90 per cent of Rohingya refugee children her age the idea of going to any sort of school, even with some of the learning centres getting through three cohorts of students a day, is little more than a fantasy.

The global refugee population now exceeds 25 million. More than half are under 18. Hundreds of thousands of young refugees are growing up without the prospect of an education – today, of the 7.1 million refugee children of school age, over 50 per cent are denied a place in school.

Yet education's critical role is not in dispute. We already know it protects, stimulates, nurtures, develops and strengthens the lives of children, adolescents and youth. We already know what is needed to increase access to it worldwide. Not to do everything in our power to give these children an education would be a reprehensible dereliction of duty.

In the world's wealthiest countries, it is taken for granted that almost every single child will have access to primary and secondary school. The passionate debates we have about the nature and quality of our schools only underline the importance we attach to education.

Imagine the outcry, then, if the rate of primary school-age children enrolled in school in one of those high-income countries was not 91 per cent, the global level, but less than two-thirds. Or that the rate for secondary school-age children was not 84 per cent, as it is worldwide – or more than 98 per cent, as it is in the wealthiest nations – but was instead 24 per cent.

Yet this is the predicament of the world's refugee population. Denied a full education, with access particularly poor at secondary level, refugees have no hope of attaining university or learning high-level vocational skills and knowledge.

It is shocking, but hardly surprising, that the enrolment rates among refugees for higher education, are so poor – just 3 per cent for refugee youth, compared to 37 per cent globally and more than three-quarters in high-income countries. And that deprives entire countries, many wracked by years of conflict, of generations of leaders, planners, thinkers and doers.

This is not a problem in far-off lands that rich countries can ignore. It is on our doorsteps, with refugee children – many of them unaccompanied or separated from their families – penned in behind fences in detention centres run by governments that in their next breath would claim to honour their international commitments and abide by humanitarian values and principles.

Almost 70 years ago, the international community signed up to the 1951 Refugee Convention as a response to the post-war European refugee crisis. The compassion shown to Europe's refugees then is barely afforded them now. Those who risk their lives attempting the journey to Europe today face indifference at best, open hostility at worst. At the same time, countries who do look after refugees have been left to shoulder the burden by their supposed European partners.

Yet no one watching and reading the stories in UNHCR's annual education report could honestly doubt the desire of these youngsters to see their studies through a full educational cycle. We must not be satisfied with merely helping them to survive the ordeal of displacement; we must give them the tools to thrive, to be independent, self-sufficient and fulfilled individuals.

The time has come for decisive, game-changing measures to end this neglect. That is why I am supporting UNHCR's new initiative, the Secondary Youth Education Programme, as an effort to rally the international community to this cause. If we are to give millions of children, refugees and non-refugees alike, the chance of an education and the opportunity to unlock their potential, innovative financing projects such as this programme, combining the know-how and firepower of the public and private sectors, will play a decisive role.

Breaking down the barriers to secondary school will benefit not just refugees but millions of other children who live side by side with them in low and middle-income countries. Building schools, training teachers, developing innovative ways to help children catch up on missed lessons – these are projects made to last, endeavours that leave legacies of which we could be proud.

The world has another decade to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 4 – the commitment to an inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. But if we do not ensure that all refugee children have access to school, that goal will never be reached.

Shehana and her classmates have no formal curriculum to follow, no desks to write at and no chairs to sit on. But their burning curiosity and appetite for learning remain undimmed. They have been neglected for too long. We owe it to them to sweep away the barriers to education and support them as they forge their own futures.

unhcr.org/steppingup



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