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European Union
Humanitarian Aid

Asia Pacific
Refugee Rights
Network



SUMMARY REPORT: REGIONAL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE ON REFUGEE AND STATELESS CHILDREN EDUCATION



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INTRODUCTION:

In November 2023, the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN), with financial assistance from EU Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), co-hosted an online dialogue session on refugee and stateless children education. The session's primary aim was to underline the long-term benefits of inclusive education policies for these vulnerable groups, enabling them to be in a position to actively contribute to and engage with society. Moreover, the aim was also to foster a collaborative spirit among regional stakeholders, emphasising the importance of unified efforts to effectively address the educational challenges faced by refugee and stateless children.

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right, vital not only for individual development but also for the progress of societies. This right is enshrined in numerous international conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that every child should have access to education irrespective of their status or background. For refugee and stateless children, education is not just a right but a beacon of hope and a tool for shaping a more stable and promising future. Education plays a transformative role in the lives of refugee learners. It serves as an anchor, providing a sense of normalcy and stability amidst the chaos and uncertainty that often characterise their lives. Through education, children can acquire not only academic knowledge but also essential life skills, which are crucial for their social integration, personal development and future self-reliance.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

The consultation convened a diverse array of stakeholders, encompassing experts from non-governmental organisations, academia, and representatives from refugee communities. The participants brought forth varied perspectives on the educational challenges and opportunities for refugee and stateless children.

ENHANCING SOLUTIONS TO DISPLACEMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

For refugee learners, education is a pathway to overcoming the trauma and dislocation they have experienced. It offers an environment for healing and growth, allowing them to nurture their potential and develop resilience. Education also equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute meaningfully to their host communities and, eventually, to the reconstruction and development of their home countries, should they choose to return. Moreover, it may also lead to resettlement, complementary pathways or integration in the host communities. The provision of education to refugee and stateless children is, therefore, an investment in the future and solutions to displacement. Educated individuals are better equipped to find employment, contribute economically, and participate actively in society. Securing the educational rights of refugee learners not only upholds their basic human rights but also contributes to creating more inclusive, stable, and prosperous societies.

Education also plays a pivotal role in the cultural integration of refugee children. Schools can be platforms where these children learn about and engage with the culture of their host countries while preserving and respecting their own cultural identities. This dual engagement fosters a sense of belonging and identity, which is crucial for their psychological well-being and social integration.

KEY CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

The dialogue brought to light a spectrum of challenges impeding access to education for refugee and stateless children. These include linguistic hurdles and cultural barriers that often leave these children alienated within educational systems which are not tailored to their unique backgrounds. Financial limitations were also underscored as a significant impediment, stemming from the refugees' circumstances and the insufficient funding channels for their education. Furthermore, the dialogue highlighted the bureaucratic and legal barriers that these children face, especially in terms of obtaining necessary documentation and complying with administrative prerequisites for school enrolment.

Conversely, the dialogue focused on prospects for enhancing these children's access to education. The potential for collaborative efforts, policy reforms, and innovative educational models to bridge these gaps was optimistically regarded as a pathway to transformative change.

A key insight from the dialogue was the imperative of a holistic and collaborative approach to tackle these educational challenges. It was emphasised that the integration of refugee and stateless children into educational systems is not just a matter of legal and administrative adjustment but also a cultural and societal endeavour. The significant role of education in empowering these children and enabling them to integrate effectively into society was reiterated, highlighting education not only as a fundamental right but also as a vital instrument for social change. The key barriers discussed are further described below:



1 LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL BARRIERS: In the Asia-Pacific, the diversity of languages and cultures presents a significant challenge for refugee and stateless children. Many of these children come from backgrounds that are linguistically and culturally distinct from their host countries. This disparity can lead to difficulties in communication, learning, and social integration within local educational systems. Moreover, the lack of culturally responsive teaching methods and materials further exacerbates these challenges, making it hard for these children to connect with the curriculum and participate effectively in the classroom.



2 FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND RESOURCE GAPS: Another major challenge is financial constraints. Many countries in this region, while hosting significant numbers of refugees and stateless persons, face their own economic challenges. This situation often results in limited resources being allocated for the education of refugee and stateless children. The lack of dedicated funding streams for refugee education leads to inadequate educational facilities, a shortage of trained teachers, and insufficient learning materials. Additionally, many refugee families struggle with poverty, making it difficult for them to support their children's education, especially when it comes to additional costs like transportation, uniforms, and school supplies.



3 LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE OBSTACLES: The legal and administrative framework in many countries often does not adequately cater to the needs of refugee and stateless children. In some cases, these children are not recognised by the legal system, which effectively bars them from accessing formal education. The lack of documentation is a widespread issue, with many children unable to prove their identity or eligibility for education. Furthermore, national policies in several countries either restrict the access of refugee children to public schools or do not have clear guidelines on their educational rights, leading to inconsistent application and uncertainty.



4 GENDER DISPARITIES: Cultural norms and safety concerns disproportionately affect girls, often resulting in lower enrolment rates in schools. In many refugee communities, girls are less likely to be sent to school due to traditional gender roles or fears regarding their safety. This situation is further aggravated in the context of higher education, where female refugee students face even greater barriers.



5 ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: Many refugee and stateless children do not have the necessary academic qualifications, documentation, or financial means to pursue higher education. Moreover, there is often a mismatch between the educational backgrounds of these students and the requirements of higher education institutions in host countries. The availability of scholarships and support programs for refugees in higher education is limited, and when available, they often do not cover the full range of needs, such as living expenses and language training.

REGIONAL ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

The dialogue resulted in several key advocacy recommendations. Prominent among these is the need for cross-sectoral partnerships that bring together different stakeholders to collaboratively address the educational challenges faced by refugee and stateless children. There was a strong call for policy reforms that recognise and ensure the educational rights of these children. Advocacy efforts should also focus on promoting inclusive education systems that cater to the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of refugee and stateless children, ensuring that they have equitable access to quality education.

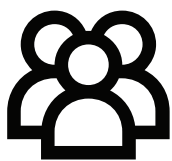
During the consultation, various long and short-term recommendations were discussed, mainly around effective use of technology to overcome the barriers mentioned above. Long-term recommendations proposed focus on structural changes and sustainable solutions. Advocating for amendments in national legislation to recognise and accommodate the educational needs of refugee and stateless children is crucial. Establishing permanent financial solutions, like dedicated scholarship programs and funding channels, can ensure consistent support. International collaboration for resource sharing and the exchange of best practices can also play a pivotal role in enhancing educational access for these children.

STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS	
	SHORT TERM	LONG TERM
RLOs, NGOs, UN System & Donors	<p>Implementing Language Support Programs and Transitional Classes: To bridge the language barrier, language support programs and transitional classes are crucial. These classes can be augmented with technology, such as language learning apps and online tutoring, to provide flexible and accessible learning opportunities.</p> <p>Use of Technology for Education: Incorporating technology into educational programs for refugees has the potential to significantly transform and enhance their learning experience. Online learning platforms, educational apps, and digital libraries can provide these children access to a wealth of resources and learning materials, regardless of their physical location. This approach is particularly effective when traditional schooling is not immediately accessible.</p> <p>Partnerships with EdTech Companies: Forming partnerships with educational technology companies can provide refugees access to cutting-edge learning tools and content. These collaborations can result in customised educational programs that cater to the specific needs of refugee learners.</p>	<p>Advocacy for Legislative Changes: Advocacy efforts should be directed towards amending national legislation to recognise and meet the educational needs of refugee and stateless children. This includes ensuring their legal right to education and removing policy barriers that hinder access to schooling.</p>
Donor Community		<p>International Collaboration and Resource Sharing: Fostering international collaboration for resource sharing and the exchange of best practices is crucial. This can involve partnerships between governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and international bodies to pool resources, expertise, and educational materials.</p>
Governments	<p>Providing Temporary Documentation for School Enrolment: Facilitating school enrolment through temporary documentation is vital. Digital platforms can streamline this process, making it faster and more efficient for refugees to obtain the necessary paperwork and gain access to educational institutions.</p>	<p>Building Sustainable Educational Infrastructure: Investment in sustainable educational infrastructure, particularly in regions with high numbers of refugees, is vital. This includes building schools equipped with the necessary resources and technology, and training teachers to address the specific needs of refugee learners.</p>
Community-Based Organisation	<p>Crowdfunding Campaigns and Community-Based Funding: Leveraging crowdfunding platforms and community-based funding initiatives can effectively mobilise resources. These digital campaigns can reach a global audience, raising awareness and funds to support educational programs for refugee children to overcome financial barriers.</p>	
All Stakeholders		<p>Establishing Permanent Financial Solutions: Developing dedicated scholarship programs and stable funding channels is key. These could include endowments, government funding, and partnerships with international organisations. Such financial solutions will provide consistent support and reduce the uncertainty that often accompanies temporary funding.</p> <p>Focus on Comprehensive Educational Programs: Developing comprehensive educational programs that go beyond basic literacy and numeracy to include vocational training, life skills, and psychosocial support, tailored to the unique challenges faced by refugee children.</p> <p>Community Engagement and Involvement: Engaging with refugee communities in the planning and implementation of educational programs. This ensures that the education provided is relevant and culturally sensitive and fosters a sense of ownership and participation among refugees.</p>

By integrating these recommendations with a focus on technology, we can create more inclusive and effective educational environments for refugee and stateless children, ensuring they have immediate access to the learning opportunities they need.

CONCLUSION & WAY FORWARD

To address the identified challenges, the dialogue proposed a number of policy suggestions and actions as the way forward for stakeholders. Forming special committees to address the citizenship issues of stateless children can provide a more structured approach to resolving their legal status, which is often a prerequisite for accessing education. Ensuring that refugee children with UNHCR cards have access to formal education can help in mainstreaming their educational journey. Additionally, encouraging universities to advocate for better documentation processes and to provide scholarship provisions for refugees can open doors to higher education, which is currently a significant gap. Detailed suggestions are:



FORMING SPECIAL COMMITTEES FOR CITIZENSHIP ISSUES: Establish special committees dedicated to addressing the citizenship and legal status issues of stateless children. These committees can work towards providing structured solutions, facilitating the process of obtaining legal status, which is often a critical barrier to accessing education.



ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH UNHCR CARDS: Implement policies ensuring that children holding UNHCR identification cards are granted access to formal education systems. This step is vital for mainstreaming their educational journey and ensuring they are not left behind.



ADVOCATING FOR STREAMLINED DOCUMENTATION PROCESSES: Encourage universities and higher education institutions to advocate for streamlined documentation processes for refugees. Simplifying these processes can make it easier for refugee students to enrol in higher education programs.

Scholarship Provisions for Refugees: Universities and educational institutions should be encouraged to provide dedicated scholarship programs for refugee students. These scholarships can help bridge the gap in higher education access, providing opportunities for advanced learning and skill development.



POLICY INTEGRATION ACROSS SECTORS: Encourage the integration of these policy suggestions across different sectors and ministries. Education policies for refugees should be coordinated with immigration, social services, and foreign affairs departments to ensure a holistic approach.

International Collaboration and Funding: Seek international collaboration and funding to support these policy initiatives. Partnerships with international organisations, NGOs, and foreign governments can provide the necessary resources and expertise for implementing these policies effectively.



MONITORING AND EVALUATION MECHANISMS: Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these policies. Continuous evaluation will help in making necessary adjustments and ensuring that the policies are meeting their intended goals.

Public Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns: Launch public awareness and advocacy campaigns to garner support for these policies. Educating the public and policymakers about the importance of addressing the educational needs of refugee and stateless children can lead to broader societal support and political will.

By implementing these specific policy suggestions, governments and educational institutions can make significant strides in providing equitable education opportunities to refugee and stateless children, thereby helping them integrate into their host societies and to foster long-term economic and social contributions.

The strategic dialogue underscored the critical need for inclusive and equitable education for refugees and stateless children. Achieving this goal requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, encompassing policy reforms, advocacy initiatives, and collaborative actions. The dialogue reaffirmed the transformative impact of education on the lives of these children, not only as a fundamental right but also as a crucial step towards solutions, their empowerment and integration as active and contributing global citizens.

