

**Forum:** General Assembly

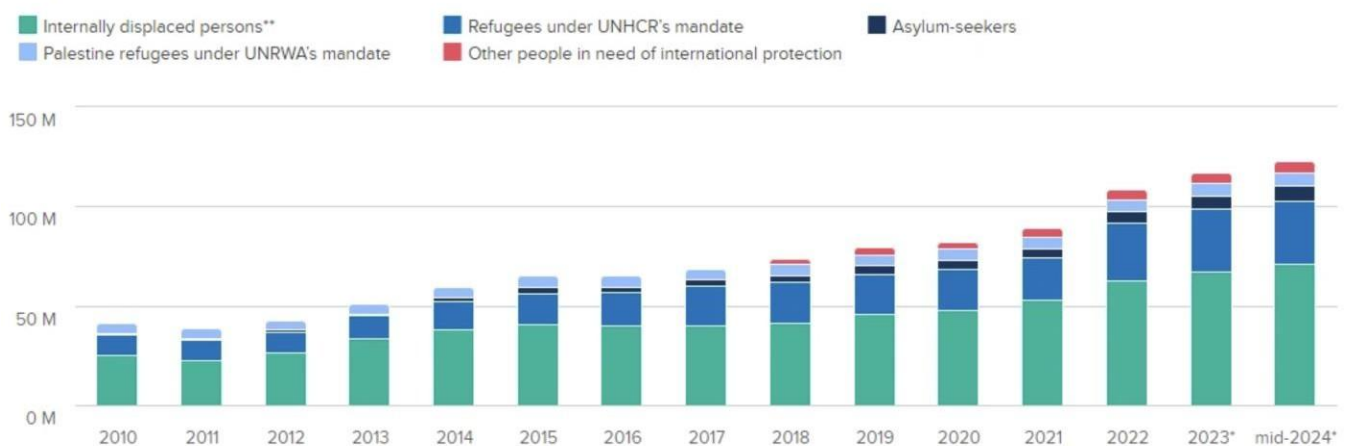
**Issue:** Ensuring Equitable Access to Education for Refugees and Displaced Persons

**Student Officer:** ChuChu Wen

**Position:** Deputy President

## Introduction

**People forced to flee | 2010 – mid-2024**



**Figure 1:** Bar showing the population of people who are forced to flee (UNHCR)

The global displacement crisis, driven by conflict, persecution, and environmental factors, represents one of the most significant challenges to international development and human dignity in the 21st century. Central to this challenge is the systemic disruption of education for millions of refugees and displaced people. According to UNICEF, as of 2016, 28 million or 1 in 80 children were living in forced displacement. Displacement disrupts learning due to legal and economic barriers, language difficulties, under-resourced facilities, trauma, and social tensions.

This gap in education has become increasingly large and complicated. As of the end of 2023, the UNHCR declared the forced displacement surged to a record of 117.3 million people globally (also shown in figure 1 above). Critically, the duration of displacement is now often measured in decades, with the average refugee situation lasting over 20 years, establishing whole generations of people vulnerable to being lost in a history of poverty and instability. Although the enrollment of refugees in primary schools has increased to 65%, the report on education by UNHCR (2023) reveals that the enrollment of refugees in secondary schools is only 41%, and 6% in the tertiary level, which is in sharp contrast to global averages. Moreover, the burden on the host

nations are immense, as low, and middle-income countries are the ones that accommodate 75% of the global refugees, frequently in the areas where their education systems are already strained to the end. The effects of such a gap are drastic because without access to quality education, displaced youth are exposed to increased chances of child labor, exploitation, recruitment in armed groups, and a permanent loss of future potential, not only for themselves but for the sustainable development of their communities and eventual return to their countries of origin.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

IDPs are people or groups who have been forced to flee their homes but have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. They remain under the protection of their own government, though the government may also be unable or unwilling to protect them.

### Refugee

A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their home country because they face a serious threat of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The key distinction of refugees from IDPs is that a refugee has sought protection by crossing an international border.

### Asylum Seeker

A person who has left their country and is seeking protection as a refugee in another country, but whose claim has not yet been finally decided. Not every asylum seeker will be recognized as a refugee. Note that in context related to migration, an Asylum Seeker does not have anything to do with mental health facilities.

### Stateless Person

An individual who is not considered a national by any state under the operation of its law. This creates immense barriers to accessing education, civil documentation, and other rights.

## Background

The challenge of ensuring education for displaced populations begins with the realization of the mere magnitude and legal backdrop of the crisis. Based on the Global Trends Report 2023 released by the UNHCR, the number of forced displacements has reached a record 117.3 million individuals, of which 31.6 million are refugees and 68.3 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The first pillar in ensuring the rights of refugees is the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol of 1967 where Article 22 clearly states that refugees have a right to obtain an education. Nevertheless, the essence of displacement has changed radically ever since.

## 1951-1967: The Foundation of International Legal Frameworks

The mid-20th century established the bedrock of international law for refugee protection, within which the right to education was accorded in writing. The United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 was developed as a result of the post-World War II to ensure the settlement of the large scale displacement in Europe. It gave the first universal definition of a refugee, as a person with a well-founded fear of persecution, not a member of his or her country of nationality. More importantly, the Convention in Article 22 confronted the issue of education directly and specified that the contracting states should grant the identical treatment to refugees as they would grant to nationalities in the context of elementary education. In the case of higher education, it is presupposed that states should offer the best treatment given to nationals of a foreign state.

The Convention of 1951 was, however, restricted in 1951 with only events that took place prior to the year 1 January 1951 capable of being included in the Convention with the signatories having the option to confine it to Europe. This time and space restriction was becoming more and more insufficient as new crises of refugees developed in the various parts of the world. To overcome this, in 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted and these limitations were eliminated, and the Convention became a truly international tool. The two documents combined became the undisputed foundation of international refugee law as both documents defined the legal obligation of the countries ensuring that the children and young individuals, who found themselves in exile, were able to continue with their education.

## The 1990s-2000s: The Era of Protracted Displacement and Its Impact on Education

The final decade of the 20th century and the first of the 21st marked a pivotal shift in the nature of global displacement. While earlier crises often saw refugees returning home within a few years, the war in such places as Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo were not solvable and lasted decades.

When at least 5 consecutive years or over, 25,000 or more refugees of a certain nationality were in exile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) started considering such situations to be protracted. As at the beginning of the 2000s, the UNHCR had already indicated that the average duration of a significant refugee situation had already extended to more than 20 years. This change of temporary emergency to permanent reality had far-reaching consequences for education. It implied that so-called temporary learning facilities and emergency education were no longer adequate. Whole generations were growing their whole childhood and adolescence in exile. This necessitated a redefinition of educational strategy where it was not a humanitarian response but a developmental response. The emphasis was to be turned on the incorporation of refugee children into national education systems, continuity of the curriculum and the multidimensional issues of certification of the refugees, teacher-training, and funding of long-term planning of education. The lost generation became a part of the humanitarian vocabulary, highlighting the danger of forming a group of young people that lacked the ability to reconstruct their lives and their nation.

## 2015-2016: Global Frameworks and Quantifying the Crisis

This was a time of officially agreeing on ambitious global objectives and the unswerving measurability of the displacement crisis. The 2030 Agenda of sustainable development developed by the United Nations in 2015 has

a core pledge to "leave no one behind." Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) had a particular goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

For the first time, the education of refugees and internally displaced people was firmly entrenched within the global development architecture, creating a measurable target for the international community.

Simultaneously, the ongoing war in Syria as well as the continued conflicts in South Sudan, Myanmar, and so on brought the numbers of displacement to new levels. A landmark 2016 UNICEF report, *Uprooted*, delivered powerful statistics: 1 in 80 children worldwide—a total of 28 million children—were living in forced displacement. This report has pointed out that had these children been a country of the displaced rather than a country in a state of sovereignty. This information was a jolt to the mainstream, and this knowledge solidified the fact that the education crisis of displaced children was no fringe problem, but a core issue of stability and development in the world.

### 2018-Present: New Global Disruption and Current Displacement

The international community's response to the escalating crisis crystallized in 2018 with the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The GCR was a non-binding framework whose aim was to facilitate a more foreseeable and fairer course of burden-sharing. Its four major goals such as alleviating the pressures on host nations, making refugees more self-reliant, increasing access to third-country solutions, and favoring conditions in source countries, including education as an essential factor. The GCR promoted the enrolment of refugees in national education systems as the most sustainable and efficient way to stop parallel and segregated schooling.

Just as this new framework was being operationalized, the world faced an unprecedented global shock. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused school closures in 1.6 billion learners across the world. This was a crisis within a crisis to the refugee populations. A 2021 UNHCR report, *Staying the Course*, documented that refugee children who already experienced a high digital divide were left behind. They did not have access to devices, cheap internet, and secure home learning environments. The pandemic revealed and heightened the underlying imbalances of inequality, resulting in some serious learning losses and a boom in the number of dropouts, especially in the case of refugee girls who were exposed to increased child marriage and household responsibilities.

According to the UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2023, forced displacement has surged to a record of 117.3 million people. The educational scenario remains deeply concerning and the UNHCR statistics indicate that although enrollments in primary schools amongst refugees increased to 65%; the figures declined tremendously to 41 percent at secondary school and only 6 percent in the tertiary schools.

The international response has been inconsistent. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caused the most rapid rising refugee crisis in Europe since the World War II. The initiation of the Temporary Protection Directive by the European Union made it easier to enroll Ukrainian refugee's children into the national schools' systems, which proves the strength of political desire and direct enrollment. This reaction was, however, in stark contrast with the chronic underfunding and less generous policies that characterized most other refugee cases, especially in the Global South. The inherent issue is still an empty purse; education during crises always remains among the most poorly funded areas of humanitarian appeal. With new wars in Sudan and Gaza and the growing

burdens on the international community of dealing with the very commitments it currently makes, much less the growing demands of millions of learners to an education, the international community is finding it hard to achieve existing commitments, much less rising demands.

## Major Parties Involved

### The League of Arab States (LAS)

As a regional organization, the LAS is heavily impacted by several crises of displacement caused by the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and the long-standing Palestinian issue. It is frequently populated by vast numbers of refugees and IDPs as well as member states. The LAS aligns positions of the regions, usually of the socioeconomic effects of hosting and the political remedies that are necessary to terminate the conflicts that lead to displacement. They present the education crisis as a direct consequence of geopolitical instability and the international political unwillingness to solve the underlying disagreement.

### Jordan

Jordan hosts one of the highest per-capita ratios of refugees in the world, with a high number of refugees of Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi descent. Government has permitted children of refugees to join its state schools, which in most cases run a two-shift system with Jordanian children going to school in the morning and refugees in the afternoon. Although this makes it more accessible it may cause social strife and questions about the quality of education. Jordan is one of the prominent speakers who has promoted the idea of resiliency funding that allows serving refugees and the host populations.

Jordan emphasizes the immense strain that hosting a large refugee population place on its infrastructure, economy, and social services, including education. Its stance is a direct call for sustained international financial and technical assistance to maintain the quality of its education system for both its citizens and the refugee population.

### Germany

Germany is a strong advocate of multilateralism and a leading contributor of humanitarian and education-in-emergencies appeals. Being one of the leading members of the European Union, a major economic force in the world, Germany considers itself a responsible party in the maintenance of the international refugee regime. It is one of the major contributors to such organizations as UNHCR, UNICEF, and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Within the country, its so-called dual system of vocational education and training (VET) has been regarded as one of the major avenues to accommodate youthful refugees into the workforce, and considerable funds have been allocated to so-called integration classes, in which German language is taught alongside civic education.

### United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Established in 1950 to manage the aftermath of World War II, UNHCR's work is guided by the 1951 Refugee Convention. It operates in over 130 countries, offering direct help such as shelter and food and also lobbying legal protection. In education, it concentrates on policy advocacy to governments, school infrastructure development, staff training, materials in education and scholarships (e.g., under the DAFI program of tertiary

education). They play a key role in coordinating the global response and also provide much of the data regarding refugee education.

## Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Previous international attempts to resolve the educational crisis for displaced populations have evolved through key frameworks and resolutions. The foundational legal guarantee was established by the 1951 Refugee Convention, and other efforts by the United Nations in these conference resolutions listed below:

- New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, 19 September 2016 (A/RES/71/1)
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 19 December 2019 (A/RES/74/130)
- The Global Compact on Refugees, 17 December 2018 (A/RES/73/151)
- The right to education: the right to education in emergency situations, 27 July 2010 (A/RES/64/290)
- The right to education: the implementation of the right to education and Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the context of the increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, 12 July 2019 (A/HRC/RES/41/19)

However, these attempts have been consistently hampered by a critical lack of sustainable funding, inconsistent implementation, and the escalating scale of displacement, which continues to outpace the international response.

## Possible Solutions

To overcome the systemic failures of chronic underfunding and ad-hoc programming, delegates should advocate for solutions that are both innovative and institutionally robust. A key proposal is the formal establishment of a Dedicated Funding Facility for Education in Forced Displacement under the oversight of Education Cannot Wait, that would make the principles of burden-sharing of the Global Compact on Refugees a reality by consolidating the contributions of the donors into multi-year and catalytic grants. Such grants would only be provided to national governments who show their commitment to refugee and IDP (identify provider) inclusion in their national plans of education sectors with disbursements made on verifiable changes including the percentage of displaced children enrolled at formal schools and reduction of the secondary education gap in enrollment.

Concurrently, a Decentralized Teacher Support Initiative should commence and train and certify both host-community and refugee teachers locally, towards faster pedagogical training in national curricula, psychosocial first aid, and language transition methods and offer stable predictable incentive payments via a single UN platform to decrease turnover.

Finally, to directly empower learners, an Emergency Education Voucher System should be piloted, providing displaced families direct cash transfers or digital vouchers which can be used to cover school-related expenses like uniforms, transportation and examination fees and would place purchasing power directly into the hands of the most impacted individuals.

These are solutions that are deliberately made to be mutually confirming and form an ecosystem of financial predictability, administrative permanence, localized professional capability, and direct household assistance that is resilient enough to oversee the long-range aspect of the contemporary displacement crisis.

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