

# COVID-19 Emergency Education Response Update

19 November 2020 / UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa

## Regional developments

Since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March, families and communities across the [Middle East and North Africa \(MENA\)](#) region have witnessed unprecedented challenges to their health, livelihoods, and personal wellbeing. In addition to coping with the devastating socio-economic losses following national lockdown measures, refugee and asylum-seeker families faced the parallel threat of [school closures](#) and difficulties associated with [distance learning](#).

Impact on [education](#) is particularly adverse in countries with already low learning outcomes and high dropout rates. The World Bank estimates an average loss of 0.6 learning-adjusted years of school for MENA countries<sup>1</sup>, with 10 per cent of additional students falling below the minimum proficiency thresholds. Whilst all children have been affected, the impact on around 2.2 million school-aged refugee children of different nationalities residing in twenty countries within the MENA region<sup>2</sup> may be particularly devastating. Many are at risk of not coming back to school at the reopening stage or dropping out completely due to learning loss, protection issues and economic pressures encountered on the part of their families.

Several countries in MENA report worrying increases in COVID-19 infections, thereby hampering national efforts for re-opening schools and universities for the 2020/2021 school year. During their five-month absence from school, refugee children and youth were particularly at risk of being excluded from education, compounding growing frustrations associated with isolation and restricted movements. Meanwhile, parents have shouldered the competing demands of supervising their children's learning, while safeguarding their family's economic welfare. With most national education systems shifting to at-home learning modalities, many children, adolescents and youth faced unequal access to distance education because they lacked internet, devices, and the necessary support services, such as language classes and psycho-social support. Additionally, suspension of school meal programmes negatively impacted children's nutrition and health, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. These same challenges will affect students who have just entered the new academic cycle.

In line with UNHCR's Protection and Solutions strategy, UNHCR operations in MENA continue to provide [education support](#) to ensure refugee and forcibly displaced children and youth have [access to ongoing learning](#) despite their families limited financial means and other pressures.



Already prior to the pandemic, refugee children globally were twice as likely to be out of education as their non-refugee counterparts.



Globally, some 50% of secondary school-aged refugee girls are unlikely to return to their studies for the 2020/21 school year.<sup>3</sup>



Across the region and already prior to the pandemic, an estimated 15 million children were out of school, mainly due to conflict and protracted crises.<sup>4</sup>



Globally, school dropouts are expected to increase from 1.9 to 7.2 million children, especially among adolescents and youth of secondary-education school age, from the poorest and most vulnerable families and those forcibly displaced.



Affected students in MENA could see their future earnings decrease by 2-8 per cent, translating into lifetime losses of between USD 200-685 billion for MENA economies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank (2020) – Impact of COVID-19 on Schooling and Learning in MENA – Summary of Learning Loss Simulation Results, Regional webinar 22nd July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The figure is reflective of 2.05 million school-aged children of Syrians and 136,000 children of Iraqi, Sudanese, Ethiopian and other nationalities registered in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Mauritania, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Israel, Qatar, Oman, KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Palestine and Syria.

<sup>3</sup> See [UNHCR: Coming Together for Refugee Education](#), September 2020, at pg. 10.

<sup>4</sup> See UNICEF: Out of School Children Initiative – Middle East and North Africa Regional Factsheet

<sup>5</sup> See: World Bank Group, [Simulating the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A Set of Global Estimates. A series of webinars were delivered by the World Bank Education Global Practice experts highlighting these losses across MENA](#): Impact of COVID-19 on Schooling and Learning in MENA – Summary of Learning Loss Simulation Results, Regional webinar 22nd July 2020.

## UNHCR's interventions in Education under the COVID-19 response are focused on three main areas:

- 1. Supporting national education systems with adapting to flexible approaches, including online and blended learning modalities relevant to the needs of all children at all levels, and contributing towards planning and preparedness processes, such as safe school reopening protocols and their implementation.**
- 2. Enhancing engagement with families and communities towards ensuring the continuity of learning and implementing supportive interventions for children and their families that includes addressing the digital divide.**
- 3. Mitigating protection risks and addressing core obstacles to education beyond the COVID-19 lockdowns through strengthening child protection referral mechanisms, remedial education, psycho-social support and cash programmes.**

## Working with Partners to Ensure Continuous Learning

COVID-19 has rendered the opportunity to reimagine education and training systems towards '[Building Back Better](#)', address inequality and reduce learning poverty through more diversified and blended learning and skills development.<sup>6</sup> Within the scope of the 3RP (Refugee Resilience Plan) for the Syria crisis and the No Lost Generation (NLG) advocacy platform, education sector partners scaled-up their efforts to overcome the digital divide and develop supportive interventions for refugee children and the most vulnerable from host communities.

In another example of forging partnerships, UNHCR and UNICEF have developed a global, two-year Blueprint for Joint Action. While extending only to Lebanon, Iraq and Libya, the Blueprint initiative aims to increase access to education for refugee children while addressing protection concerns and ensuring quality, child-friendly response services and identifying barriers to inclusion in national systems in a more coordinated manner. Furthermore, to counteract the negative impact of the pandemic, minimize the loss of learning and help children and youth resume their studies, UNHCR and partners are contextualizing the global [Framework for Reopening Schools](#) and promote regional Back to Learning approaches consistent with national health responses, physical distancing, hygiene and safety regulations, as well as learning modalities coordinated through the Ministries of Education (MoE).

From March to August 2020, UNHCR country teams in MENA redesigned education programmes, expanded partnerships and seized on capacity building opportunities and tailor-made solutions. UNHCR's persons of concern and host communities, united through student and youth networks, volunteer and other community groups, have been an incredible source of support.

Programme adjustment and redesign was possible due to the generous funding support of global and regional donor organizations such as the United Kingdom, the European Union, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Education Cannot Wait (ECW), Al-Ghurair Foundation, Dubai Cares and others.

<sup>6</sup> ILO (2020): [Policy Brief Distance and Online Learning during the time of COVID-19](#), and World Bank (2020): [Building back better](#)

## Operational Highlights

Havrest, 20, and her family fled their home in Syria to seek asylum in Duhok, in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Since arriving, she qualified for a DAFI scholarship to pursue a degree in Art at the University of Duhok, where she is among the top students in her programme. Havrest has supported other refugee youths by training 44 primary and secondary school students in Domiz 2 refugee camp in Duhok to help develop their artistic skills and ambition. Havrest's dream is to obtain a PHD and open her own gallery to encourage community engagement and social cohesion through art.



Thanks to the support of the German Government and private donors, UNHCR's [DAFI scholarship programme](#) has provided over 18,000 qualified refugee students since 1992 the opportunity to earn undergraduate degrees in their country of asylum.

### IRAQ

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and prior to lockdown, UNHCR has supported the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) MoE to develop e-learning platforms for students already enrolled in formal education. As an accompaniment to the e-learning rollout, UNHCR developed and disseminated guidance to support families and communities adapting to distance learning, piloted training sessions for Parent-Teacher Associations to better assist families and students, and created training materials to strengthen the capacity of teachers, parents and field staff. Catch-up classes for students unable to attend formal education have also been provided. In addition, UNHCR and partners provided safe transportation and travel stipends for Grade 12 students to complete their national exams in July and August. For those in tertiary education, UNHCR continues supporting 240 refugees DAFI scholars with their tuition fees and stipends.

### JORDAN

Given the steady rise of COVID-19 cases across Jordan and decision to close schools indefinitely, UNHCR and partners continue to support children's distance learning to prevent learning loss. The Kolibri platform, developed by Learning Equality and delivering comprehensive education support in alignment with Jordan's MoE school curriculum, has been an important resource for children and youth during the school hiatus.

To support continuation of learning during school closures, UNHCR Jordan has worked closely with the MoE and educational providers across the Kingdom in developing the technology and e-learning modalities. Building on the organisation’s experience at its 10 Connected Learning Hubs, the Kolibri platform, which provides Arabic-based courses in maths, English, science and coding, has been integrated within Noorspace, an online platform that creates virtual classrooms operated by the MoE and the Queen Rania Centre for Information Technology. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, over 1 million users have logged into the NoorSpace e-learning platform.



Syrian refugee siblings, Ghazal, 11, and Omar, 9, study at home in Amman. Since coronavirus closed schools in Jordan, refugee and Jordanian students have been relying on e-learning and educational programmes on TV. Ghazal, however, prefers the WhatsApp group her teacher has set up to talk her class through the lessons. Photo by UNHCR / Lilly Carlisle

## LEBANON

Due to the spread of COVID-19 in Lebanon and the impact of the Beirut blast, learning was disrupted for approximately 197,000 refugee children in public schools and 30,000 refugee children and youth in non-formal education. During this time, many refugee children were unable to follow online learning due to limited access to internet and electronic devices, as well as a lack of learning support at home.

In close collaboration with the education sector and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), UNHCR has taken part in the 2020/21 “Back-to-Learning” campaign to facilitate the resumption of learning for all refugee children and youth. Refugee volunteer and community networks, Education Community Liaisons (ECLs), as well as children engaged in Foreign Language Groups (FLGs) have been supported with costs related to remote connectivity, psycho-social support (PSS), as well as up-to-date information on school enrollment and registration. The EWS (Early Warning System)—launched amongst DAFI scholarship students — addressed obstacles to students’ academic performance by distributing information to guide counselling of students.



Rehabilitation works carried out by vocational training students following the Beirut blast. Photo by IECD

With the temporary closure of vocational schools, students experienced initial interruptions in learning but were able to resume through online instruction modalities. Many graduates of vocational schools who volunteered following the blast in Beirut were offered internship grants and referred to specialized work programmes such as plumbing and heating repair, as part of the Beirut rehabilitation efforts.

## TURKEY

As per the decision of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the 2020-2021 school year began on 31 August with online learning via the Education Information Network (EBA) government platform, reaching out to children of different age groups through web-based methods and the state TV channels. With some students returning to their classes on 21 September and others starting face-to-face education on 12 October, distance learning has remained available for all children enrolled in Turkish public schools. Refugee children have nevertheless found it difficult to access internet and devices to attend online classes. Additionally, as all online courses are provided in Turkish, refugee children, particularly in secondary grades following the advanced curriculum, struggle with language barriers. In partnership with the authorities, UNHCR and partners continued to provide Turkish language courses by switching to online and supervised remote learning modalities. UNHCR also increased its support to 750 refugee students on tertiary education scholarships by facilitating their access to online resources and including them in psychosocial support and counselling activities. In consultation with academia and education practitioners, UNHCR developed the “coaching and mentoring toolkit” for use by university advisors as a counselling tool for refugees struggling academically or socially.

## EGYPT

With public schools closed until 18 October, UNHCR continued to facilitate access to learning, including through providing education grants for eligible refugee children<sup>7</sup>. Despite constrained funding, UNHCR topped-up these education grants so families could afford internet packages and hygiene items for physical well-being once schools reopened. UNHCR also followed-up with relevant ministries on the renewal of national residence permits or other missing essential documentation such as birth certificates, that continue to serve as a legal requirement for refugees’ access to education and other services. UNHCR advocates with the authorities to extend tolerance towards refugees and asylum-seekers whose UNHCR documents or residence permits have expired.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR Egypt commenced registration for education grants in July

## SYRIA

The Syrian MoE established education TV channels and other initiatives to ensure continuation of learning, including online study platforms. In support of the national response, UNHCR partners also developed online learning portals—including group instruction via WhatsApp, Skype, Telegram and/or other online applications. To harmonize multiple communication channels while ensuring education activities were delivered in line with protection considerations, UNHCR and partners developed a guidance note on e-learning. Due to these interventions and other support provided during the closure of community centres, approximately 6,000 students were able to continue their curriculum and prepare for national exams in July. Following the re-opening of schools on 13 September and to encourage school enrollment UNHCR provided families with education grants for children enrolled in primary and secondary learning. Additionally, remedial learning, catch-up classes and school supplies are being provided through country-wide Community Centres for 15,000 refugee children who missed out on schooling during the second half of the 2019-2020 school year. To date, UNHCR partners have resumed 30 per cent of regular Community Centre activities, while implementing preventive safety measures.

## ALGERIA

In Algiers and other urban areas, all education activities were suspended indefinitely, including non-formal and vocational training, until the reopening of primary schools on 21 October, middle schools on 4 November 2020 and universities thereafter. In coordination with UNICEF, safe procedures for schools reopening have been devised and training activities for school staff on safety and hygiene measures are being regularly implemented. Algeria’s MoE launched online learning platforms in various subjects across all academic levels—including a national television broadcast focusing on education. However, with MoE platforms communication only in Arabic, many refugee children in French speaking schools have no access to distance learning. UNHCR is working with partner NADA to support children in accessing and developing learning platforms in French. Under the lead of the MoE and with the assistance of UNICEF and education partner AFAD, these platforms were also made available to Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, and the information about them disseminated widely among the community, including through social media and religious networks. Additionally, the Sahrawis launched TV-based education programmes in Arabic for students in the Tindouf camps, with a special focus on exam preparations. Refugee students at the tertiary level, including DAFI scholarship recipients, followed distance learning curricula developed by the MoE.

## MAURITANIA

To minimize the impact of prolonged school closures, since April, UNHCR has supported the introduction of distance learning in Mbera camp. This has involved training teachers on distance learning methodologies, distributing textbooks to all primary-level children, and commissioning a specialized radio learning programme in coordination with partners. As only two per cent of Mbera camp households have access to internet and four per cent possess radios<sup>8</sup>, UNHCR has focused on fostering learning in small groups, distributing educational materials, and mobilizing community groups and parent networks towards further support of learning. This distance learning model has been replicated by seven other educational departments across Mauritania. In preparation for the reopening of schools in Mbera camp on 1 September, UNHCR conducted a series of teacher trainings on distance learning methodologies, distributed textbooks and masks amongst students and school personnel<sup>9</sup>, carried out awareness raising on hygiene and health, and rehabilitated school infrastructure.

## MOROCCO

During the height of COVID-19 in Morocco, with the support UNHCR's partner Foundation Orient-Occident and in collaboration with community networks, DAFI students volunteered to conduct online courses in Mathematics, Science, Arabic, and French for some 340 refugee children enrolled in lower secondary and high school. DAFI students have also set up WhatsApp groups to provide peer support on language learning. In advance of the new academic year, UNHCR joined a nationwide 'back to learning' campaign, targeting all children but specifically those from marginalized communities, including refugees. With nearly 100 per cent refugee families choosing to send children back to school at the end of September, UNHCR resumed conditional cash assistance for education to all registered families, which will help families to purchase school supplies and hygiene materials.

## YEMEN

UNHCR is currently preparing for the 2020/21 academic year for 11,300 refugees and Yemeni children in the areas under Government of Yemen control in the south. UNHCR assists six kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in Aden and Lahj governorates with teaching materials, stationery, extra-curricular activities and maintenance of facilities. UNHCR, together with partner Charitable Society for Social Welfare, sanitized school facilities ahead of the new school year and disseminated 5,000 masks to students and teachers. In de facto authority-controlled areas in the north, UNHCR has been facilitating similar support services.

To improve access to education following the pandemic, UNHCR began covering incentives for 224 teachers in Yemen for the period August 2020 – February 2021. This support will help to guarantee schools remain open where possible, and ensure no child is left behind in their education.

## UAE

In partnership with the Abdulla Al-Ghurair Foundation for Education, UNHCR facilitated access of refugee children and youth to Al-Ghurair's "Young Thinkers Programme", powered by Arizona State University. The programme includes a free, bilingual, online platform designed to help young Arabs between the ages of 15 - 30 gain career awareness and exposure, and to develop critical soft skills for success in their employment endeavours. As access to the platform is extended beyond UAE to Lebanon, Jordan and other countries, young persons of concern to UNHCR will connect through a special hashtag, helping to monitor their enrolment rate. Furthermore, community representatives will inform UNHCR on job placement impact for persons of concern following completion of this programme.

<sup>8</sup> According to a UNHCR rapid sampling assessment in Mbera camp conducted in July, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> [UNHCR External Operational Update – Sahel Crisis Response](#), June 2020, pg. 8.

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## Global Financial Requirements

UNHCR's [revised prioritized requirements to support the COVID-19 preparedness and response](#) in situation of forced displacement, including those for UNHCR MENA, has increased from USD 255 million to USD 745 million. **So far, a total of USD 469 million (63 per cent) has been contributed or pledged to the UNHCR Global Appeal out of USD 745 million required.**

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## MENA Financial Information

**Earmarked contributions for the Coronavirus Emergency Situation in MENA amount USD 103 million, including:**

United States of America 67.8M | Japan 9M | European Union 4.9M | African Development Bank 3.9M | Qatar Charity 3.5M | Saudi Arabia 3M | CERF 2.4M | United Nations Foundation 2M | Austria 1.8M

**Special thanks to the major donors of softly earmarked contributions and pledges at the global level to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation:**

Germany 63M | United Kingdom 25M | United States of America 20M | Denmark 15M | Canada 6.4M | United Nations Foundation 4.8M | Spain 3.5M | Ireland 3.3M | France 3M | Sweden 3M | Sony Corporation 2.9M | Private donors in the UK 1.7M | Norway 1.4M | Australia for UNHCR 1.3M | Japan 1.2M | USA for UNHCR 1.2M | UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe 1.1M

**Special thanks to the major donors of unearmarked contributions to UNHCR's 2020 programme:**

Sweden 76.4M | Private donors Spain 66.8M | Norway 41.4M | Netherlands 36.1M | Denmark 34.6M | Private donors Republic of Korea 34M | United Kingdom 31.7M | Germany 25.9M | Private Donors Japan 25.1M | Japan 23.8M | Switzerland 16.4M | Private donors Italy 15.7M | France 14M | Private donors Sweden 11.7M | Italy 10.6M

Contributed without restrictions on its use, unearmarked funding allows UNHCR critical flexibility in how best to reach refugees and other populations of concern who are in the greatest need and at the greatest risk.

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## Resources:

- [Coming Together for Refugee Education: Education Report 2020](#)
- [Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in Schools: a safe return to schools for refugee children and youth](#)
- [Supporting Continued Access to Education during COVID-19: Emerging Promising Practices II](#)
- [Supporting Continued Access to Education during COVID-19: Emerging Promising Practices](#)
- [Protecting Forcibly Displaced Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: UNHCR response and field practices](#)
- [Report on UNHCR's Response to COVID-19 \(March – September 2020\)](#)
- [UN Lebanon Flash Appeal \(August 2020\)](#)
- [UNHCR's Coronavirus Emergency Appeal \(Revision\)](#)
- [UNHCR MENA's comprehensive funding needs for the COVID-19 response \(May\)](#)
- For MENA regional and country reports on COVID-19 response, please visit – [UNHCR Global Focus](#); [UNHCR Operational Portal \(Syria Regional Refugee Response\)](#); and [Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan website](#)
- Support UNHCR's COVID-19 preparedness and response plans: <https://giving.unhcr.org/en/coronavirus/>