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Inter-sectoral cooperation for Afghan refugee education in Iran

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A recent decree in Iran removed a legal barrier to undocumented refugee children attending school but other barriers remain. One NGO discusses the successes and challenges of adopting an inter-sectoral approach to breaking down these barriers.

Iran hosts over three and half million displaced Afghans. Some 951,000 Afghans have de facto refugee status through the *Amayesh* scheme,¹ which allows them to live and move within the province in which they are registered; 620,000 hold passports with temporary visas; and an additional 1.5 to 2 million undocumented Afghans live in Iran without legal status. The last group is the most vulnerable, having almost no legal access to essential services.

The Iranian government has always granted documented refugee children access to the public education system but children without documentation did not have the same privilege until recently. In May 2015, a new decree opened up school registration for all undocumented Afghan children. Their families can now apply for a 'blue card' – the education pass that facilitates school registration for their child. Blue card holders and their families are also protected from being sent back to Afghanistan as long as the child is attending school.

This change in policy is a real breakthrough for refugee education in Iran, and there has been a considerable surge in student enrolment numbers. However, the decree only removed the legal/documentation barriers to education. Other barriers remain.

The decree has put additional pressure on an already overstretched public education system, with over-crowded classrooms and a lack of educational materials and equipment. There has been little investment in school infrastructure and, according to media reports, 30% of schools are in poor repair and need rebuilding or refurbishing.²

There is an important financial barrier as well. Many families are unable to afford education-related costs (such as uniforms,

stationery and health checks). The situation is exacerbated if the school is distant and children require transportation. While recent research shows that education is a priority for Afghan parents, some simply cannot afford it. Many children work or have access only to informal education that is less costly but cannot provide formal certification that would allow children to continue their studies. The recent re-introduction of US sanctions against Iran is further exacerbating the financial challenges for the most vulnerable households.

Furthermore, while the decree has provided access to primary education, children find it hard to continue to secondary education. Those lucky enough to do so have few options. Higher education is only available for those who hold passports with visas; vocational training opportunities are limited; and entrepreneurship and small business ownership often operate in the informal economy.

And finally, many of the refugees are in hard-to-reach areas and/or lack documentation, making them harder to find. The education decree, however, provided an opportunity for humanitarian actors to identify and reach many of those families.

A holistic response

It was clear from the beginning that it was not simply a case of supporting families to obtain a blue card and register their children in school. A more holistic response was needed. The assistance provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) therefore combined different practical, in-kind and training components. Most of the schools are mixed, attended by both Afghan and Iranian children. Our shelter teams assessed

the physical state of school buildings and made the necessary repairs, making the learning environments safer and more pleasant. The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) teams refurbished or built facilities such as hand-washing points, latrines and drinking water fountains. WASH teams also delivered hygiene kits and hygiene promotion training to both Iranian and Afghan parents and children. Participating in this training brought the two communities together in an activity important to both. Our information, counselling and legal assistance unit (ICLA), meanwhile, provided information to any undocumented families they encountered about how to obtain the blue card. The ICLA team also provided cash assistance, which could be used to obtain documentation and therefore better access school or to directly pay for education-related costs. And the education teams assessed the schools' needs, providing equipment such as desks, libraries and educational supplies. The education team also supported the Directorate of Education to deliver life skills trainings to Afghan and Iranian parents and teachers.

We had also been collaborating with a government organisation, the Literacy Movement Organisation. Children who required accelerated education programmes – 'catch-up' classes – were enrolled in the organisation's literacy and numeracy classes (accompanied by life skills sessions) and then allowed to enter formal school at the age-appropriate level so that they could sit with children of the same age. This programme was now opened up to undocumented children as well.

Our aim is to apply a comprehensive, integrated approach that will address the family unit as a whole in order to make the home environment as conducive to learning and cognitive development as the school. An integrated approach means addressing the needs of the learning environment as a whole; basic services such as shelter, health, civil documentation and livelihoods are all part of the package – with protection at the core – in order to help families as much as possible to send their children to school and to stay in school. For example, helping a household

to secure a livelihood opportunity for one adult in the family may ensure that a child no longer has to work – and assisting a family to rectify its legal status in the country may mean that the adult has access to a higher number of professions. Additionally, a pilot project that we ran in 2016, in collaboration with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, showed that involving parents in the literacy and numeracy classes along with their children meant that parents' appreciation for the value of education increased. For example, many fathers who had opposed sending their girls to school changed their views and attitudes towards girls' education.

Key elements in this approach

A recent evaluation by an external consultant identified the following elements that contributed to the successes of this approach.³

Decentralised organisational structure:

Moving away from a very centralised way of working (where most decision making was based in the country office) by appointing senior programme managers, specialised programme teams for each core competency, and support teams in each geographical area office has allowed us to focus on high-quality provincial project implementation, including frequent field visits. This structure enables faster expansion, as necessary, to additional provinces where there are unmet education needs. Senior specialists for each core competency, based in Tehran, offer support to different area teams for project implementation. The programme specialists help to design projects, raise important policy-related and technical issues, and provide training for the implementation staff. The specialists are also responsible for the strategic direction and technical quality of the whole country programme.

Concentration of efforts and resources in a limited number of geographical locations:

Focusing from the very beginning on just two provinces – Qom and Kerman – enabled us to make a significant difference to the large Afghan populations living there. Making frequent visits to education

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stakeholders and the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs⁴ (both at a central level in Tehran and at provincial levels in areas of operation) enabled effective relationship building. This concentration of efforts also made it easier to measure the impact of the pilot programme and to draw on lessons learned before expanding the programme geographically.

Integrated inter-sectoral

approach: The technical teams (covering all core competencies and cross-cutting functions) are encouraged to work, as much as possible, as a single integrated team. The teams jointly undertake needs assessment, implementation and monitoring. Sharing of knowledge, experience, contacts and documents is also encouraged between the geographical area teams. This approach was identified as ‘inter-sectoral’ – with work taking place between and among technical sectors. This is distinct from a ‘multi-sectoral’ approach – which could imply separate programming and implementation.

What could we do better?

The external evaluation of our programming indicated two main areas requiring attention. Firstly, meeting the pressing need for additional school spaces requires greater advocacy with donors and the international community to support the Ministry of Education in its endeavour to accommodate all children.

The second area related to the use of cash distributions to improve access to and retention in education. Monitoring of the cash distribution provides some evidence that families are using it towards education, yet the monitoring suggests that more evidence is needed to ascertain whether the money is being spent on education in the way that the integrated approach intended. We are



Afghan children in Iran participating in a ‘peace education through art’ class supported by NRC.

currently looking into the specific use of cash in education programming and discussing possible modalities. One such modality could be introducing some conditionality – such as breaking the payments into instalments with the second instalment given after proof of registration in school. Another modality under consideration is giving cash at registration points at schools and assisting families with the enrolment procedure. A pilot programme will be implemented to determine the most effective way forward.

What challenges remain?

Many barriers remain unaddressed. This inter-sectoral approach may be more effective but, due to lack of funding, our ability to expand learning spaces is limited. The major challenge that the education sector is facing is the costs associated with expansion of schools or construction of new ones. Furthermore, families themselves still face financial barriers, with many relying on their children for income generation.

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Although developments in policy can result in considerable change, they must be accompanied by a strategy for implementation. A change in policy does not immediately translate into results: it does not mean that families are suddenly fully informed of their rights and how to claim them. Education stakeholders must adopt a systematic and sustainable approach in order to ensure that major changes in policies are effectively implemented. This could be facilitated by the ability to undertake more in-depth mapping and analysis of mechanisms regarding school enrolment and registration in order to understand more precisely where the gaps lie and how to address them.

Despite significant efforts by the Government of Iran, the educational needs remain significant. Humanitarian assistance needs to be scaled up, and – in this protracted displacement situation – a longer-term, development approach is also needed, with funding to match. In the meantime, advances like those made in Iran should be showcased

in order to encourage other host countries to adopt similar policies that will help to guarantee the right to basic education for all.

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1. In 2003, Iran introduced a new system known as *Amayesh* (Persian for ‘logistics’ or ‘preparation’) to register all Afghan nationals then in Iran. The vast majority of Afghans arriving since then have not been registered for an *Amayesh* card. Those with *Amayesh* cards are granted protection largely in accordance with entitlements under the 1951 Convention but are required to renew their status every 12–18 months.
2. *Tehran Times* (26 July 2018) bit.ly/TehranTimes-schools
3. Talbot C (2018) *External Evaluation of NRC’s Education Programme in Iran* (funded by European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations).
4. The main government entity in charge of refugee issues and the main partner of international non-governmental humanitarian organisations.