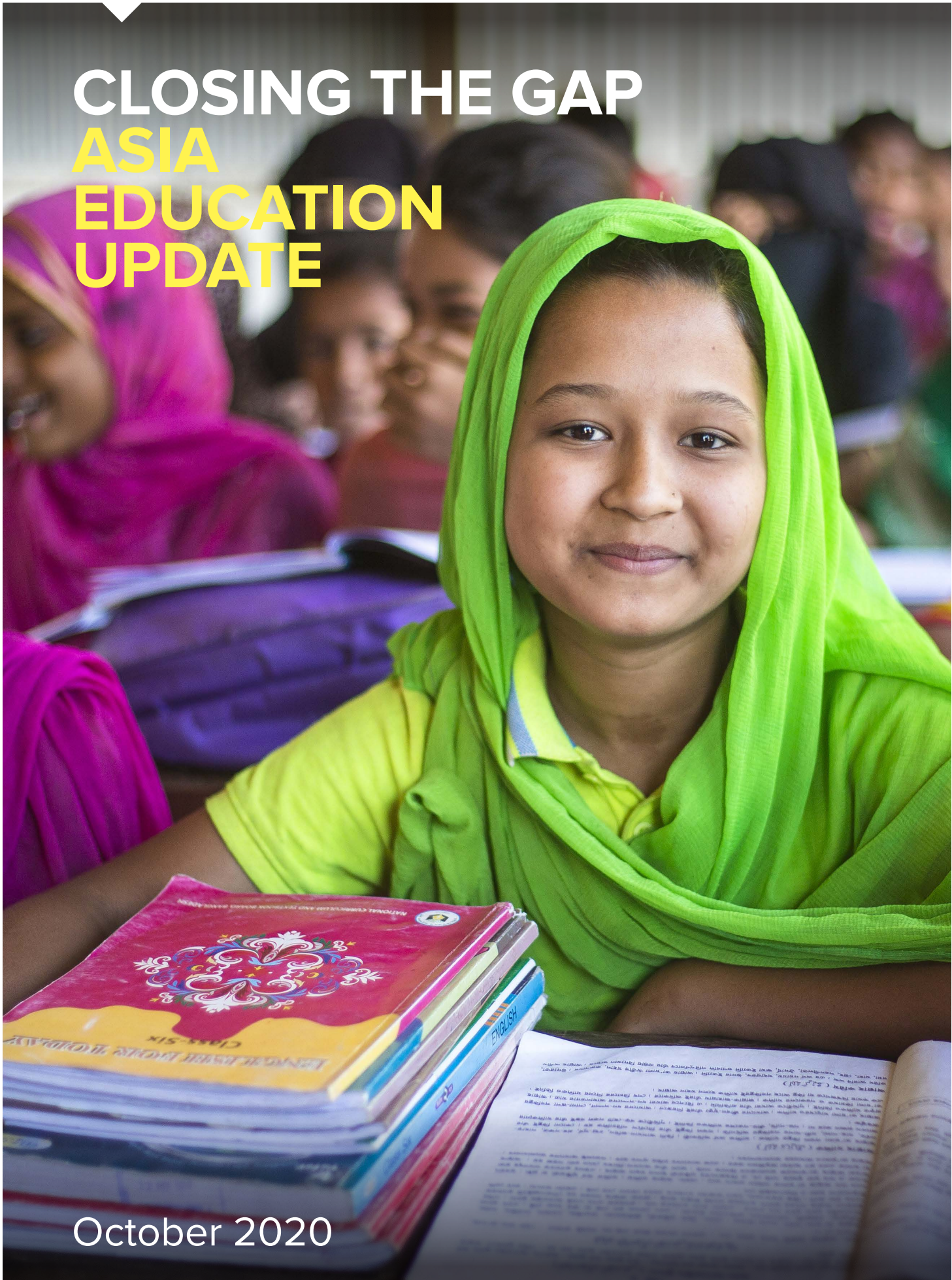


# CLOSING THE GAP

## ASIA

## EDUCATION

## UPDATE



October 2020

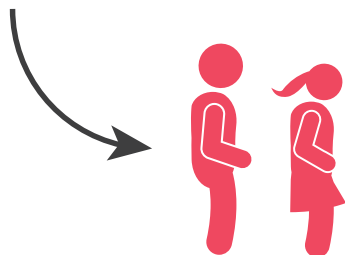
# Education for Refugee Children

Of the **4.3 million** refugees and asylum-seekers in Asia and the Pacific, an estimated **810,000<sup>1</sup>** are at primary school age. This report focuses on **13 countries** in Asia where education data is available. The finding is that only **32%<sup>2</sup>** of them have access to formal primary education.

The right to education is one of the most fundamental human rights supported by a number of international conventions including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. All countries in Asia and the Pacific are striving to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 which includes components related to equal access to education. UNHCR, through its recent refugee strategy “Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion”, recognizes the importance of enhancing equitable access to education for refugees and other persons of concern, and is committed to boosting enrolment and retention of refugee students through its programmes by working in close coordination with host governments and partners.

UNHCR’s Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP) prepared this update to highlight the challenges faced by refugees and other persons of concern in Asia in terms of equity, inclusion and access to education, and to demonstrate how UNHCR is working to improve the situation together with refugees themselves, States, partners, and other stakeholders.

**Two thirds** of refugee children in Asia do not attend formal primary education



<sup>1</sup> Primary school attendance age varies from country to country. Estimations have been made where data is not available.

<sup>2</sup> This is the percentage of refugee/asylum-seeker children attending formal primary education in the region based on 2019 data.

# Challenges

The challenges to accessing education for the majority of the world's children are well known. These challenges are exacerbated when those children are refugees or stateless. In the Asia-Pacific region, there are several layers of obstacles preventing refugee children from accessing primary education, depending on the socio-economic situation of the host country. The following examples further underline these challenges.

## HOST COUNTRY CAPACITY

Many refugee-hosting countries in the region are in challenging economic and social situations, making it hard to extend sufficient support to refugee/asylum-seeker children. For instance, Pakistan, which is the largest refugee-hosting country in South-West Asia, accommodating some 1.4 million refugees, has a net primary education enrolment rate only of 68% as of 2018. Under such circumstances, the public school system itself has several challenges including school space and the number of teachers as well as their qualification levels. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, since 2016, all Afghan children of school age can attend primary and secondary school education for free, regardless of their documentation status. While this policy is much welcomed, it puts extra pressure on educational space in the country.

Many host communities also lack the capacity to support the inclusion of refugee children, through, for example, catch up, remedial, or accelerated education programmes. Some States also do not have resources to establish a support system such as extra local language classes or supplementary classes for children whose education was interrupted, or may not even have a policy in place to facilitate the inclusion of refugee children into the education system.



*Without a school building, the children in Qarabagh, Afghanistan, have studied outdoors for years. ©UNHCR/Claire Thomas*

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

Refugee children face financial challenges which prevent them from accessing education. For those who are unable to access public schools due to policy or language issues, it is a burden on the household to pay for costly private schools. Even in the case of those allowed to attend public schools, many refugee families, with limited means of earning a living in the country of asylum, will struggle to afford related expenses such as uniforms, school supplies, and transportation. The need for financial support in this respect is reported in several countries including India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Many children also face issues like child labour and early marriage, reported in several countries, both of which contribute to reduced enrolment rates. Households are often faced with the dilemma of enrolling their children in school but losing the extra income their children can earn through informal labour.

## DIFFICULT LIVING CONDITIONS

Across the region, there are over 1.6 million refugees or other persons of concern to UNHCR living in camps or camp-like situations, and delivering education in these locations remains challenging. The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh host more than 850,000 refugees. The Government of Bangladesh provided land and is supporting the refugees with various services, but due to the population density, living conditions in the camps remains fragile. School structures are often very basic, with minimum furniture and insufficient school supplies, and classes are provided in an informal and limited manner.



*Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. Challenging conditions include lack of infrastructure, inadequate sanitation and the threat of flooding and landslides. Half of the camp population are children under the age of 18 years. ©UNHCR/Vincent Tremeau*

# Mapping Formal Primary Education Enrolment

## METHODOLOGY

Statistics on refugee enrolment have been drawn from statistical reports from Governments, UNHCR or partner organizations while refugee population numbers have been collected through Government or UNHCR's population databases and registration systems in 13 countries where education data is available. The total refugee population of the selected countries is 3.7 million, more than 83% of the total refugee population in the Asia and the Pacific region.

This report uses Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) for primary education, meaning that all children enrolled are included, regardless of whether they are in the right class for their age.

The enrolment rate is based on the number of children enrolled in formal education programmes at primary level. The report used UNESCO's definition of formal education as provided [here](#).

Calculating how many children are in or out of schools requires age-specific enrolment data. In order to calculate the GER at regional level, assumptions were made by extrapolating using age-sex breakdown of similar refugee communities. Since refugee education data is limited to those 13 countries hosting 83% of refugees and asylum-seekers in Asia and the Pacific, the conclusions inferred at regional level are representative of that population. The report, however still helps to provide information and challenges on refugee education in the Asia and the Pacific region.

## DATA AVAILABILITY & CHALLENGES

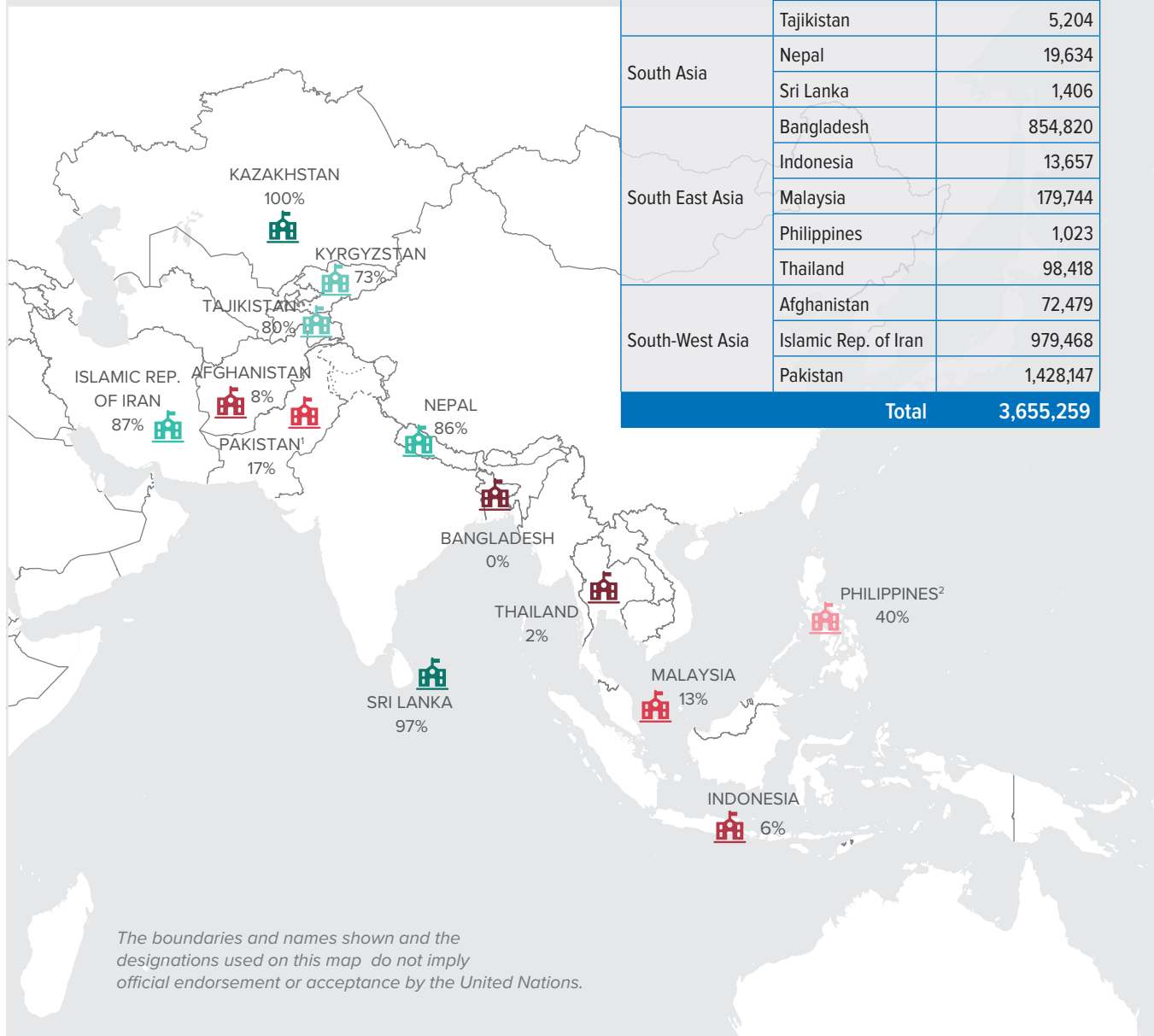
The nature of refugee education data has changed in recent years with an increasing shift towards inclusion of refugees into national systems. Data collected on refugee children in national education information management systems is often not disaggregated by refugee status and difficult to keep track of. At the same time, most common national surveys or censuses that include education-related questions do not include specific information on refugee status. As a result, refugee children are often absent or not fully represented in the statistical picture when looking at common national education data sources.

UNHCR collects information on education from different sources, which include the formal registration process, administrative data and household surveys. Such activities require adequate financial resources as well. In line with the global thinking and with its Data Transformation Strategy 2020-25, UNHCR is continuously strengthening efforts to generate and use refugee education-related data.

**Percentage of primary school-aged refugee & asylum-seeker children enrolled in formal primary education by country**

**Legend**

100%  0%



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

**Number of registered refugees in 13 countries covered by the report**

Sub-region	Country	# of refugees & asylum-seekers in the country
Central Asia	Kazakhstan	742
	Kyrgyzstan	517
	Tajikistan	5,204
South Asia	Nepal	19,634
	Sri Lanka	1,406
South East Asia	Bangladesh	854,820
	Indonesia	13,657
	Malaysia	179,744
	Philippines	1,023
South-West Asia	Thailand	98,418
	Afghanistan	72,479
	Islamic Rep. of Iran	979,468
	Pakistan	1,428,147
<b>Total</b>		<b>3,655,259</b>

<sup>1</sup>This is the percentage of children accessing UNHCR supported refugee village schools and does not include those accessing schools outside of refugee villages.

<sup>2</sup>This % is based on the number of refugee children known to UNHCR to be enrolled in formal primary schools while the actual figure could be higher



Islamic Republic of Iran. Afghan refugee sisters in Isfahan go to school for the first time. ©UNHCR/Mohammad Hossein Dehghanian

## Making a Difference

Improving equitable access and inclusion in education for refugees and asylum-seekers requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including host governments, local communities, educational institutions, the international community, partners, donors, and most importantly the refugees themselves. In order to overcome the obstacles that prevent children from accessing education, UNHCR has adopted several approaches in the region, a number of which are outlined in this section.

## CAPACITY BUILDING OF HOST COUNTRIES

UNHCR works closely with the host country and the refugee-hosting communities to support the development of their educational capacities and infrastructure so that they can include refugee and asylum-seeker children. For example, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 12 schools were constructed in 2019 benefitting over 8,000 refugees and Iranian children and 11 more are being built in 2020. This is also an important component in terms of bolstering social cohesion. Similarly, in Pakistan, as part of the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) programme, UNHCR has been implementing education-related infrastructure projects such as the improvement and construction of additional school facilities. In 2019, over 6,000 people benefitted from the programme. In Bangladesh which hosts the largest number of refugees in South East Asia, UNHCR supported 87 educational institutions in the host community through construction or rehabilitation of school facilities and donation of school buses and furniture in 2018 and 2019 which benefitted over 63,000 children. In Nepal, 12 classrooms were built to enable Bhutanese refugees to attend municipal school alongside Nepali children last year. This form of support helps to include refugee children into the local school system.

Support to returnees is also important. In Afghanistan, as the number of Afghans returning to their areas of origin increases and host communities require assistance, as part of the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) programme, several projects for the construction or rehabilitation of school facilities have been implemented. Last year, 21 projects were completed benefitting over 56,000 people and more are planned for this year.



Malaysia. Girls enjoy studying at a learning centre run by UNHCR in collaboration with partners and refugee communities © UNHCR/Mimi Zarina Azmin



## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In several countries across the region, UNHCR provides financial support to refugee and displaced families who have difficulty affording school fees or related expenses such as school supplies and transportation. Cash-based programming is implemented in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand among others.

UNHCR also facilitates scholarships for higher education. DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarships gave an opportunity for education to 1,172 refugees and others of concern in 2019 in several countries in Asia-Pacific such as Afghanistan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. In 2020, over 900 students in Asia-Pacific are expected to benefit from the programme. In Malaysia, UNHCR works with the initiative called Opening Universities for Refugees (OUR) which links students with higher education opportunities in Malaysia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Australia, and Hong Kong SAR. Initially based in Malaysia, this initiative has now been incorporated into the Centre for Asia Pacific Research Studies within the University of Auckland. In Myanmar, the Australian Catholic University runs a higher education programme on the Thai-Myanmar border while Institute for International Education (IIE) has a scholarship programme for higher education.

UNHCR continues to explore financial support and partnership opportunities for refugee children who would not be able to access education otherwise.

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN CAMPS AND SETTLEMENTS

UNHCR works to establish and strengthen educational facilities in refugee camps and settlements across the region in order to increase enrolment. In refugee villages in Pakistan, for example, over 56,000 children are provided with primary education in school facilities supported by UNHCR. In the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, some 5,500 educational facilities were established by the end of 2019 of which 1,700 were established by UNHCR. A much-needed teacher training exercise is also on going.

The activities of UNHCR go hand-in-hand with those of other actors to overcome the challenges of providing access to education in refugee camps. In Bangladesh, all the education activities are coordinated by the Education Sector, co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children, and involving 44 partners. UNHCR co-chairs with the Government the Strategic Advisory Group of the Education Sector. Through these collective efforts, informal education has been provided to 300,000 Rohingya children aged 4 to 14 years in the camps in Cox's Bazar. At the same time, WFP has been running a school feeding programme covering all the learning centres in the camps, encouraging school attendance. Meanwhile, in an important development in 2020, the Government of Bangladesh approved a pilot project for 10,000 refugee students in middle school (grades 6-9) to be taught based on the national curriculum of Myanmar, their country of origin. This is the first time that the Myanmar curriculum would be available in the camps and it is an important first step towards offering access to quality education for the children in the camps. UNHCR, UNICEF and Save the Children together with various other national and international actors are working to support the successful roll-out of this pilot project.

## ADVOCACY

UNHCR continues to be a strong advocate for enhancing refugees' access to education from a policy level.

In December 2019, the first Global Refugee Forum took place, where States and other actors came together to share good practices and pledge financial support, technical expertise and policy changes to help reach the goals of the Global Compact on Refugees. Some of the major outcomes for the Asia-Pacific region include eight pledges, such as: Afghanistan, Australia, and Indonesia expanding access to education for refugees and returnees; Japan, Malaysia and New Zealand facilitating refugee access to higher education; and Thailand working on the recognition of educational certificates and documents for displaced children from Myanmar.

UNHCR continues to support education and youth empowerment initiatives in South-West Asia through dedicated projects implemented within the framework of the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). Prioritized interventions going forward will focus on enhancing access to (and quality of) the national education systems in the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

UNHCR is also part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Working Group for Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth which seeks to understand and address some of the barriers to accessing education in the region.



*Young girls write their daily class work during their lesson at the Community Girls School in Kotchandana refugee village in Punjab province of Pakistan. ©UNHCR/Sara Farid*

Advocacy also takes place at country level. Several UNHCR operations lead or take part in education-related working groups and advocate for improved access to quality education, together with UN agencies and other stakeholders. Advocacy to improve access to education for refugee children at policy level is actively taking place in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, and Pakistan.

UNHCR is strengthening partnerships with key donors and multilateral institutions to systematically include refugees in their programming, such as Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the World Bank.

## SUPPLEMENTARY SUPPORT

UNHCR provides supplementary support to the refugees who are not able to attend formal schools or who need additional support to be integrated into the mainstream educational system. For instance, in Malaysia, UNHCR supports 132 learning centres that make up the informal education system providing access to education to 13,881 children of concern. In Thailand, UNHCR, through its partner, provides Thai language programmes for urban refugee and asylum-seeker children to equip them with the language skills needed to access public schools. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNHCR provides literacy classes to Afghan and Iraqi children to improve their access to primary education. Similar language and other remedial programmes are provided in other countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan.



Islamic Republic of Iran. A refugee student is holding his new backpack distributed by UNHCR. © UNHCR/Iman Behjatian

# Way Forward

Improving refugee children's access to education requires sustainable interventions from all stakeholders. UNHCR calls for the continuous support from the host countries and partners while encouraging other stakeholders to join the collective efforts.

COVID-19 outbreak is also severely affecting the learning environment of refugee children with prolonged school closures. The socio-economic impact on vulnerable families has also been severe and could lead to school dropouts where children need to work to support the family. In several operations in the region, UNHCR together with other stakeholders has been supporting children during school closures, such as through the provision of necessary equipment and connectivity for distance learning.

UNHCR continues to work closely with the refugee hosting communities and partners while also advocating for further support from other parties.



## UNHCR is grateful for the support of:

Australia | Canada | China | Denmark | European Union | France | Germany | Ireland | Italy | Japan | Luxembourg | Netherlands | Norway | Qatar | Republic of Korea | Saudi Arabia | Spain | Sweden | Switzerland | United Kingdom | United States of America | CERF

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Agility Logistics | Athmar Holdings | Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation | Education Above All Foundation | Education Cannot Wait | Fast Retailing Co. Ltd. | Fondation EDF | Global Charity Association for Development | Irthi-NAMA | J.S. Foundation | Jolie-Pitt Foundation | Lam Kin Chung Morning Sun Charity | Mabarrat Ghanaem Al Khair | Private Donors Lebanon | Private Donors Singapore | Private Donors Thailand | Private Donors Philippines | Qatar Airways | Qatar Charity | Relief Singapore | RUSSING Group | Shih Wing Ching Foundation | Stephen Riady Foundation | Thani Bin Abdullah Bin Thani Al Thani Humanitarian Fund | UPS Corporate | Unilever (UK) | Zakat House

### Resources

- UNHCR's Education Policy and Programmes: <https://www.unhcr.org/education.html>
- UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030 – A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>
- UNHCR's Coming Together for Refugee Education: <https://www.unhcr.org/5f4f9a2b4>
- Stepping Up- Refugee Education in Crisis Report: <https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup/>
- DAFI Scholarship: <https://www.unhcr.org/dafi-scholarships.html>
- Refugee Education Strategy-Pakistan: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/73890>
- Global Trends: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

*Cover photograph:*

*Bangladesh. Rebuilding girls' lives through education*

*"I come to school to increase my knowledge so that I can get a job and help educate orphan girls."*

*Sumaiya Akter, 12, is a Rohingya refugee living in Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh. She says the UNHCR-funded school she attends is a place of fun, happiness and knowledge. © UNHCR / Roger Arnold*

# CLOSING THE GAP

## ASIA EDUCATION UPDATE

October 2020



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