



An Information Hub on Education: A Consolidated Platform to Deliver Practical Educational Assistance to Afghan Refugees and to Enhance Refugees' Access to Education.

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Introduction

The Taliban takeover in 2021 has triggered a dramatic increase in the influx of Afghan refugees. Challenges ranging from socioeconomic to environmental uncertainty, human rights violations, particularly against women and girls, and heightening poverty have forced Afghans to flee their homes. As of June 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are 2.6 million Afghan refugees – rendering them the third-largest refugee population in the world by nationality. Access to quality education is the most pressing challenge for children and young Afghan refugees, which makes it a growing concern among various stakeholders, such as governments, civil society, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) worldwide. This plethora of stakeholders seeks to enroll refugees in school and create the kind of education that facilitates better futures. However, this common goal faces numerous challenges, which can be listed as follows: lack of clear operating procedures for integration of refugees into government schools and poor information dissemination channels; lack of awareness about education options and resources to overcome stigma-related barriers to education stemming from their refugee statuses, such as language gaps, lack of required documentation, histories of trauma, and discrimination in the host country. This problem can undercut the ability of collaborative NGOs and institutions to provide educational opportunities to refugees. To that end, this paper will address how establishing information hubs on education can create a consolidated platform for various actors to better understand the systematic use of policy instruments to deliver educational assistance and to the refugees to have access to that assistance. Such mechanisms include strategic planning, gathering up-to-date data and managing information, mobilizing resources, and ensuring funding for a complete cycle of education. This paper will depict an education information hub by exploring global and local resources for the provision of education, and the public sector's commitment to global action can contribute to achieving universal access to education, as formalized in the Education for All Declaration.

The Influx of Afghan Refugees and Challenges to Access to Education

Since the Taliban seized power on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan has plunged into an economic crisis that has pushed millions who already have hardly enough food or money to live on to flee the country. Incomes have vanished, many Afghans, particularly women, lost their jobs, life-threatening hunger has become widespread, and an estimated 24 million

Afghans need humanitarian assistance.^[1] The Western sanctions against Taliban officials add to the intensity of the economic and humanitarian crisis. In addition to the severe financial crisis, many Afghans remain at risk of being targeted for their past work or association with coalition forces. Afghanistan's former government, international development programs, media, civil society, and other organizations promoting human rights are at risk. Many families, especially those who fear that their wives and daughters can no longer work or study, are also motivated to flee the country.^[2] Increasing targeted attacks against Hazara and Shia populations persuaded people to leave their homes.

Last summer's political turmoil came on top of the 2.2 million Afghan refugees already in neighboring countries and 3.5 million people forced to flee their homes within Afghanistan's borders.^[3] According to UNHCR data, neighboring countries, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, in particular, saw the most enormous numbers of Afghanistan's refugees and asylum seekers last year. For example, almost 1.5 million fled to Pakistan in 2020, when fighting intensified, 780,000 to Iran, 129,300 to Turkey, and 15,100 to India. Reported newly arrived Afghans in need of international protection to neighboring countries since 1 January 2021 are 117,550 to Pakistan, 50,400 to Iran, 13,020 to Uzbekistan, 5, and 710 to Tajikistan, according to UNHCR data.^[4] A significant number of Afghans were also evacuated by the coalition partners after the Taliban took control of Kabul. Only the US evacuated more than 123,000 civilians last summer.^[5] Hundreds of thousands of Afghans are in the country waiting for their visa or seeking their ways out, which will add to the already significant number of Afghan refugees worldwide.

The number signal the need to provide protection and support to vulnerable groups of refugees, such as survivors of gender-based violence and those suffering from trauma, and a system can strengthen the access to educational opportunities for young Afghan refugees. Education is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention.^[6] Moreover, The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants pinpoints education as a critical element of the international refugee response.^[7] However, millions of refugees' children and young adults do not have access to quality education. There are various reasons for such a bitter fact. Many who left the country empty-handed cannot afford basic costs. Others face administrative barriers, like lack of documents, when they try to enroll or find the navigation of government bureaucracies that are unfamiliar to them difficult. The host country's language is another main barrier to receiving education for refugees. Such problems cause Afghan refugees worldwide to have limited access to education or their rights to education is not fulfilled. The absence of a legal framework to obligate host countries to provide quality education and enroll refugees at national schools is another challenge to ensuring access of refugees to education. For instance, Iran is a signatory to the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, while Pakistan is not. The Convention commits states to give refugees the same treatment as nationals concerning primary education and to treat them as favorably as possible with regard to secondary and tertiary education (article 22).^[8] Some countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires states to progressively make primary education compulsory and accessible to all and make secondary education available and accessible to all children (article 28).^[9] Some others, like the United States,

have not. Similarly, not all countries have also ratified the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which, in article 13, also calls for free and compulsory primary education for all, as well as the accessibility and availability of secondary education. [10] Thus, while education is critical for helping Afghan refugees gain a foothold toward self-sufficiency and upward social and economic mobility, they face numerous challenges to access to education.

Available Resources to Support Afghan Refugees' Access to Education

The development of refugee education is connected integrally to international instruments, institutional relationships, and shifting understandings of the purposes of education. While not comparable to the degree of challenges that restrict refugees' access to education, thousands of NGOs, associations, foundations, and groups strive to provide the support necessary for refugees to access their right to complete education, including secondary school. For example, to realize the rights of refugees to education, UNCHR safeguards the right of refugees to education and implements the six goals of Education for All (EFA), which include free access to primary education, equitable access to appropriate learning for youth, and adults, adult literacy, gender equity, and quality education. UNHCR also monitors and evaluates all refugee education programs in line with the established standards and indicators, ensuring that these programs receive the necessary human resources and appropriate funding at all levels and phases of UNHCR's operations.[11] Some organizations, such as the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), strive to ensure early intervention and development of education programs in the earliest stages of an emergency and access to education programs by children and adolescents upon arrival.[12] Others, including Education International, mobilize the funding to scale up quality learning for refugees. Educational institutions provide fully funded scholarship opportunities for refugees, and many other similar efforts have taken place to strengthen refugees' access to education. For example, Columbia University, one of the leading educational institutions in the world, offers a Scholarship for Displaced Students (CUSDS) as an effort to provide displaced/refugees students with the opportunity to pursue higher education at Columbia University.[13] Coursera, one of the largest online education platforms, offers free access for refugees to its entire catalog through the Coursera for Refugees program. EdX, another online platform, partners with Arizona State University on its Global Freshman Academy, which allows students to earn transferable college credit from anywhere in the world. There is an abundance of such programs and initiatives worldwide provided by various actors.

Nevertheless, this common goal faces numerous challenges, which still remain. As also stated in the previous section, there is a lack of clear operating procedures for integration of refugees into government schools and, poor information dissemination channels, a lack of awareness about education options and resources to overcome stigma-related barriers to education stemming from their refugee statuses, such as language gaps, lack of required documentation, histories of trauma, and discrimination in the host country undercut the ability of collaborative NGOs and institutions to realize the refugees' rights to education. The challenges remain, and a considerable number of these refugees have had their education interrupted, severely impacting their potential for future success, which demands many steps to be taken to remove barriers to education.

Establishing Information Hubs on Education Can Create A Consolidated Platform for Various Actors

Access to education involves the ability to enroll in school and continue one's studies to the end of a given level. Access to education is determined by many factors. First, supply, such as the nature and diversity of accessible schools, the location of formal schools, and the availability of sufficient classrooms and teachers. Second, demand, like social perceptions of schools, processes, and strategies for school enrolment and attendance based on the direct and indirect cost of schools and the role of children/students in households and family livelihoods. Third, exclusion along individual characteristics, including gender, age, the social and economic position of the family, urban/rural residence, displacement, ethnicity/race, language, disability, and documentation/legal status. Finally, policies and practices, such as certification and recognition of studies, asylum and settlement policies, and how the right to education is protected by law and in policy and practice. Countless NGOs, institutions, and foundations facilitate some of the stated factors and support refugees in overcoming challenges by offering grants, mentorship programs, awareness sessions, and language services. However, many refugees are unaware of or have limited access to their services mainly because not all information and support can be provided by a particular organization. Typically, organizations offer support that fits within their principle, budget, and scope of work. They cannot address the extensive barriers to education that refugees face, recognizing their challenges' multifaceted, interlinked, and complex nature. Therefore, facilitating the realization of the right to education for refugees is a global and transnational challenge that must be overcome through cooperative means and in a coordinated manner.

Establishing information hubs on education can create a consolidated platform for various actors to deliver educational assistance and for the refugees to access that assistance. An information hub – digital or physical – connects refugees to resources so they can easily access the information they need in the search for education. Such a hub serves as a single source that provides holistic knowledge about the available resources and step-by-step guides for benefiting the resources, activities, and materials offered by various organizations and stakeholders, considering the complex nature of the refugees' challenges. For example, Omid International facilitates refugees' education through training and mentorship to ensure a sustainable future for those fleeing the war. From providing language services and skills to educational and employment opportunities, Omid International attempts to give refugees a sense of purpose in their host countries.^[14] But, hundreds of organizations like Omid International can work together under one umbrella to reach more refugees and overcome refugees' challenges from various angles. A hub can connect organizations committed to providing resources to Afghan refugees. For instance, the center can offer practical information and resources for newly arriving Afghan refugees in various countries and regions in English, Dari, or Pashto on services, benefits, and laws that facilitate their education. An information center named "HelloUSA" was launched soon after the first groups of Afghan evacuees arrived in the United States. The role of the digital center is merely to provide information to Afghan refugees addressing their various needs, including information about laws, culture, job opportunities, health centers, and life in the US.^[15]

Hundreds of guides, policies, and other important documents are available and easily accessible in the center. A similar center was launched to support Ukrainian refugees in honor of welcoming week in September. Instead of navigating through several organizations' websites, Afghan and Ukrainian refugees receive information about their multiple challenges in a single source. With increasing numbers of Afghan refugees worldwide, particularly in Afghanistan's neighboring countries, an information center is required to show various avenues for overcoming the educational challenges refugees face. The hub should possess three specific distinguishing features from other similar organizations:

- The hub should provide all necessary information regarding the educational resources, laws, countries' policies, and local organizations in the countries that exist for Afghan refugees.
- The center should connect various organizations, NGOs, institutions, and individuals that support Afghan refugees' education through different means. It should create a platform for multiple stakeholders to work together over a common goal.
- The information should be easily accessible and contain concise, up-to-date, and easy-to-understand content in both local –Dari and Pashtu – and English languages.

Gathering and managing all necessary information will not only fill the information gap for the refugees but also helps individual organizations with their strategic planning, having access to up-to-date data about refugees, mobilizing resources, and ensuring funding for a complete cycle of education. Countless initiatives have taken place to address and resolve refugees' education challenges. Yet only a small portion of refugees has access to quality education. An education information hub will not resolve the problem either. But, providing accurate and required information and exploring global and local resources for the provision of education and the public sector's commitment to international action will contribute to achieving universal access to education, as formalized in the Education for All Declaration.

Conclusion

Access to quality education is the most pressing challenge for children and young Afghan refugees, as well as various stakeholders, such as governments, civil society, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) worldwide, to resolve the challenge. Hundreds of thousands of initiatives and investments of millions of aids have been unable to completely address the problem and make the refugees' access to education possible due to the affluence of challenges that refugees face. Sometimes refugees have to knock on tens of doors to receive the information and services they need to access education. While establishing an information hub on education for Afghan refugees will not resolve the problem completely, it can provide a set of holistic information that direct them toward an educational path. It is one of many steps that can be taken to protect the right to education for Afghan refugees. The realization of refugees' right to education is a global and transnational challenge that must be overcome through cooperative means and in closer and better coordination. Education for Afghans who flee their country must be planned and considered a global concern with protracted situations. Refugee education should not be perceived as a short-term crisis intervention but as a long-term solution for strengthening community resilience and equipping learners with knowledge and skills.

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