

Private sector engagement in refugee education

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The involvement of the private sector in providing education for Syrian refugees has much to commend it but greater consideration needs to be paid to the ethical and practical concerns that may arise.

Private sector engagement in education has become increasingly appealing to a growing portion of the international community. In the Syrian context, with public education systems in the Middle East struggling to provide for growing refugee populations, high-profile businesses such as Goldman Sachs, Google, Hewlett-Packard, LinkedIn, McKinsey & Company, Microsoft and Pearson Education have made funding commitments, proposed new initiatives and developed partnership arrangements to advance the cause of educating Syrian refugee children.

On the surface, the mobilisation of these and other private sector actors appears commendable. Prominent actors are voicing their concern for refugee education, and businesses may be able to help address crucial educational gaps. Critics, however, argue that the involvement of the private sector can weaken public education systems, undermine state responsibility and even, in contexts of crisis, be seen as exploitation.¹

In pre-war Syria, 94% of children were enrolled in primary and lower secondary education. In August 2016, enrolment figures for Syrian refugee children in formal and non-formal education were estimated at a total of 52% of registered school-age children (aged 5-17) across the region of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt.² Regionally, it is estimated that 739,000 registered Syrian refugee school-age children and adolescents are not enrolled in any type of educational programme.

Based on data collected in the second half of 2016, we identified 144 non-state organisations engaged in Syrian refugee education in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, of which 32% were businesses and 10% were foundations. Of these, 77% were headquartered in the Global North (that is,

in high-income countries) and 62% did not have education as part of their mandate. Interviews with private sector actors and their partners, including representatives from businesses, corporate foundations, UN agencies, local and international NGOs and bilateral donor agencies, indicate some major areas for concern.

Mass proliferation and limited coordination:

The surge in private participation in the education of Syrian refugees is very recent, with most actors beginning to engage only since 2015. The rush to involvement was largely seen as problematic because of the lack of coordination and knowledge sharing among actors.

Dominance of technology: A dominant form of engagement is through the provision of education-related technology, such as online digital learning platforms, online courses, tablets and handsets, portable WiFi hubs for use in schools and the development of new operating systems. Many actors were very critical of this over-emphasis on technology, seeing it as contextually and logistically inappropriate and pedagogically problematic, particularly where it was formulated as an alternative to teachers.

Support for private/non-formal schooling:

Many business actors work collaboratively with governments and ministries of education but many others do not, instead bypassing the public sector and establishing privately run schools. Critics argue that such schools foster a lack of accountability, often hire non-unionised and poorly trained teachers, and lack an exit strategy, potentially leaving students stranded when profits and other forms of returns are no longer considered sufficient and schools have to close.

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Ethics of motivation: There are also ethical tensions between humanitarian and profit motivations. While some private actors express humanitarian aims, for others creating markets, increasing visibility and developing brand loyalty are central motivations.

We found that, despite serious concerns about their motivations, businesses and foundations have a potentially important role to play in supporting the education of Syrian refugees. Given the scale of the impact of the Syrian crisis, it would seem that a reliance solely on traditional public sector engagement in education is both limiting and unrealistic. Furthermore, several corporate actors – both businesses and philanthropic foundations – have made significant strides in meeting educational needs, including by providing financial support to local and international NGOs working in this field.

However, our study also sheds light on the limitations of the private sector in understanding and working within rapidly evolving humanitarian contexts. The global education community needs to ask how to harness the expertise and funds of the private sector in a coordinated and ethical way that is mindful of the state's responsibility to be the primary provider and regulator of quality education.

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1. Research undertaken 2016-17, funded by Education International. See Menashy F and Zakharia Z (2017) *Investing in the crisis: Private participation in the education of Syrian refugees* <http://bit.ly/Menashy-Zakharia-2017>
2. UNHCR (2016) *3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018 in response to the Syria crisis: Regional strategic overview* <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/16434>