

Education and self-reliance in Egypt

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Education has the potential to empower urban refugees to maximise their options, compensate for their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis local citizens and build a more secure future.

The increasing presence of refugees in urban settings poses some unique challenges. Urban refugees are expected to become self-sufficient more readily than their camp-based counterparts who, often prevented from engaging in subsistence or income-generating activities, are typically assumed to require ongoing assistance.

The reality, however, is that urban refugees' capacity for self-reliance is often severely constrained as well, with restrictions placed on their right to work and on their entitlements to critical forms of social support. Those coming from rural areas may be at a higher risk of impoverishment and marginalisation if they lack the skills needed to operate successfully in an alien urban environment. Adequate educational and training interventions can help refugees in urban settings to overcome some of these obstacles.

Barriers to education for forced migrants in urban settings include difficulties in regularising their status and obtaining necessary documentation, communication challenges and lack of awareness of available educational opportunities. The link between education and increased self-reliance can also be compromised when legal and structural restrictions prevent refugees, whatever their level of education or training, from working.

The significance of education

UNHCR's guidelines on urban refugees¹ emphasise the promotion of self-reliance among refugees, with education and vocational training initiatives designed to support the acquisition of the essential life skills that can enable urban refugees to become autonomous members of their host societies.

Some of the educational problems encountered by urban refugees are similar to those facing other vulnerable groups within urban areas. For the urban poor, school fees, uniforms, books and other school materials may be unaffordable and transportation may be too time-consuming and unsafe. At the same time, city-based refugee children often have to compete with local students for limited places in schools. Legal provisions prohibiting refugees – especially those without recognised legal status – from enrolling in public schools are not uncommon, nor is discrimination on the part of school administrators, teachers and even local students.

Many refugee children come from societies where chronological age is not recorded. Most fled situations where conflict, social upheaval and displacement are likely to have disrupted educational services. Those who are – or appear to be – significantly older than the class average may encounter difficulties enrolling in courses at their appropriate educational level. The need to adjust to unfamiliar pedagogical techniques, communicate in a new language and navigate the expectations of the dominant group whose views on religion, gender, race and other cultural values may be alien and unwanted are other obstacles commonly facing urban refugee students.

When enrolment in regular local schools is not a viable option, 'refugee schools' – frequently run by churches or faith-based humanitarian organisations – often provide one of the few opportunities for displaced students in urban areas to acquire an education and recover a measure of normalcy. They are, however, far from being a panacea. Limited resources, reliance on volunteer

staff, high rates of turnover and inconsistent curricula are some common difficulties. Their most problematic feature is the lack of official accreditation; students attending refugee schools which are not officially recognised are likely to be prevented from enrolling in higher education institutions regardless of the educational level they have achieved.

Working towards self-reliance

When formal education is not a realistic option, job-related training may open another door to economic independence for urban refugees who are effectively forced to work in a cash economy. They are less likely to receive the kind of direct financial assistance provided to many camp-based refugees and, given the higher expenses associated with urban living, must rely on alternative forms of income generation.

In effect, the majority of the forced migrants living in urban areas – especially those in the global south – support themselves through participation in the informal economy, although those with higher levels of education may be able to find better paid employment as, for instance, teachers in refugee schools, interpreters or within humanitarian agencies. Programmes seeking to enhance the self-reliance of forced migrants in urban areas are thus likely to include apprenticeships and vocational training initiatives or skills training in cottage industries, particularly for women. However, restrictions on the right to work often make it impossible for even well-educated workers and those trained in vocational skills to find a position in the formal sector suitable for their qualifications.

The case of Cairo

There are no refugee camps in Egypt. Virtually all displaced persons in the country reside in two large urban centres – Cairo and, in smaller numbers, Alexandria. The Egyptian government's official position towards refugees is characterised by its unwillingness to permit refugees legal integration into Egyptian society. Refugee parents without legal status are unable to register their children. Complicated bureaucratic procedures, overcrowded schools and xenophobic attitudes are additional difficulties, as is the fact that many refugee parents object to the Islamic curricula taught in Arabic in government schools. Unaccredited refugee schools, many of which teach in English, are the only realistic alternative for many refugee students in Egypt – but, unable to obtain recognised school certification, the majority of them are then barred from pursuing a higher education.

The link between education and self-reliance for refugees in Egypt is further compromised by factors regulating the labour market for refugees. The informal sector of the economy generally provides the only income-generating opportunities available to them. The difficult economic situation, high unemployment levels and pressure on the education system contribute to making education, income generation and self-reliance difficult to achieve for city-based displaced populations in Egypt.

Conclusions and recommendations

UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies regard education as a basic human right, a tool for protection and an essential component of humanitarian assistance to displaced populations. They typically adopt a utilitarian view of the role of education in urban displacement that favours local integration and encourages refugees to become educated and learn the skills needed to become self-reliant. Education is a highly desired goal for most refugee communities. However, legal restrictions, structural conditions and cultural factors may erode education's promise as a pathway towards

their increased self-reliance. It is, therefore, imperative that these limitations be adequately addressed.

Recommendations to make educational opportunities more easily available to urban refugees and to enhance their chances of becoming self-reliant include:

- avoiding the imposition of local curricula perceived as undermining the cultural values and practices of the displaced population, especially when local integration is not a desired goal
- supporting church-run schools and other institutions that accept refugee students, and working with local education authorities to ensure that these schools are granted full accreditation
- providing long-term assistance in the form of scholarships and education grants, and helping students to enrol in private schools if public ones are not accessible
- disaggregating data on education, livelihood strategies and other factors affecting urban refugees by age and gender, as women, men, children and the elderly are likely to have different needs and seek different solutions
- implementing programmes to address the special needs of young adults with limited or no schooling.

Adequate educational and training opportunities can enhance urban refugees' capacity for establishing sustainable livelihoods and mitigate the risks of life on the margins of urban society although by themselves these initiatives are unlikely to address all the challenges of urban displacement.

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1. UNHCR policy paper on urban refugees (IOM/25/97 – FOM30/97), further elaborated in the document UNHCR Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas (IOM/90/97-FOM95/97). <http://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.html>



Refugee children at St Andrew's Refugee Services 'refugee school' in Cairo.

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