

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Save the Children

THE PRICE OF HOPE

Funding education
for the world's refugee children

Executive summary

Refugee children from Ukraine, Syria, South Sudan and many other countries have been uprooted from their homes. Many have lost parents, brothers, sisters, and friends. They have witnessed unspeakable acts of violence. These children need security and a chance to rebuild their lives.

For the world's refugees, education is a source of opportunity and hope for a brighter future. Yet almost half of all refugee children are out of school, and there is a real and present danger that a generation of refugee children will be deprived of the education they need to restore their future.

Education is an essential part of any quality child-focused humanitarian response. It can be lifesaving as it provides a safe space where children are protected, supported by responsible adults and have access to water, sanitation and hygiene services, and health and nutrition programmes. Their mental health and psychosocial support needs can be met, and they can learn skills to keep them safe, play with peers, thrive and build their own futures.

However, education is too often neglected as an afterthought rather than seen as every child's right, and too many refugee children wait months, if not years, before returning to education.

Integrating refugee children into the national education system is the most effective and sustainable way to meet their need for relevant, quality, and accredited education. While a few countries continue to actively exclude refugees from the national education system, many have taken commendable steps to adopt national policies that explicitly indicate refugees can access education on the same terms as the host community.

Yet, even when policies are place, host governments struggle to implement them at the local and school levels, and refugees face a range of policy and practical barriers in accessing the formal education system which further disrupt their development. This

includes language barriers, lack of documentation, and discriminatory gender and social attitudes in host communities and schools which create hostile learning environments for an already excluded group.

A global promise to the world's refugees has been put on hold

In 2018, the world adopted the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), an international agreement to improve the worldwide response to the needs of refugees. The Compact includes the landmark commitment to get all children in school and learning within a few months of their displacement, and makes this a shared responsibility for the international community and refugee-hosting countries. At the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), in 2019, significant resources and funding were pledged to support the education of refugees in the countries and communities who hosted significant numbers.

Then the world changed. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption, closing schools all over the world, and acutely damaged the livelihoods of the most vulnerable in society. As the world struggled to respond to the crisis, the hope for a better future that was promised to refugees was put on hold.

The world's largest displacement crises have also become even more protracted. **Today the average humanitarian crisis lasts over nine years² and protracted refugee situations last an estimated 26 years.³** The intersecting threats of COVID-19, conflict and climate change now threaten to push back

¹ Government of Uganda & UNHCR (2022) [Uganda Refugee Response Plan \(RRP\) 2022 – 2023, Education Dashboard Quarter 3 2022](#).

² UNOCHA (2018) [World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2018](#).

³ UNHCR (2017) [Contribution to the fifteenth coordination meeting on international migration](#), UN/POP/MIG-15CM/2017/14. New York: UNDP

progress even further, and increase the education needs of an ever-growing population of refugee children.

Refugee children around the globe are still waiting for governments to deliver on their promises to secure their futures. From Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Venezuelan refugees in Colombia, to newly displaced refugees from Ukraine and the millions who have been displaced by the ongoing hunger crisis in East Africa, the urgent need for sustainable and durable solutions to meet their education needs has never been greater.

Some of the poorest countries host the highest numbers of refugees – and their economic outlook is bleak

The need to support the countries that host refugees is fundamental to addressing the refugee education crisis. **76% of the world's refugees live in low-income and middle-income countries⁴ whose education systems already struggle to meet the needs of children and where learning poverty (being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10) is high.⁵** Resources are massively stretched, and many countries receive little to no international support, despite the global public good that refugee-hosting countries perform by opening their borders and educating the world's refugees.

The general absence of funding for refugee education and host governments is exacerbated by a lack of predictable, long-term funding, a lack of clear financing targets and resource mobilisation plans, and poor coordination among donors.

On top of this, worsening debt burdens are threatening the ability of low- and lower-middle-income countries to allocate sufficient resources towards education. More than half of low-income countries are currently either in or at high risk of debt distress and **4 out of 14 of the top low- and middle-income refugee-hosting countries, nearly a third, spent more on servicing external debt than they did on education in 2020.**

What's more, the low- and middle-income countries in the top 20 refugee-hosting countries **paid more than US\$23 billion in interest payments on external debt alone in 2020. This is enough to send every refugee child in low- and middle-income countries to school for nearly five years.**

The 2023 Global Refugee Forum is an opportunity to get progress back on track

At the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, 233 pledges were made to support refugee education. While less than a quarter have so far been fulfilled (24%), many pledges span years if not decades and reflect medium- to long-term processes to deliver durable and lasting solutions for refugee children and young people.

But many of the commitments made by host governments were contingent on financial support from the international community, which has not materialised. Many pledges were understandably affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the challenges that host governments face in financing education.

Three and a half years on from the first Forum, there is still no status update for over a quarter of the education pledges (26%) so whether they have been implemented remains unknown. As we approach the second Global Refugee Forum, in December 2023, it is critical that all pledge-makers commit to reporting regular updates on their pledges (at least once a year). **The Forum presents a critical opportunity to take stock of how well previous pledges were implemented, and get progress back on track through the fulfilment of existing commitments and delivery of new meaningful, accountable and actionable matched pledges.**

Without mobilising sufficient funding, the world's promises on refugee education will never be realised

Undeniably, the world has been dealt some immeasurable challenges since the last Global Refugee Forum. But the promises made in the Global Compact on Refugees still stand. At its heart, the Compact promises a programme of **action** – focusing on exactly how host country and donor governments and other stakeholders will improve refugees' access to quality education.

In 2021, the World Bank and the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, estimated the annual global cost of educating the world's refugee population in low- and middle-income countries at US\$4.85 billion a

⁴ UNHCR (2022) [Refugee data finder](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023)

⁵ UNICEF (2022) [The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update](#)

year.⁶ At the Global Refugee Forum this December, the international community urgently needs to commit to finding this financing. Delivering inclusive, safe and quality education for refugees is not just about money – but in many circumstances, a lack of financing remains the biggest bottleneck preventing this from happening.

Save the Children calls on the international community to mobilise the funding needed to meet the annual US\$4.85 billion cost of providing education to refugees and strengthening education systems in low- and middle-income countries.

Resources should be distributed equitably, with a focus on the poorest countries and the education needs of the most marginalised children and young people, including the multiple and intersecting barriers that many refugee children face in accessing quality education and learning.

This report sets out recommendations to the international community on how to support some of the poorest refugee-hosting countries to deliver education that will benefit refugee and host community children alike.

This year's Global Refugee Forum is an opportunity to create new hope for the world's refugees, but commitments must be backed with cash if we are to turn the promise of the Global Compact on Refugees into a reality.

Having already lost their homes, refugees are losing their education and their hopes for a brighter future. **Delivering the funding needed for refugee education will give a generation of refugee children the opportunities that come with education and the chance to rebuild their lives.**

⁶ World Bank & UNHCR (2021) [The Global Cost of Inclusive Refugee Education](#)



Ghinwa*, 13, doing her homework at her home in a refugee settlement, in Beirut, Lebanon