

# UNHCR's education challenges

by Eva Ahlen

**UNHCR is committed to realising the right to free and safe quality education for refugees but funding is limited and education has not been included in the Cluster Approach.<sup>1</sup>**

*“We thank you for helping us, giving us food, shelter, medicines, but the best that you have done for us was to give our children education. Food and other things we will finish but education will always be there wherever we go.”*

*(Ethiopian refugee father, 2003)*

UNHCR has education programmes in 97 countries, implemented by 200 international or national NGOs. However the agency has only two dedicated education posts, one at Geneva HQ and the other in South Sudan. UNHCR has recognised

serious gaps in provision and quality of its education support:

- A third of refugee children and adolescents are out of school in the 23 countries for which reliable data is available: the actual

figure of refugee children not attending school is far higher.

- Only a third of refugee students in secondary school are girls.
- Less than two thirds of teachers in refugee schools have qualifications and only a third of female teachers are qualified.
- Early marriage and gender discrimination deprive many girls of educational opportunities.
- Vocational training, non-formal and secondary education are often neglected and receive insufficient



support. This means adolescents face major protection risks.

- refugee and host communities often fail to monitor the quality and safety of the education of their children.
- education ministries – in host countries and countries of origin – are often insufficiently engaged with refugee education programmes.
- accurate data on the situation of urban refugee children is not available.

UNHCR will focus attention on the right of refugees to education in order to support their capacity to find durable solutions and to enhance their own protection. The agency will:

- strengthen the capacity of its staff and partners through training and dissemination of policies and guidelines
- undertake annual country reviews and data compilation and analysis based on minimum standards and indicators in education.
- support countries in which gaps are identified
- facilitate establishment of national and community-based education committees comprising refugee communities, local authorities, relevant organisations and agencies
- develop a standardised refugee teachers' training manual prioritising prevention

of gender-based violence, addressing HIV/AIDS and tackling in-school violence and discrimination in order to ensure safe access to school and provide life skills training

- endeavour to include non-formal education and vocational training in UNHCR education programmes
- advocate for increased and improved access to secondary education, especially for refugee girls through community-based activities and partnerships
- continue support for tertiary education through the DAFI initiative<sup>2</sup>
- increase the number of education officers: they will be deployed in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council
- develop guidelines on safety in school to address protection risks especially for girls
- develop an Education Assessment and Programming Tool to enable staff to undertake situation analysis and develop education strategies
- compile a handbook on good practice
- strengthen partnerships with sister UN agencies through revision and operationalisation of memoranda of understanding
- work closely with other partners and alliances such as the Inter-

Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE).

Education can save lives and promote a productive life. It provides protection from recruitment and exploitation (although educational institutions themselves can become targets) and it offers stability and normalcy.

It is unfortunate that repatriation processes often result in premature termination of refugee education programmes in host countries before proper mechanisms have been established in countries of origin. Closing of schools can push refugees to return to insecure circumstances, often increasing protection risks, especially for girls.

In post-conflict situations it is important that all stakeholders are mobilised to plan educational programmes prior to return. Curricula, teacher training and certification procedures in host countries must be recognised in the country of origin. Cross-border coordination is required to organise 'go and see' and 'come and tell' visits to reassure returnees that education is to be provided. The conditions in areas of return should be improved by renovation of schools, training of teachers and provision of materials. Teachers must be provided with incentives to return – for often salaries are higher and more dependable in host countries. Recruitment of teachers upon return – particularly female teachers – needs to be ensured.

It is time that education became an integral part of all reintegration programmes to ensure continuity and a holistic approach to protection.

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*This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of UNHCR.*

1. See Tim Morris, 'UNHCR, IDPs and clusters', FMR25, [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2531.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2531.pdf)  
2. Funded by the German government, and jointly administered by the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund and UNHCR, the DAFI scholarship scheme contributes to the self-reliance of refugees by enabling them to secure professional qualifications for future employment.