

## **A Budding “Good Practice”: Access to Quality, Non-Formal Education for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon**

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### **Abstract**

*According to a 2013 World Economic Forum report, Lebanon is ranked tenth in overall quality of education, and fifth in science and math. According to Muhammad Faour, a nonresident senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, "this assessment is a significant departure from the results of student achievement tests in every international test Lebanon and Qatar have participated in." The percentage of the population as a whole with at least some secondary education (aged 25 and above) is 54.2%. For the percentage of the female population with at least some secondary education, the figure drops to 38.8%. Amid this impressive and reputable system, Lebanon has suffered with waves of conflict, displacement, as well as asylum and refugee influxes which challenge this model and reputation of education each and every day. This paper looks into “good practice” in integrating the Syrian Refugee population into the educational system, as well as the model Lebanon has created in order to cope with almost an entire generation of illiteracy within its borders.*

**Introduction:**

Lebanese government estimates indicate that the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon ranges between 1.5 and 1.6 million – this indeed would mean that it this accounts for roughly one third of the total Lebanese population which also includes another significant fraction of Palestinian refugees which needs to be accounted for within these numbers. According to UNICEF’s 2015 Annual Report on Lebanon, approximately one third of these refugees are children aged between the 3-17 years of age.<sup>1</sup> The majority of refugees are settled in what are described as the most “vulnerable areas in Lebanon”, which happen to be the ones with the lowest rates of education fulfilment due to scarce resources, the socio-economic standings of most families, as well as the “low quality” of public schools in these areas.<sup>2</sup> According to the UNHCR, Lebanon today has the highest ration of refugees per capita in the world, one in four.<sup>3</sup>

Lebanon maintains its stance not to sign or ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, namely due to what is often described as a “delicate demographic balance” as well as due to Lebanon’s experience post-Civil War which settled over 500,000 Palestinian refugees in the country. Nonetheless, the Lebanese government has ratified several other human rights treaties which are relevant to both the protection and provision of basic human rights standards, as well as services for the refugee communities within its borders.

Most definitely, relevant treaties in this regard include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Dakar Education for All (EFA) framework (2000), as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2015), UNICEF Annual Report on Lebanon, Retrieved at: [https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Lebanon\\_2015\\_COAR.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Lebanon_2015_COAR.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (n.d.), United Nations Lebanon – UNHCR, Retrieved at: <http://www.un.org.lb/subpage.aspx?pageid=78>

Not only do each of the aforementioned international instruments recognize compulsory primary education as a universal right, they also lay the foundation for both legal and academic practices which encompass issues such as vulnerability and threat, as well as touch upon the “access to education” through multiple intersectional lenses.

Moving from this concept, similar to the manner through which the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East was created in December 1949 in order to support the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees, the government “withholds” refugee status from Syrian refugees in Lebanon and allows for the reversion of most of the responsibilities toward this community to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees which has existed in the country since 1962, providing support to the government and to refugees from around the Middle East and North Africa.

### **Classification of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon amid International Framework:**

According to the Centre for Lebanese Studies, in its report with The Education Commission in 2017 Syrian refugees in Lebanon are currently classified as “foreigners”, “displaced”, or “migrant workers” rather than “refugees” due to the complexity in the intersection of multiple social, demographic and politically sensitive reasons.<sup>4</sup> The report further insists that “[...] such designations have significant bearing upon living conditions, basic rights, and access to services, namely to education”.<sup>5</sup>

This is highly problematic in application, mostly due to the fact that this legal “classification” or standing pertaining to the Syrian Refugee community, eludes the conventional legal frameworks for human rights, obstructs access to basic services, such as education, and further

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad, N. & Shuayb, M. (2017), An Education for the Future: The Schooling Experience of Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon and Germany, The Centre for Lebanese Studies with The Education Commission, Retrieved at: <https://www.lebanesestudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/An-Education-for-the-Future.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

eliminates an obligations of the state toward the rights outlined in Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As this Article clearly states that:

“A child or young person is a refugee if they have had to leave their country to escape war, persecution or natural disaster. Children and young people who are refugees have the right to special protection and help whether they've come to Scotland with other people or not.”

It further elaborates that:

“The rights of refugee children and young people in Scotland are protected by the Commissioner, regardless of if they are Scottish citizens or not. Refugee children and young people don't lose any of their rights under the UNCRC just because they've come from one country to another. Specific things they have the right to include:

- medical treatment;
- education; and
- shelter.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) in Lebanon has maintained its commitment to tackle the right to education of vulnerable children affected by the Syrian crisis within its territory through the development of a three-year strategy titled ‘Reaching All Children with Education in Lebanon’ (RACE).<sup>7</sup> The strategy prioritizes the integration of refugee children into formal and non-formal education across Lebanon, including the provision of tailored hours and coursework which would allow for Syrian refugee children to catch up to their peers – as almost all of them have missed a significant and un-trackable

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<sup>6</sup> Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland (n.d.), Article 22, Retrieved at: <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/rights/uncrcarticles/article-22>

<sup>7</sup> Reaching All Children with Education, Read more: <http://racepmulebanon.com/>

amount of schooling and curriculum. RACE I in its initial commitment, initiated in 2014, committed the government and its partners to provide access to education for around 200,000 Syrian children by 2016. RACE II in its strategy for the years 2017-2021 “seeks to build on RACE I, envisaging now a more strategic approach to the education sector response, on the premise of a stabilization and development agenda through these key strategic shifts”.<sup>8</sup>

Aligning with the SDGs’ Goal 4 on Education, RACE II seeks to integrate human rights, child rights, and child protection principles, as key to its interventions with the aim of ensuring that quality education opportunities are available for the most vulnerable children and families; whether they be non-Lebanese or Lebanese.

The MEHE and its partners which have currently funded the renovation of over nine schools, intend to implement systemic and holistic interventions which address both the demand for, and the availability of, quality public education services.

Subsequently, the strategy aims at ensuring that all children and youth aged between 3 and 18 years old are enrolled in quality and inclusive education opportunities. This, RACE II believes, will “[...] explicitly expand the Sector’s responsibility to support education opportunities for all throughout their life-cycle; from early childhood education, to improving quality of teaching services for primary, secondary, and vocational education, and a focus on equipping children and youth with effective life-skills”.<sup>9</sup>

RACE I and II have steadily adjusted their strategies to accommodate the increase in the number of Syrian refugees since its initiation in 2013 – with these numbers steadily increasing from an estimated 13.5% in 2012-2013 to around 36% in 2014-2015 and approximately 40% in 2015-2016.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

## **Tailoring Education: Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon**

In this tailored format, the majority of Syrian refugee children attend second-shift schools exclusively for Syrian refugees with instruction for about five consecutive hours between 14.00 and 18.30 in the evening. Lebanese regulations further stipulate that the teaching of the Official Lebanese Curriculum to Syrians assists in maintaining a unified standard in delivering classes. This includes but is not limited to teaching Maths and Science in English or French.

Although perhaps “well-intended”, this foreign language of instruction presents significant learning obstacles for refugee children who are only well versed in Arabic, and who have subsequently only undertaken lessons across their entire schooling and subjects in Arabic predominantly. Syrian children learn all subjects taught in the morning shift with the exception of arts, sports, and music due to the lack in time and resources. Due to these time constraints, Syrian students are only permitted ten minutes of recess.

Students in these non-formal, or second school shifts are taught by either tenured Lebanese public school teachers or Lebanese contracted teachers, where the only qualification to be hired is a university degree in the subject-matter of instruction. According to the Centre for Lebanese Studies’ report, no teaching experiences is required of these teachers prior to their employment in this capacity. Moreover, Syrian teachers from within these communities are not permitted to teach in public schools or any programmes run by MEHE per its policies.

In order to accommodate the dire conditions under which this community entered the country, as well as in order to further assist and facilitate the enrolment of Syrian refugee children in public schools, the Lebanese MEHE exempts students under Grade 6 from providing any school transcripts or report cards prior to their enrolment in Lebanese public schools.<sup>11</sup> In the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

absence of a school transcript, students are expected to sit for school placement tests with the aim of determining their grade levels.

While the Lebanese MEHE opened registration for Syrian children from refugee communities in Lebanese public schools for the 2012-2013 Academic year, after concerned UN agencies agreed to cover the registration and parents' tuition fees, the ministry applied restrictions the following year as the number of Syrian refugees rose drastically and capacities to accommodate this elevated number of students became more difficult and quite impossible. In the academic year 2013-2014, MEHE's policy shifted to opening a second shift and a preference to segregate Lebanese from Syrian students for fear that "the latter would affect the learning of the former".<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, students above Grade 6 are still required to present their official transcripts which creates an additional barrier for many Syrian adolescents who wish to enroll in formal education. This is particularly the case for students who fled Syria at the early stages of the conflict and are currently unable to return to retrieve these documents ever. Other strict requirements also hinder older refugee students from independently registering for official government examinations.

The Lebanese government currently has two sets of official examinations: those at the Grade 9 level, and those at the Grade 12 level in order to determine whether or not a student can enroll in a higher education institution or public/private university. In the case of Syrian refugees, students must be at least 18 years of age or older in order to sit for Grade 9 examinations and at least 20 years of age in order to sit for the Grade 12 exams. They also need to provide official transcripts for Grades 8 and 11 respectively prior to being able to officially register for these exams.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

Amended on March 30, 2016, this decision was withdrawn by the Lebanese government, as it announced that students at the public middle and high school levels, both Grades 9 and 12 respectively, regardless of nationality, are permitted to sit for the official exams for the academic year 2015-2016 without presenting any official transcripts or documentation of earlier schooling. Those who succeeded in these exams stood to receive Official Certificates from the Lebanese MEHE, and those who do not pass the exams will be allowed to sit for them again in compliance with the exams pre-determined rules and regulations imposed on all students without exception. This decree would go on to help thousands of Syrian students whose educational development had been paused prior to this decision.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Role of Civil Society in Refugee Education:**

Furthermore, Lebanon's civil society organizations have been heavily supporting educational support for Syrian refugee children across Lebanon. Given the fact that many Syrian students have lost several years of schooling as a result of the ongoing Syrian conflict, the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) developed the Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) in 2015, in order to meet these needs through a condensed basic education program for Grades 1 through 9 drawn from existing curricula with a specific learning methodology. Alongside initiatives such as the CERD's ALP, Non-formal Education (NFE) offers Syrian refugees a substitute to public education, which may assist them in catching up, but unfortunately, neither is accredited nor regulated by the Lebanese MEHE nor any other governmental bodies or agencies. Non-formal education remains a popular choice for many parents, as it provides a more flexible and supportive learning environment for students who also "work" during the day to assist in supporting their families. It is estimated that by

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<sup>13</sup> Berjaoui, R., El-Ghali, H. A., DeKnight, J. (2017), Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Lebanon, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, Retrieved at: [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research\\_reports/2016-2017/20170702\\_refugee\\_education.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2016-2017/20170702_refugee_education.pdf)

December 2014, there were more than 100,000 Syrians and other vulnerable children enrolled in NFE programmes across various institutions in Lebanon. In 2016, the Lebanese MEHE worked closely with concerned UN agencies with the aim of developing a more clear and efficient framework for NFE. Subsequently, in order to improve the quality of teaching in second shifts, MEHE increased its Guidance and Counselling team responsible for “mentoring and supporting teachers, particularly those teaching afternoon shifts who are more likely to be new and therefore have less experience”.<sup>14</sup>

Although a developing and quite already sophisticated approach to the issue of access to Syrian refugees to quality education in Lebanon, the system is indeed not void of allegations surrounding its use of corporal punishment, discrimination against students, as well as other forms of bullying and harsh treatment towards students from these vulnerable communities. A study of Syrian refugee children’s psycho-social and the support provided in schools by the Centre for Lebanese Studies in 2016 revealed students experienced four main sources of social distress, mainly:

- war-related trauma,
- bullying,
- harsh treatment by teachers, and
- aggressive home environments.

Furthermore, the report further illustrates that the numbers for psycho-social indicators are 20-30% higher for afternoon shift students.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> LCPS (2016), Rapid Need Assessment of The Psychosocial Needs of Public Schools in Lebanon 2016, Retrieved at: <https://www.lebanesestudies.com/rapid-need-assessment-of-the-psychosocial-needs-of-public-schools-in-lebanon-2016/>

**Conclusion:**

Despite the truly tremendous efforts of the Lebanese MEHE in comparison to not only other Ministries, but also in comparison to many regional players in accommodating the educational and developmental needs of the Syrian refugee community and its children, enrollment remains a challenging factor in its success. A 2013 World Bank report depicts that dropout rates among Syrian children are twice the national average for Lebanese children,<sup>16</sup> while UNHCR estimates that 20% of Syrian children drop out of school.<sup>17</sup>

As Lebanon continues to adjust its policies, legal framework and human rights duties amid a complex, fragile and politically sensitive system, the model it has created for the integration of these Syrian refugee children in the country's educational system lays the foundation for multiple other integrative practices across different Ministries. Not only does this model cater to the aforementioned sensitivities and circumstances the country has gotten accustomed to maneuvering, but also allows for policies and legal frameworks to be oriented contextually without entering Lebanon into the commitments outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, should Lebanon maintain that it is not in its best interest to sign and ratify it.

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<sup>16</sup> World Bank (2013), Lebanon Bears the Brunt of the Economic and Social Spillovers of the Syrian Conflict, Retrieved at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/09/24/lebanon-bears-the-brunt-of-the-economic-and-social-spillovers-of-the-syrian-conflict>

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR (2013), The Challenge of Education, Retrieved at: <https://www.unhcr.org/FutureOfSyria/the-challenge-of-education.html>