

Education in Emergencies

02 December 2024

Key points

- Work towards inclusion in national education systems from the start of an emergency, ensuring that initial programming supports and contributes to sustained access to all levels of education.
- Engage Ministry of Education and local education officials in the planning and operationalization of the response.
- Consider the educational needs of children and youth of all ages, including those who may have missed out on schooling or be overage. Include secondary school-aged children and university-aged youth in the education response.
- Foster complementarity between the early phase of the education response and child protection initiatives.
- Identify specific barriers to participation in education based on gender, disability, ethnicity or other factors during assessments and design interventions to support enrolment and retention.

1. Overview

Access to education is a basic right that is also applicable in emergency settings. The Global Compact on Refugees (para. 68) aims to see children and youth return to learning within three months of displacement. The activities implemented during the early stages of a response should support and contribute to displaced children and young people being able to access education services through national systems.

Education provides knowledge and skills that support community resilience, facilitate living with dignity and lay the foundation for future access to meaningful work. Going to school also offers emotional, psychological and protection benefits - in emergencies education activities offer

opportunities for refugees to receive information about their rights, available services, disease prevention, safety and physical security (including mine risk awareness) and have access to psychological support services (PSS). This entry explains some of the key steps that should be taken at the start of an emergency to ensure that children and youth have long-term access to education.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Education is one of the first services requested by refugees after their immediate needs have been met – in addition to it representing a return to normal routines and habits, it is also an investment in the future for families and communities. Decisions on education access and services taken at the initial phases of an emergency have a profound impact as to how the right to education can be sustained over the full period of displacement. In line with UNHCR's approach to sustainable responses, this may require higher levels of support at the start of an emergency where national services may be expanded or new infrastructure developed and displaced communities provided additional support so that children can learn and progress.

Initial response decisions should be aligned with the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees which supports access to accredited (recognized) education delivered through official institutions that are part of the host country's education system. In line with commitments to ensuring sustainable and on-going access to essential services, it is important to ensure displaced learners are provided required support to advance educationally, including language learning assistance and support to adapt to a new curriculum. Host community educational institutions should be supported to mitigate the impact of increased educational demand due to new arrivals.

3. Guidance on establishing education programmes as part of the emergency response

3.1 Inclusion in national education systems

The inclusion of refugees in national education systems allows refugees to learn the same content as host country children and youth, have the opportunity to sit for examinations and receive official documentation of their learning progress, and be able to progress from one level of education to the next. It also means that refugee learners are included in national enrolment data on education, receive access to support services delivered through schools and, ultimately, that education for forcibly displaced learners is financed in the same way as it is for host communities.

Promoting "inclusion from the start" means that education programming in an emergency should provide the support services needed to enable displaced children and youth to be able to succeed once they enter formal education programmes that follow the national curriculum of the host country. These may include non-formal programmes that support language learning and help children address gaps in their learning. Once children are enrolled in formal education programmes, targeted support may still be needed to ensure that displaced learners continue to

learn effectively and be able to progress educationally. Initial responses may also need to prioritise the expansion of existing education facilities to accommodate new arrivals.

For more information on what national system inclusion entails, consult UNHCR's annual Education Reports.

3.2 Promoting resilience and enhancing protection through education

Providing access to education – particularly in times of emergency – serves the dual objective of supporting the protection of children and young people, and building individual and community resilience. The education response strategy should be clearly articulated in the Protection and Solutions strategy.

Education reinforces protection objectives by:

- Reducing the risk of children and young people being recruited into armed groups, onward movement, being engaged in child labour and/or other exploitative practices.
- Providing a protective environment where children and young people acquire knowledge and skills, socialize and have access to wrap-around support services (including health screening, nutrition and counselling).
- Supporting psycho-social wellbeing by offering hope and a focus on the future and promoting the re-establishment of familiar routines.
- Reducing the risk of girls marrying and having children early. Education can help change social attitudes that perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes.

Education also supports the long-term resilience of individuals and communities by:

- Providing a foundation for future economic activity, meaningful work and addressing generational poverty
- Supporting the acquisition of knowledge and skills that can foster peace, dispute resolution and upholding human rights

3.3 Principles that should guide the education response

- Work towards inclusion of displaced children in the national education system from the start of an emergency. This requires close collaboration with and, sometimes, intensive advocacy with national authorities to agree on how best refugee children can receive education that is certified, of high quality and allows refugees to progress from one level of education to the next.
- Support children and youth to return to learning as quickly as possible. Minimize the time spent out of school/ structured learning opportunities to – ideally – less than three months.
- Consider the educational needs of all age groups, including secondary school age youth and those above 18.
- School infrastructure should be safe and accessible to those with disabilities.
- School environments should be free of violence – including gender-based violence – and any attacks on education documented and reported.
- Sex-segregated WASH facilities should be established in schools and be accessible to children with disabilities.

- Non-formal education programs should be limited in duration and help children and youth to transition to the formal system or prepare for livelihoods-focused skills programs. Accredited accelerated education programs may be of longer duration and operate alongside formal education opportunities.
- Specific barriers to education experienced by girls, adolescent girls and boys and those with disabilities should be explicitly addressed.

3.4 Key actions - before and during the emergency response

1. Familiarize yourself with the education policy context in the country of asylum. The UNHCR Guidance on Emergency Preparedness includes a List of Preparedness Actions, which operations are encouraged to implement as part of contingency planning. In particular, in the preparedness phase, undertake a light-touch review of the context, focusing on the policy environment that will inform the strategic direction of the education response.

Identify any possible administrative or policy barriers that may limit enrolment in formal education.

Gather information on pre-displacement enrolment rates as this can help predict the likely level of demand for places in schools and the likely need for support for out-of-school children and youth.

2. Familiarize yourself with the potential education partners in country who can support the response - UNICEF and the Education Cluster, where activated, may be able to provide useful information on education actors who may be able to support the response.

Reach early agreements on the leadership of education coordination structures, with the involvement of the relevant education authorities. Where possible, in refugee responses, it is recommended that UNHCR co-lead the coordination of the Refugee Education Working Group with government for the first 12 months of the response. Co-leadership of education coordination should be explicitly linked with UNHCR's leadership in advocating for refugees with the national authorities and addressing administrative barriers to education related to legal status and access to documentation, and promoting long-term inclusion in national services across sectors.

3. Ensure that the education response is well planned, budgeted and included in inter-agency appeals.

4. Articulate a clear strategy for the initial response, highlighting how actions will support inclusion in national systems and prioritize actions for ensuring the continuity of learning across different educational levels.

5. Meet with district or local education officials to discuss the response with them and ensure that they are informed about and supportive of efforts to support education access for newly-displaced persons.

6. Expand or establish education infrastructure, taking into account the distances between where refugees live and where they will go to school.

7. Establish temporary learning spaces where literacy, numeracy, psychosocial/ recreational activities can take place – particularly if existing education services cannot accommodate all learners immediately.
8. Determine whether there are existing programs (such as accelerated education programs) or materials (books, language learning materials) approved by the national authorities that can be used in the response. Where possible make use of existing programmes for out-of-school or over-age learners.
9. Work in close coordination with [child protection](#) actors to ensure that referral pathways exist between education and protection services. In the initial phase of a response similar activities may be carried out by [child protection](#) and education actors – it is important to ensure that any activities supporting learning contribute to the eventual inclusion in national services.
10. Ensure that the community remains well informed about education services and decisions regarding curricula and inclusion in the national system. Consult community members and respond to any concerns that they express and identify ways in which young people can be supported to learn and succeed educationally.
11. Where refugees will be involved in the delivery of education activities, establish a common framework for the identification, recruitment, remuneration, conditions of service and [code of conduct](#) for volunteer teachers and education personnel.
12. Identify key indicators against which all education actors will report. Data on education participation should be disaggregated by age, gender, level of education and disability.

3.5 Coordination and partnership

- Identify **focal points in the Ministry of Education** at national and local levels who will be actively engaged in both technical elements of the response and co-leadership of coordination structures.
- Coordination is key to a strong response, identifying gaps, minimizing the duplication of services and providing tools to clearly track what services and support has been delivered. In settings where a Refugee Education Working Group is established- and where an Education Cluster is operational - it is recommended that from the outset there be close collaboration and exchange of information on the response, context and refugee needs with the **Cluster**.
- An education needs assessment will help to understand the previous education experience of children, the length of disruption to their education, the capacity of local education infrastructure and teacher availability in the refugee community. The Education Cluster's Joint Education Needs Assessment tool can be adapted to refugee contexts. Ensure the education part of the [Needs Assessment for Refugee Emergency \(NARE\)](#) checklist is included in the multi-sector assessment.
- The coordination structure should also be in a position to be able to communicate the needs of refugees and affected populations to education **development coordination groups** with the aim of having refugees and hosting communities included within the remit of development financed initiatives and plans.
- Ensure effective collaboration with UNICEF and establish mechanisms for sharing

information on response priorities and joint advocacy informed by the [Strategic Collaboration Framework](#).

- [Education Cannot Wait \(ECW\)](#) is a key donor to education sector responses in emergencies.
- Be aware of and identify possible **synergies with development-focused initiatives** in the education sector and key donors to education, including the World Bank and the Global Partnership for Education.

Context specific guidance

A) Camp-based refugee responses

- Where new camps are being developed, work with site planners to identify locations where temporary learning spaces can be established, taking into consideration the distances and routes that children will need to walk.
- Consider climate resilience when designing and establishing education infrastructure.
- The location of secondary schools in the camp should also take into consideration the distances to be walked and the safety of adolescent girls and female teachers on the way to and from school.
- Where possible and where host community schools are within a reasonable distance, invest in improving host community infrastructure rather than developing separate facilities for refugees.
- If building new schools/ educational facilities, allocate sufficient space in camps to allow for the building of more permanent structures that meet the infrastructure standards of the Ministry of Education and include gender-segregated, age-appropriate and disability-accessible WASH facilities.
- UNHCR Emergency Handbook entries [Energy needs](#), [WASH in emergencies](#), [Safe and secure settlements](#) and [Shelter, camp and settlement](#) are also applicable.
- If refugee teachers are hired to deliver education activities as incentive staff, remuneration rates should be fair and take into account the rates paid for weekly/monthly work in other sectors in ways that do not disincentivize working in educational settings.

B) Urban refugee responses

In urban responses the education response will typically be centred on enrolling young people in local schools. However, administrative, financial and space constraints may make this difficult or extend the length of time that children and young people are out of education – specialized support may be needed to be support the continuity of learning.

- Outreach and information dissemination on available education services should clearly explain enrolment procedures and requirements.
- Provide assistance in navigating bureaucratic procedures, including interpretation services, assistance checking application documents, and addressing administrative barriers with authorities.
- Support local authorities to expand education infrastructure to accommodate increased demand. Identify suitable, cost-effective solutions that can be transformed into long-term improvements to school infrastructure.

- Establish non-formal education programmes in community hubs that will support transition into formal education. This may include intensive language learning programmes if children are not proficient in the language of instruction.
- Negotiate with education authorities to offer supplementary programmes aimed at linguistic and cultural maintenance that can be offered outside of school hours.
- Integrate social cohesion activities into programming.
- Include education costs in minimum expenditure basket calculations for cash-based assistance.

C) Contexts where national policy does not allow for inclusion in national systems or use of the host country curriculum

Many countries have removed legislative or policy barriers that have prevented refugees from learning using host country curricula, however there are still some places in which this is not possible. In such contexts it is recommended that the emergency response:

- Establish non-formal education programmes that allow children and young people to maintain the literacy, numeracy and scholastic knowledge that they have acquired prior to displacement. To the extent possible this should be based on the skills in the host country curriculum.
- Distance learning options should be as closely aligned with the host country curriculum content as possible.
- Ensure that learning can be documented in ways that will allow for transition into formal education programmes should policies change.
- Clearly communicate the costs, and associated risks, of sustaining separate education programmes only for refugees over the full period of displacement to donors and other actors.
- Offer skills training programmes for youth that will offer access to certified vocational programmes.
- Advocate with the State authorities to allow more comprehensive access to education for forcibly displaced children and youth in line with international commitments on the rights of children.

D) IDP responses

- In IDP responses the coordination of the education response is usually led by the Education Cluster, where activated.
- Education programs and services established during an emergency should support access to the national education system. As far as is practical, host community schools should be supported to include displaced children and youth, with an emphasis on the continuity of learning.
- Protection monitoring and education assessments should identify any administrative or legal barriers limiting access to education.
- If IDPs speak a different language to that used in local schools, additional language support programs may be needed.

Post emergency phase

The education response must be implemented in such a way that access to education can be sustained over the full period of displacement. Following the acute phase of the emergency, further negotiation may be needed with the host country authorities to ensure that:

- refugees, displaced and stateless persons' needs are taken into consideration in national crisis response and education sector plans;
- education projects supported by development actors also consider the needs of displaced persons and that, where relevant, support programmes are extended to include displaced persons;

Where necessary, response actors may need to work with government to ensure that policies are formalized which guarantee long-term access to education and that procedures are in place to recognise prior learning, facilitate placement in appropriate grades, and allow access to certification – under conditions similar to those applied to nationals.

Checklist

- Undertake an analysis of the education context in the country of origin including the structure of the education system in and key transition points – and how these may differ to host countries. The contextual analysis should take into consideration enrolment rates by level that will help project likely level of demand for education services.
- Agree the main pillars of the education response with national/ local education authorities, including which curriculum will be used.
- Establish coordination structures to ensure a well-planned, shared approach to the education response.
- Communicate available education services and the rationale for inclusion in host country education systems to affected groups.
- Ensure that sufficient land is allocated for the establishment of education institutions.
- Expand existing schools to respond to increased demand for education or establish new school infrastructure.

- Agree standard conditions of service and remuneration rates for refugee teachers.
- Establish support programs that will facilitate learning through the host country curriculum.
- Provide support that reduces economic barriers to education participation.
- Integrate MHPSS activities in education programming.
- Engage child protection actors and coordination leads to ensure complementarity between education and protection programming.

4. Standards and Indicators

The emergency response should be guided and informed by the national standards set by Ministries of Education. This needs to be taken into consideration from the onset when constructing classrooms or educational facilities that will be handed over to the Ministry.

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies provides useful guidelines for the establishment of safe, accessible temporary learning spaces and age-appropriate WASH facilities.

Where national standards cannot be met, this should be explained and justified to education authorities, and agreement reached on suitable alternatives.

UNHCR Emergency Handbook entries [Energy needs](#), [WASH in emergencies](#), [Safe and secure settlements](#) and [Shelter, camp and settlement](#) are also applicable.

Indicators

Core indicators for tracking the reach of education programmes in emergency contexts include:

- Enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education programmes
- Participation in non-formal education programmes (including language support classes, accelerated education programmes and catch-up classes)

Data should be able to be disaggregated by gender and by education level.

It is strongly recommended that standard activity descriptors be used to track and aggregate

information on the education sector response, particularly in multi-country responses.

Annexes

[UNHCR Refugee Education 2030, A Strategy for Refugee Education](#)

[ISEEC Report on Improving Coordination, 2020](#)

[UNHCR Cash for Education, Direction and Key Considerations](#)

5. Learning and field practices

[Short online course](#) on education coordination mechanisms, their mandates and how to improve greater synergy between these structures.

[Education in Emergencies - Workday Learning](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

6. Links

[UNHCR Education Pages Accelerated Education Working Group Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies \(INEE\) Global Education Cluster Education Cannot Wait Education Community of Practice](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

7. Main contacts

Contact Senior Education Officers in Regional Bureaus or the Headquarters Education Section (hqeduc@unhcr.org) in the Division of Resilience and Solutions (DRS).