



Regional collaboration to strengthen education for nationals & Syrian refugees in Arabic speaking host countries

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Refugees
Education
Reform
Syria

ABSTRACT

The international community launched the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) to help meet the needs of more than 4.8 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. The education arm of 3RP is the No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative, which supports the ministries of education in these host countries expand access to education; ensure the provision of quality, relevant education; and strengthen national and sub-national education systems. Planning of NLG efforts is regional; however, decision-making and implementation remain at the country level. Our study analyzes NLG initiatives for refugees in the context of recent education reform undertaken by Jordan and Lebanon, as these countries have focused on improving their national systems. We find that continued political instability in the region, and uncertainty of where refugees will reside in the future, coupled with common socio-economic concerns of the four countries, and comparable weaknesses of their education systems, suggest regional collaboration is needed to strengthen education systems. Three recommendations are offered to build the region's education systems: standardize K-12 curricula in STEM and standardize accreditation requirements for secondary formal education and NFE; develop regional databases in Arabic of evidence-based best teaching practices; improve linkages between universities and industry to secondary schools to ensure skills developed are compatible to those needed in the 21st century economy. These recommendations make education more portable for refugees, given their uncertain future; they equalize learning opportunities for students, regardless of SES and geography; they make education relevant for refugees and nationals, providing skills young people need for better prospects. At the same time, our recommendations respect national authority in key subjects and promote local ownership of teaching and learning processes.

1. Introduction

The Syrian crisis entered its seventh year in March 2017, having already caused the largest displacement of a country's peoples since World War II – and its end is still unknown. The devastation of life and land has forced millions to flee to neighboring countries, with the majority relocating to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Government leaders estimate more than 6.1 million Syrians reside in these countries, though, as shown here, 4.81 million are registered as refugees [Table 1](#).¹

These five host countries have generously undertaken the herculean task of providing services and resources for Syrian refugees, which has

put tremendous pressure on their nations' resources and added new tensions to their social fabric. To support these countries in their massive and diverse efforts, United Nations (UN) agencies and hundreds of their affiliated government, non-government (NGO), and private-sector partners have launched the greatest and most integrated international response ever to a refugee crisis, termed the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP).³

3RP efforts to educate Syrian refugees have been especially promising with the UNICEF-coordinated “No Lost Generation” (NLG) initiative. Started in 2013, NLG brings together a coalition of UN agencies and international NGOs to support the work of ministries of education in the region for the purpose of, “(1) Scaling up opportunities for

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¹ “3RP Regional and Resilience Plan 2017–2018 in Response to the Syria Crisis”, pg. 28. <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/publications/> By comparison, there were a total of 884,461 Syrian asylum applications to 37 of Europe's countries between April 2011 and October 2016. Note that the order in which the countries are named is based on the scale of refugee influx.

² Culled from “How the Common Core Was Created.” www.corestandards.org.

³ Ibid, chart excerpted from pg. 28, which includes the following excerpted footnote: “Total estimated number of Syrians of 6,151,000 represents government estimates, including registered Syrian refugees, unregistered Syrian refugees as well as Syrians residing in the host countries under alternative legal frameworks... Projected registered Syrian refugees of 4,703,000 is the 3RP regional refugee planning figure, representing the expected registered refugee population in the respective countries by 31 December 2017...”

Table 1
Estimated Number of Syrian Refugees, Registered & Unregistered, by Country.²

Country	Registered Syrian refugees (30/11/2016)	Total estimated number of Syrians
Egypt	115,204	400,000
Iraq	227,971	235,000
Jordan	655,833	1,266,000
Lebanon	1,017,433	1,500,000
Turkey	2,764,500	2,750,000
Total	4,810,216	6,151,000

Note. Excerpted from 3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017–2018 in Response to the Syria Crisis (pg. 28), 2017, Retrieved from <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/publications/>

equitable access to formal and non-formal education. 2) Promoting the quality and relevance of education. 3) Strengthening education systems at national and sub-national levels."⁴

While the hosts contend with numerous challenges in realizing NLG's objectives for refugees, the situation also presents a unique opportunity for these countries: never before has so much international energy, expertise, or funding been directed at working with government education leaders in the region. Thus, the crisis not only gives these countries the benefit of international support for refugee education; the concerted response offers a valuable occasion to strengthen the nations' education systems for all children.

Our research speaks to this opportunity, as we review recent education reforms of Jordan and Lebanon – countries that have made significant gains in strengthening their national systems via internationally developed efforts in recent years. We study these reforms in relation to access and quality issues pertaining to Syrian refugee education in the four Arabic speaking host countries. The goal of studying this relationship is to discern the underlying potentiality of the host country's education system relative to the obstacles faced and progress achieved by NLG education initiatives for Syrian refugees.

Our study finds that continued political instability in the region and uncertainty of where refugees will reside in the future, coupled with common socio-economic needs of the four countries and comparable weaknesses of their education systems, suggest a more integrated approach of regional collaboration is needed to achieve the goal of strengthening education systems at national and sub-national levels. Though a 3RP Regional Steering Committee (RSC) and Regional Technical Committee (RTC) are in place to guide and support activities, 'the centre of gravity for implementation and decision-making remains at the country level, with coordination structures determined in each country under the leadership of the national Governments.'⁵ This is critical, of course, as context differs from country to country and within a country. Therefore, challenges and possibilities must be negotiated nationally and locally. However, to successfully address the looming prospect of a "lost generation" of refugees and to manage the complex problems of longer term under- and unemployment of youth in the region, we maintain that certain education reform should be tackled regionally.

We offer the following recommendations on collaboration among these four countries: 1) Standardize K-12 curriculum in STEM, and standardize accreditation requirements for secondary formal education and NFE, particularly with regard to the use of second languages (English, French, Kurdish, etc.), across the four countries; 2) Develop regional databases in Arabic of innovative evidence-based best teaching practices, made accessible to all educators in the four countries; and 3) Enhance linkages between universities and industry to secondary schools in the four host countries.

Regional standardization of curriculum in the areas cited above would make education more portable for refugees, regardless of where

they live in the region, or whether they're Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi, etc. And standardization would help ensure that all students – refugees and nationals alike – meet equally high learning expectations directly tied to the 21st century knowledge economy. Yet, national and sub-national autonomy would be maintained in history, Arabic language, and subjects that are necessarily local in culture and context. Additionally, while curriculum would be standardized in some areas, teaching approaches and materials used might differ, depending on local needs and interests; this differentiation would give educators greater ownership of the process and promote stronger buy-in. Thus, standardized curriculum in STEM subjects would strengthen national systems and equalize learning expectations for all students; yet, educators would have ample space to own the learning process – so local authority would also flourish, but in a more structured, goal-oriented manner.

Another way to improve the quality of teaching while promoting local ownership is to develop regional databases of best practices. From regional databases, educators choose the evidence-based practices they believe will work best for their students and, as educators and researchers continue to contribute to the databases, they allow educators across countries to build from each other's knowledge on best practices. In the process, the databases help equalize learning opportunities for students within and across countries by making best teaching practices accessible to all educators who have access to the internet. The final recommendation of enhancing university and private sector linkages to secondary schools helps ensure students develop skills that are relevant to the needs of their economy.

We begin our paper with a review of the NLG response to the Syrian refugee crisis in the host countries; then we move on to study educational attainment and recent reform in Jordan and Lebanon, particularly given broader socio-economic concerns in the region, before highlighting our findings and discussing our policy recommendations. Our research relies on primary sources published from 2014 to 2017 by NLG and 3RP to assess the refugee response in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt. We then examine education attainment, as well as education and labor reform documents, along with socio-economic reports from Jordan and Lebanon, to provide a fuller picture of education context in these key countries.

2. Education response to the syrian refugee crisis

The No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative consists of three inter-related pillars for children and youth: education; protection services; and engagement of adolescents/youth for the five host countries, as well as children/adolescents who are severely distressed or internally displaced in Syria.⁶ In education, NLG supports policies and programs that expand equitable access and provide relevant, high-quality learning experiences. As Table 2 shows, the host countries have had difficulty scaling up their systems quickly enough to meet refugee need: more than 1.5 million children have no formal or non-formal education (NFE). In all countries but Egypt, more Syrian children have education needs that must be met than those enrolled in formal education or NFE. Additionally, continued schooling for those already enrolled is dependent on funding from external donors Table 2.

Access to education in the region has been hindered by severe shortages of learning space; overburdened institutions and localities; lack of trained teachers and other school personnel; policy and/or administrative restrictions on enrollment; issues of integration; and uncertain funding. Moreover, any family cost associated with schooling, from paying annual fees to purchasing supplies, is a barrier to receiving education in an environment where even basic needs are unmet.

⁶ "How the Plan Works". 3RP website. <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/the-3rp/http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/the-3rp/>

⁷ Mendenhall, M., S. Garnett Russell, E Buckner, Peter Bjorklund, J Cha (2017). Urban Refugee Education Strengthening Policies and Practices for Access, Quality and Inclusion Key Contributions. New York

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2016–2017." 3RP Report, 2016.

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