



**Forum:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
**Question of:** Promoting equitable access to education and vocational training for refugees  
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## Introduction

Currently, out of 36.8 million refugees worldwide, around 40% of them are children below the age of 18 (“UNHCR”). Access to education and vocational training for these young refugees is imperative as secondary education; specifically, it is a prerequisite for not only future opportunities but also for refugee’s empowerment and self-reliance. Having access to education keeps people engaged, protecting refugee youth from forced recruitment into armed groups, child labor, sexual exploitation, and illegal activities.

However, there are countless barriers that hinder refugees from obtaining access to education. As refugees are displaced to other foreign countries, they are often placed in situations where the language and culture does not match. This can cause frustration and lead to high dropout rates. Vocational training programs offered assume baseline literacy which limits participation of newly arriving refugees foreign to the new language. Furthermore, there are additional structural barriers like lack of credential recognition. Refugees cannot prove their previous educational achievement due to it being lost, destroyed, left behind, or the host country may not recognize the qualifications from other countries. Consequently, refugees may be forced to restart their education at a lower level, or denied entry for advanced programs. Even with online courses, they are often only available in English or the host country’s primary language. There is also a digital divide where refugees lack devices, internet and electricity in camps for them to utilize online resources.

Gaining access to education is particularly challenging as 73% of refugees are hosted in low to middle-income countries (“Figures at a Glance | UNHCR”). Oftentimes, education and vocational training is already a challenge for local youth in developing regions and arrival of the refugees intensifies the competition. This could breed tension and deter integration of refugees / locals accepting them. (For example, in Kakuma refugee camp, “there are only 7 secondary schools in the region, compared to 26 primaries”.) Simply put, host countries lack adequate resources since secondary schools require better facilities, learning materials and better qualified teachers which is scarce in low to middle-income host



countries. Therefore, secondary schools are often not available in regions near refugee camps as their settlements are located in isolated rural areas. Vocational centers are usually located in urban areas, making it challenging for refugees to access these facilities without transportation and travel allowances. In some regions, refugees have even limited freedom of movement.

Cultural norms also prohibit young refugees gaining access to education and vocational training. Due to limited resources and opportunity, boys are often prioritized for education as it is seen that they have greater potential than girls. Girls are instead expected to remain at home for domestic duties, taking care of younger siblings or older relatives, collecting water, and carrying out chores, which may be perceived as more valuable than education. Girls are pressured to forfeit education and marry early and start earning income as refugee families may prefer immediate income-generating activities over investment in education and vocational training. For some conservative communities, lack of female teachers may be a deterrent as they will not allow their daughters to be taught by a man.

Building more secondary schools and other relevant facilities require large investments that many host countries cannot afford without international support. Oftentimes, education ministries and local authorities are left to find the necessary funding and this can be very challenging. Especially vocational training programs can be quite expensive as it requires cost-intensive resources, specialized instructors, thus deprioritized in humanitarian budgets. The refugee crisis usually lasts for a long time and long-term crises often see a drop in international interest and funding leading to closures of existing programs. Additionally, new outbreaks of emergency situations can divert global attention and funding away from protracted refugee situations.

Nonetheless, there have been initiatives made to address the issue. Several programs like Secondary Youth Programme and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program were launched to provide scholarships, mentoring, catch-up programs, professional development, and upskilling opportunities for refugee youth. The Albert Einstein Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) scholarship along with Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is one of the known funding from international bodies that provide monetary aid to refugees to continue their education, especially in higher education for qualified refugee students.

This agenda highly resonates with the conference's theme "Voices of Tomorrow" as by promoting equitable access to education and vocational training for refugee youth, they are empowered and can advocate for themselves and change. Refugee youth are arguably the most silenced, vulnerable, marginalized population on earth. Through equitable access to education and vocational training, refugees



can reclaim their future, uplift their communities, and contribute to a more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable world.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Term 1

#### Refugee

Refugees by definition refer to individuals who were forced to flee their country due to human rights violations, and unable to return. The 5 convention reasons, race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, and political opinion, refers to the specific grounds on which individuals face fear that compels them to leave their country. Refugees are entitled to protections under international law, such as access to education, work, and safety, under 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 New York Protocol. (It is important to note the difference between asylum seekers and internally displaced people. )

#### Vocational Training

Vocational Training is the specific type of education in which learners acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies specific to a particular occupation (“Vocational Education | UNESCO UIS”). Participation in vocational training not only simply uplifts the individuals’ skills, but also enhances employability, and supports long-term integration. Vocational Training further allows the youth to explore different fields, find talents, and align their interests with market relevant skills.

#### Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education refers to planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum (“Definitions - European Youth Foundation - [Www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)”). For refugees, non-formal education is pivotal in bridging the education gap caused by displacement and interrupted schooling. Common forms include language and literacy classes, accelerated learning programs for over-age students, or catch-up courses. These offer a safe and accessible option to refugee youth who are oftentimes excluded due to linguistic and financial barriers.

#### Protracted Refugee Situation

The term Protracted Refugee Situation is used to describe when “at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years” (“Protracted Refugee



Situations Explained”). In these long-term displacement contexts, temporary education solutions are not sufficient, highlighting the urgency of integrating refugees into national education and vocational training frameworks rather than relying on short-term humanitarian responses. “In the beginning of 2019, nearly 16 million people were in a protracted refugee situation” (“Protracted Refugee Situations Explained”). Examples of protracted refugee situations include the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, and Somali refugees in Kenya's Kakuma camps.

### **15by30 Target**

The 15by30 target, pledged by UNHCR and its partners of more than 110 countries, seeks to achieve 15% enrollment of refugee youth by 2030. Various stakeholders including the local government, higher education institutions, and private sector partners around the world are committed to expanding access to education opportunities for refugees (“Higher Education and Skills | UNHCR”). This outlines the concrete guidance and strategic actions to pursue and achieve equitable access to education and vocational training for refugee youth. The roadmap for 15by30 target focuses on 4 key components as to providing adequate education to the refugee youth: policy, access opportunities, pipeline to higher education, post-graduate opportunities.

## **Timeline of Key Events**

### **July 28, 1951 - Adoption of the Refugee Convention**

The 1951 Refugee Convention, now with 149 states as signatories, laid the “basis of UNHCR’s work” (“The 1951 Refugee Convention | UNHCR”). Supplemented by the 1967 Protocol, which removed the Convention’s original geographic and temporal limitations, the documents collectively serve as a legal foundation for refugee protection, including basic rights like access to education (Article 22). Though initially created in response to the aftermath of World War 2, the Convention now serves as an outline of the minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, applying universally to protect all individuals fleeing conflict and persecution.

### **1992 - Establishment of Albert Einstein Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) Scholarship Program**



The DAFI program is one of the longest running educational initiatives for the refugee youth, having “supported over 26,300 students in 59 countries since its inception” (“Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) | EAA Observatory”). The program seeks to empower young men and women with a secondary diploma to pursue higher education, enabling them to participate in the host economy and become contributing members of their communities. This initiative highlighted the importance of access to higher education which was not considered much previously. Aside from simply providing financial support that covers from tuition, study resources, transportation to accommodation, the DAFI program enhances the employability of refugee youth through skills training and internship opportunities. The German government has been the core donor of the program, yet there has been growing support from other partners, representing the increasing global commitment to refugee education. The program continues to expand to other refugee situations in need and seeks to “increase the number of scholarships and the refugee enrolment rate in higher education by 2030” in accordance with the 15by30 target (“DAFI Scholarship Programme | the Global Compact on Refugees | UNHCR”).

### **March, 2011 - Ongoing - Syrian Refugee Crisis and Onset of Mass Displacement**

The outbreak of Syrian Civil War in 2011 led to one of the largest displacement in recent history. By 2024, “over 12million Syrians had been displaced, with more than 5 million seeking refuge” in other neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (RefugePoint). The mass displacement of Syrian families left them in especially vulnerable states without access to education, employment, and healthcare. Although host countries have made efforts to include refugees in their education systems, they have met challenges in ensuring access, quality, and equity. Syrian refugee children faced barriers to education due to language differences, legal restrictions, and overcrowded classrooms. Even where schools were available, educational quality often suffered due to inadequate and scarce resources, and lack of trained teachers. This event highlighted the need for international support and collaboration for the host countries in overcoming overwhelmed national education systems with the incoming refugee population.

### **August, 2015 - October, 2016 - Rohingya Refugee Crisis**

Beginning in late 2015, the intensified military crackdowns in Myanmar led to thousands of Rohingya people to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Currently, “around 1 million people have found safety in Bangladesh”, nearly half of the population being under the age of 18 (“Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained”). Most settled in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar region, one of the largest and densely populated refugee camps. The Bangladeshi government prohibited formal schooling for the refugee youth, citing



concerns over long-term settlement, only allowing them to pursue informal education provided by NGOs. This unofficial education “was operating on a budget of virtually nothing, and was vulnerable to being shut down by camp officials”. Nonetheless, Bangladesh has confirmed it will lift restrictions on education for young Rohingya refugees (Ahmed). This marks a positive step from the Bangladeshi government in ensuring equitable access to education and vocational training for Rohingya children and adolescents.

### **December 16, 2019 - December 18, 2019 - First Global Refugee Forum and Education Pledges**

The first Global Refugee Forum marked the pivotal moment in addressing the challenges faced by refugees worldwide, particularly in education. “Over 3000 participants” attended the Forum, including government officials, NGOs, and other stakeholders that came together around the shared goal of “increasing cooperation and solidarity with refugees and affected host countries” (“Global Refugee Forum 2019 | UNHCR”). The Forum emphasized the importance of education for refugee children as a key pathway to self-reliance and integration. The pledges made at the forum represented the recognition of the need for sustainable solutions to the educational challenges refugees face. Participants shared “good practices” and discussed upon the “challenges and opportunities ahead” as they all worked together towards ensuring education and vocational training opportunities for the refugee youth (“Global Refugee Forum | UNHCR”).

### **December, 2019 - 2023 - COVID Pandemic and Widespread School Closures**

The COVID Pandemic profoundly impacted the education world wide, with refugee youth facing heightened vulnerabilities during this period. School closures disrupted traditional education, forcing a shift to digital learning and remote access. This transition posed significant threats to refugee children lacking access to digital devices with internet capability. UNHCR has estimated that “refugees are 50% less likely than the general population to have access to devices” leaving them excluded from any source of education for the duration of the pandemic (Wide Eye Creative). Moreover, COVID limited employment opportunities for refugee households, further exacerbating the situation as refugees remain unable to afford the cost for future transportation and materials to attend school. The pandemic has “added a deep layer of complexity” to the challenge of providing refugees with equitable access to education and vocational training (Wide Eye Creative).



## **Position of Key Member Nations and Other Bodies**

### **Bangladesh**

In the early years following the inundation of Rohingya refugees, the Bangladeshi government restricted formal education for the refugee youth concerned of the potential instability and security issues if the refugees were integrated into the national education system. The decision was further driven by the lack of resources and infrastructure that was already insufficient for the local population. Over time, the government reevaluated the ban as international bodies stressed the importance of education as a fundamental right for all. Currently, the Bangladeshi government acknowledges education as a fundamental right, establishing temporary centers to facilitate access to basic education and vocational training opportunities.

### **Kenya**

Kenya hosts a large refugee population in Kakuma refugee camp, primarily from neighboring countries like South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. The government has been committed to addressing the needs of refugees and supporting them through their journey. The country has a dedicated Department of Refugee Services (DRS) established under the Refugee Act 2021 which deals with refugee affairs such as registration and documentation. Nonetheless, Kenya also faces challenges such as inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers which impact the quality of education and vocational training available to the refugee youth. They have been emphasizing the need for education-focused investment to support both the refugee and host country children.

### **Turkey**

Hosting one of the largest refugee populations in the world due to ongoing conflict in Syria, Turkey has been active in supporting the refugees, particularly through education and vocational training. Such as Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES) project, the Turkish government has shown efforts to support the refugee youth and enhance educational opportunities. The “national legislation guarantees the right of all children to access education”, providing additional language acquisition courses for those in need (“Education | UNHCR Turkey”). Several vocational training programs are run in collaboration with NGOs and international organizations. Turkey has consistently called for international support in funding and resources to address the needs of the refugee youth.

### **Uganda**



Uganda is recognized for its inclusive policy for refugees that grants access to the national education system. The Ugandan government launched several projects with the UNHCR and international NGOs, providing vocational training opportunities to the refugee youth. Placing an emphasis on vocational training programs as a keystone for empowering refugees, many of its programs have been community-based, equipping individuals with skills in the fields of agriculture, agri-business, tourism construction, et al. Challenges still persist as local schools are overcrowded, trained educators are scarce, and the available infrastructure is insufficient. Continued international support and collaboration is needed to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the initiatives.

### **Germany**

As a strong advocate of refugee education, especially in higher education, Germany has been active in supporting the refugee youth. Through DAFI, more than 20,000 students gained access to tertiary education, empowering the young individuals to continue their passion in education. Refugees in Germany have legal right to access education, facilitating the integration of refugees into the national education system. The German government further provides incentives to firms that collaborate to provide vocational training tailored to industry needs. Nevertheless, Germany has faced pressures on educational and vocational training resources, highlighting the need for additional support staff.

## **Suggested Solutions**

Equitable access to education and vocational training for refugees requires a strong foundation. The government needs to consider adopting inclusive policies that incorporate refugee youth into their national education sector plans and budget allocations, ensuring long-term access to quality and accredited learning. Additionally, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms through sufficient data collection can ensure the effectiveness of policies and programs, allowing continuous improvement of targeted interventions.

Sustained educational support necessitates a reliable and stable funding mechanism to ensure educational environments are equipped with requisite resources: material, technical, and financial. The international body should explore ways to enhance funding and resources directed towards the refugees, seeking ways to ensure all initiatives are sustainable and adequately resourced. Private sector involvement should be encouraged by expanding public-private partnerships particularly in labor-market aligned TVET. The involvement of private sector partners can significantly enhance the development of tailored vocational training for refugees. By offering internships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities, private





firms can provide practical and hands-on experiences that align with the labor market demands. This collaboration not only equips the refugee youth with relevant skills but also facilitates their integration into the workforce, promoting self-reliance.

Namely, the most crucial step to address the issue is through infrastructure development. Attention should be directed toward building and refurbishing facilities such as school and vocational training centers. These facilities must ensure access to electricity, clean water, and learning materials to create a safe and comfortable environment for the students. If permanent structures are not available, temporary learning spaces could be established, especially within refugee camps where mobility is limited. Investments could also be made in digital learning infrastructure to support innovative teaching methods through tools such as solar-powered devices and training courses on using online platforms. Adding on, focus could be on learning centers that provide bridging programs for over-age learners or those lacking formal certification. Language and literary accelerated learning courses would prepare the refugee youth for formal education and vocational training, equipping them with the foundational skills necessary to succeed. Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) resources could be used in improving existing public sector educational facilities within accessible distance to refugee villages which would benefit both the host and refugee communities, promoting social cohesion.

Furthermore, efforts should also be made in promoting gender equity in access to education. Community outreach programs should aim to challenge the prevailing gender norms and highlight the value of education for all, regardless of gender. Recruiting more female teachers can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for girls, making them feel more comfortable and represented in education. These female teachers can serve as role models inspiring and guiding the students. Additionally, implementing mentoring programs and offering scholarships specifically for girls can further encourage their education pursuits, helping bridge the gender gap and empower the young women in their communities.

Lastly, public advocacy is crucial in addressing the issue. Refugee youth can be empowered to lead advocacy programs and amplify their voices and experiences. These campaigns can raise awareness and garner more support from the international community. Ongoing advocacy efforts should focus on the critical role of educational opportunities for growing refugee youth. This includes public campaigns, community events, and partnerships with media outlets to promote success stories and benefits of education for both refugee and host communities.



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