The impact of lack of residency on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon’s access to Education

Around 59% of Syrian Refugee children aged 3-18 are estimated to be out of school¹ including over 80% of Syrian children aged 15-17. Whilst there have been advances in enrollment numbers² for the 2016-17 academic year, Syrian children continue to face many barriers to accessing formal education including transportation and associated costs, distance to schools, lack of familiarity with the curriculum or language of instruction, lack of documentation and lack of adequate psychosocial support or support for special needs. In addition lack of valid residency can create additional barriers for many children - limiting access to Education.

Whilst officially neither parent or child need to have valid residency for children to be able to access public education, Syrian refugee adults’ widespread lack of valid residency permits continues to limit access to work, compounding existing economic vulnerability and increasing pressure on children and youth to work. This is especially true for male Syrian refugee teenagers aged 15 and above – 77% percent of whom are estimated to be participating in the labour force. These children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace such as verbal and physical abuse, long working hours and no access to legal redress if for instance employers withhold wages. As many families are forced to rely on their children to earn income, this greatly decreases those children’s access to education.

Distance and transportation are significant barriers to education for some households compounded by lack of residency. Parents who face restrictions on their freedom of movement resulting from a lack of valid residency are often unable to accompany their children to school or access them in case of emergency, which can lead to reluctance to send children to school. This is particularly problematic in areas with safety and security concerns where roads are not secure or the fact that second shift programmes end after dark in winter. At the same time, parents may withdraw children, especially older girls, who face harassment on the way to and from school.

Syrian children aged 15 or over are required to have their own residence permits – which is virtually impossible to obtain if they entered Lebanon as a child on a family document as they often do not possess and cannot obtain the required passport or Syrian National ID. The many that lack valid residency experience difficulties crossing checkpoints, compounded by the greater distances many adolescents travel to attend the smaller number of secondary schools open to Syrian refugees.

Given these barriers, formal education through the public school system cannot be the only option for Syrian refugee children to access education in Lebanon. Many Syrian children have been out of formal school for three years or more⁴. Non-formal education opportunities, which serve as a bridge to formal education as well as an alternative for those who may never be able to go to school, are essential. The Non-Formal Education (NFE) Framework is in the process of being operationalized however NGOs are still not fully engaged as partners in meeting education targets or included in decision-making structures, which is critical to ensure that decision-making is informed by the operational experience of those implementing educational programmes.

Access to education must go beyond the number of refugees enrolled in schools, to ensure that refugee children are able to both access appropriate education opportunities and achieve learning outcomes. Less than half of Syrian children who enter the first grade are likely to reach grade 6⁵. There is little reliable data on or effective measurement of education quality. Unless good quality education is ensured, the number of children dropping out is likely to increase as many parents lose hope that their children will achieve learning outcomes.

Last year donors collectively contributed around $200m to education in Lebanon. However in order to ensure all children have access to quality learning opportunities the Government of Lebanon, with the support of the international community must:

Address ongoing barriers to residency to ensure that all refugees, regardless of their UNHCR registration status, means of entry to Lebanon and means of self-support once in Lebanon, are able to obtain and maintain residency through a clear, simple and reliable process that does not require sponsorship or fees.

Rapidly operationalise the NFE Framework with approved content and SOPs. Despite admirable efforts by donors and the GoL, there is a significant gap between the number of Syrian children in formal education and the number of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon.

Ensure that learning outcomes are the measure of success in education. Access to education must go beyond the number of refugees in schools. An independent and transparent monitoring system should be implemented to enable the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE II) strategy to be adjusted as needed to address existing and emerging gaps in access to and quality of education.

Ensure that NGOs are engaged as collaborative and supportive partners for education and included in the coordination and decision-making structures of the Reaching All Children with education strategy.

¹ MEHE REC Presentation on latest figures February 2017
³ Almost 200,000 Syrian children between 3-17 have been enrolled in Lebanese schools for the 2016-17 academic year, a 30% increase from the beginning of the last academic year.
⁴ Save the Children, UNICEF, UNHCR (March 2016) ’i dream of going to school: Out of School Children in Lebanon’
⁵ Interagency Back to School Dashboard, September 2016
EDUCATION
AROUND 50% OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LEBANON AGED 3-18 ARE ESTIMATED TO BE OUT OF SCHOOL

COST

Cost is the most frequently reported reason that Syrian refugee children are out of school. For households with high levels of socio-economic vulnerability, even seemingly small school-related costs such as uniforms, stationary, and transportation fees can be prohibitive. The opportunity cost of education may also be too high when families depend on income children earn from working. In 2015, 71% of households with out-of-school children had a monthly income of less than $300.

EDUCATION GAPS

Mary Syrian children have been out of school for more than three years and face difficulties re-integrating into formal education. In addition, a number of subjects in the Lebanese curriculum are taught in French or English, creating language barriers for Syrian children who are used to instruction in Arabic. Non-formal education (NFE) programs are designed to address education gaps and help children re-integrate into formal education. To best enable this, the NFE Framework needs to be fully operationalized with approved content, and NGOs need to be engaged as collaborative and supportive partners for education. The longer it takes to achieve this, the larger the education gaps grow as more and more children fall behind, making their return to school increasingly unlikely.

DISTANCE & TRANSPORTATION

Distance to schools, and the associated transportation costs and protection concerns, are directly linked to education outcomes. Students who live furthest from schools are most likely to drop out. Even when there is a school nearby, spaces in the second shift may be full, or the second shift may close if not enough children enroll. While up to half of all available spots in the first shift should be open to Syrians, refugees report that in practice some schools prevent their children from enrolling. There are also fewer secondary schools than primary schools, making distance an even greater issue for adolescents.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Less than half of Syrian refugee children who enter first grade are likely to reach grade 6. Issues with school environment and teaching quality play a role in dropout rates. Some Syrian families report that children face bullying, harassment, and the use of corporal punishment in classrooms. In the 2015-16 school year, 33% of students said they had faced these or other problems at school. Schools also lack psychosocial support systems and support for children with special needs. Almost two-thirds of Syrian children with special needs do not go to school. Some schools reject these children, citing a lack of resources or skills to educate them.

RESIDENCY & DOCUMENTATION

Neither parents nor children need to have valid residency for children to be able to access public education. However, some schools ask for documentation beyond what is required, such as residence permits or UNHCR registration certificates. Families also encounter difficulties when children entering grade 7 or above lack proof of previous schooling documents such as transcripts, which are required for obtaining certificates and exam results. Lack of residency is also a problem when it limits freedom of movement. Parents without residency cannot accompany their children to school or access them in case of emergency. This is particularly problematic in areas with security concerns where roads are not safe, especially given the fact that second shift programs end after dark in winter. Children over 15 are required to have their own residence permits—which are virtually impossible to obtain if they entered Lebanon as a child on a family document and thus face major obstacles to obtaining a Syrian National ID—making checkpoints a barrier to their access to school.