

POLICY BRIEF:

**Expanding Refugee Access to
National Education Systems: The
State of the Evidence on Enabling
Factors, Constraints, and
Interventions**

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co- construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

Access to education remains out of reach for half of refugee children and youth. Average gross enrolment rates stand at 38% for pre-primary, 65% for primary, 41% for secondary and 6% for tertiary education.¹ Despite increasing research, evidence remains limited of what works, how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost to improve refugee student access in countries of first asylum to national education systems (NES). To inform evidence-based decision making across policy, practice, advocacy and research, the ERICC² programme reviewed and synthesised existing research on refugee access to NES. This policy brief summarises actionable findings from the ERICC Evidence Review: Expanding Refugee Access to National Education Systems: The State of the Evidence (forthcoming)³ to further highlight evidence gaps and research needs. These findings may be particularly useful for government agencies, donor organisations, humanitarian and development actors, and research bodies.

The policy brief describes the substantive, methodological and geographic scope of existing evidence on refugee student access to NES. It then presents findings about six global-, regional- and national-level enabling factors and constraints for refugee student access to NES: financing, education infrastructure and sector capacity, political will and support for refugee inclusion, governance and coordination arrangements, non-state actor engagement and data systems. Local and child-level risk and protective factors further influencing refugee access to NES are presented in the third section of the brief, including: gender, socioeconomic and legal status, language barriers, perceptions of education relevance, and xenophobia, gender-based violence and intolerance. The fourth section synthesises evidence on interventions used in refugee-hosting contexts to improve student access: global and regional frameworks that support refugee inclusion; double shift schools; recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning, flexible learning programmes, and host country language acquisition; cash transfers; and school feeding.

Finally, this brief presents research needs which stakeholders can prioritise to significantly improve the evidence base for (cost-)effective, inclusive and scalable interventions that enhance refugee student access to education.

A. State of Evidence

Following a rigorous process of identifying literature, controlling for quality, and coding against the ERICC Conceptual Framework,⁴ 82 studies were included in ERICC's evidence review. Of these studies, 80%⁵ focused on identifying needs and describing the status quo, e.g. country- or school-level enactment of refugee inclusion, factors influencing policy approaches to refugee inclusion, refugee

¹ UNHCR. (2024). Global trends: Forced displacement in 2023. UNHCR.

² Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) is a large-scale programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. ERICC aims to expand and deepen operational and policy-relevant evidence to support bold reform in education delivery in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts. The programme is implemented in seven countries: Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

³ ERICC Evidence Review: Expanding Refugee Access to National Education Systems: The State of the Evidence (forthcoming)

⁴ Kim, H.Y., Tubbs Dolan, C., Aber, J.L. (2022). A Conceptual Framework for Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC). ERICC Working Paper No.1.

⁵ Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

experiences of accessing NES, and institutional opportunities and challenges in facilitating refugee access. Of the 82 studies reviewed, 11% were concerned with assessing how interventions work, 7% with measuring how well interventions work, 7% with estimating cost efficiency and effectiveness of interventions, and 1% with designing interventions to expand education access for refugees. Most of the evidence reviewed was produced via descriptive methods (74%) or literature reviews and synthesis (26%) but rarely through quasi-experimental (6%) or experimental (1%) methods.⁶ This evidence was generated from studies predominantly in the Middle East (70%), East Africa and Chad (54%) and Bangladesh and Pakistan in South Asia (16%).⁷

B. Enabling Factors and Constraints

This section outlines six global-, regional- and national-level enabling factors and constraints identified in the literature as influencing refugee student access to NES.

- **International and domestic financing:** Global frameworks that promote refugee inclusion are based on the long-standing principle of responsibility sharing. Yet, international financing for refugee education has well-documented limitations, including inadequate, unpredictable, inflexible and short-term support; donor fatigue due to competing crises and priorities; and lack of support for infrastructure or recurring costs, including teacher salaries.
- **Sector capacity and infrastructure:** In many countries of first asylum, education systems are overstretched prior to refugees' arrival. Inadequate physical infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and shortage of space and teachers, including female teachers, represent a significant barrier to expanding access for more students.
- **Political will:** Strong host government leadership and willingness to accept refugees and integrate them into NES is evidenced in the literature as a critical foundation for the development of laws and standards that support education access for refugees. At the same time, given global commitments to share responsibility for hosting refugees, sustained political will and long-term donor support are also central to the refugee inclusion agenda.
- **Effective governance and coordination arrangements:** Governments' success in implementing public sector reforms is central to expanding education access in refugee-hosting contexts. In addition to strong governance, evidence suggests that clear institutional arrangements for supporting refugee education, communication between ministries dealing with education, migration and crisis response as well as coherent coordination between government, UN and NGOs support refugee access to NES.
- **Non-state actor engagement:** Non-state actors, including community- and refugee-led initiatives, can play a valuable role in supporting expanded access to refugee-hosting NES across all education levels.
- **Data availability:** Data limitations complicate what is known about policy implementation and effectiveness. They restrict decision makers' ability to adequately respond to the needs of refugee and host community learners and to allocate scarce resources to where they are needed most.

⁶ The sum is greater than 100% because some studies were coded in more than one category.

⁷ Ibid.

Key Takeaways

- Future research can help clarify the costs of refugee inclusion in NES and explore realistic arrangements for equitable and effective international responsibility sharing.
- Evidence shows that high national education budgets (as a percentage of GDP) can facilitate refugees' access to NES.
- Significant investment in NES, including through strong multi-stakeholder partnerships and multi-year financing, can be an enabling factor for refugee student inclusion.
- Processes of national planning and reform can be windows of opportunity for advocating and institutionalising refugee student access to NES and for addressing the needs of under-resourced host communities.
- Limited research exists on how non-state actors, including community and refugee groups, can support learners' transition to formal schooling, expand education access and strengthen the inclusivity of NES.
- Attention is needed to build data systems that can support evidence-based policy approaches to expanding education access for displaced and host community students.
- There is strong global consensus on the value of including refugees into NES. However, this may not always be feasible or in the best interests of learners, at least in the short to medium term. Future research could explore under which conditions refugee inclusion is the best policy option.

Existing evidence suggests the factors above play a significant role in facilitating or inhibiting the access of refugee students to NES in host countries. The next section outlines local and child-level risk and protective factors for refugee access to NES.

C. Risk and Protective Factors

At the local and individual levels, refugees' access to NES can depend on their area of residence, country of origin, year of arrival and a range of intersectional vulnerabilities, including gender, socioeconomic and legal status, and language, even in the context of inclusive policies. In terms of **gender**, forced migration greatly increases girls' vulnerability to exclusion from and discrimination in education, to gender-based violence (GBV) and to early marriage, pregnancy and housework. It can also increase boys' vulnerability to sexual violence, to segregation and movement restrictions and/or to being viewed as a threat. The indirect costs of education – such as for uniforms, books and transportation – are a well-documented barrier to refugee student access to NES as they raise the opportunity cost of enrolment in the absence of **socioeconomic advantage**. This demand-side constraint can be further exacerbated by lacking **legal status**, which may cause outright denial of refugee students' right to education. **Language** of instruction in NES is another widely cited impediment to refugee student access, with effective second language instruction for refugees often lacking. **Xenophobia, GBV and intolerance** are well-documented further barriers to refugee school attendance. Refugee inclusion in NES can exacerbate these dynamics as the sharing of limited educational resources can strain host systems, causing tension between individuals and groups and leading to bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools. Finally, existing evidence suggests that **low-quality education and uncertainty about the relevance and usefulness of gaining certification**, as compared

to the immediacy of gaining financial security, is a widespread barrier to refugee education access. Challenges accessing opportunities to earn a productive livelihood also demotivate students and represent a disincentive for youth participation in education.

Key Takeaways

- Future research can help identify the profiles of learners who face additional barriers in order to support the development of interventions that address intersectional vulnerabilities.
- Although indirect costs of education are not unique to refugees, they are exacerbated in communities where poverty levels are high and where refugees are not allowed to enter formal employment.
- Research is needed to design policies and programmes to address inter-group tensions and improve group-level cohesion, safety and belonging.
- High-quality and continuing second language instruction for refugees at all school levels by properly trained teachers and using appropriate teaching materials is often lacking in low-income countries of first asylum.
- Research is needed to understand how best to structure school-to-work pathways to meet refugee education needs while aligning education opportunities with realistic future livelihood prospects and national development goals.
- With secondary education enrolment rates for refugees at less than half the global average, being a refugee between the age of 12 and 24 is closely connected to a lack of educational opportunities.

D. Extant Evidence About What Works to Improve Refugee Access to NES

This section synthesises evidence on seven interventions related to expanding refugee access to NES in countries of first asylum. While this evidence review focuses on refugee students, it is critical that all interventions include vulnerable host community students through equitable and conflict-sensitive approaches.

- **Global and regional frameworks:** A range of global and regional policies have been enacted to support refugee access to host country national systems, including education, e.g. the Djibouti Declaration of 2017 and the Global Compact for Refugees of 2018. Enactment of these policies comes amid strong global consensus on the value of including refugees into NES as soon as possible. However, there is limited evidence on the influence of these global and regional agreements on the inclusiveness of national education policy or education outcomes for refugees.
- **Double shift schools:** Existing research raises concerns about compromised quality of education in double shift schools due to reduced instruction time, limited extracurricular activities, overworked teachers and segregated students. Other research argues double shift schools can expand access, reduce overcrowding and address teacher shortage issues.
- **Administrative requirements and recognition of prior learning:** Various approaches have been implemented to reduce documentation and certification restrictions to school access, including allowing public schools to enrol refugees without identification, expanding access to birth registration and issuing accessible school identification documents. These initiatives are widely considered to be low-cost, low-risk interventions that support education access.

- **Flexible learning programmes:** Interventions such as accelerated education and basic literacy and numeracy programmes, bridging classes and language instruction are widely implemented to support out-of-school refugee students in accessing, completing and progressing through different levels of education. Experimental and quasi-experimental evidence on the impact of flexible learning programmes on access and retention in NES is limited. Case study research suggests that, where possible, accelerated education programmes should be certified, aligned with national curriculum, and designed in a way that can eventually be included in the national system.
- **Host country language acquisition:** Supporting refugee students (and their families and communities) in learning the language of their host country is widely considered good practice, which can be offered as part of accelerated or bridging programmes and integrate the refugee students' home language and cultural background.
- **Cash transfers:** Cash transfer programmes can alleviate the high opportunity cost of education for refugees and support their transition to formal education. Evidence from low- and middle- income contexts suggests cash transfers can improve enrolment, attendance, completion and dropout rates; however, in refugee-hosting contexts these potential positive effects are contingent on adequate education sector capacity, a favourable policy environment and positive support to refugee students.
- **School feeding:** Evidence from low- and middle-income country contexts suggest that school feeding interventions have a strong effect on school enrolment and attendance, in addition to providing a wide range of individual and social benefits.

Key Takeaways

- There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of government-led initiatives to increase access for refugees to NES. Future research could explore government-led approaches to expanding NES capacities to meet the needs of refugee and host community learners.
- Experimental and quasi-experimental evidence is limited on the impact of flexible learning programmes on refugee access to and continuation in NES.
- There is limited evidence on the impact and cost effectiveness of language-related interventions to support refugee access to education.
- More research is needed to evidence the role of technology in facilitating refugees' access to certified national distance learning programmes and/or in supporting their transition to formal in-person schooling.
- More rigorous evidence is needed on the group-differential impact, cost effectiveness, and scaling and localisation opportunities for cash transfer programmes.
- There is limited research on refugee teachers within the context of the inclusion agenda. Future research can identify promising practices to enable refugee teachers to contribute to host country education systems, expand access, improve teacher quality and support teachers' job continuity.

E. Research Needs

This policy brief has presented key findings from the ERICC's review of evidence about policy and programme interventions to improve refugee student access to NES in countries of first asylum. These

findings outline the need for substantially more research to address identified evidence deficits. To do so, stakeholders should:

- **Fund efforts to develop robust research frameworks**, to build theories of change and facilitate the design of evidence-based interventions tailored to unique challenges facing refugee and vulnerable host community learners.
- **Expand the scope of research**, including through funding and supporting studies in local languages and considering diverse research paradigms, to advance understanding of the educational landscape for refugee students.
- **Support causal research**, including quasi-experimental research, to ensure rigour in both evaluating interventions' efficacy and identifying contingencies and any group differentials in observed impact.
- **Systemise assessing implementation quality and evaluating intervention efficacy**, including by developing clear metrics to estimate cost per planned output and then reporting cost per change in outcome, for improvement and transparency.
- **Encourage collaborative research partnerships** between local researchers, educational institutions and international organisations to ensure research is contextually relevant and grounded in the realities faced by refugee communities.

By addressing these research needs, stakeholders can significantly improve the evidence base for (cost-)effective, inclusive and scalable interventions that enhance refugee student access to education.

