

Summary of Proceedings: Virtual Roundtable on Parliamentary Action to Include Refugees in National Education Systems

Co-organised by UNHCR and the International Parliamentary Network for Education

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This Summary of Proceedings document synthesises discussions during the virtual roundtable on “*Parliamentary Action to Include Refugees in National Education Systems*”. The roundtable brought together 55 participants and 27 Members of Parliament from all continents to share perspectives and exchange views and information on refugees’ access to quality education in different contexts.

Within the frame of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and the High-Level Segment on Statelessness (2019), participants were encouraged to reflect on three issues:

1. the role of parliamentarians in mobilizing support for refugee inclusion in education systems;
2. national education priorities; and
3. key recommendations to enable inclusion in terms of legislation, budgetary allocation and policymaking.

Members of Parliament agreed that education is a *sine qua non* for inclusion, peace and social cohesion. Including children in national systems is fundamental to ensuring no one is left behind and refugee children have the necessary skills to contribute to the economic development of countries of asylum and of origin – if return is safe.

They also acknowledged that further cross-regional parliamentary and multi-stakeholder collaboration is needed to increase access to quality education for the most marginalized individuals, particularly girls, children with disabilities, forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

The role of parliamentarians in mobilizing support for refugee inclusion in education systems

Out of 779 pledges submitted by States at the GRF, around 90 pledges have been fulfilled. Parliamentarians play an important role in scrutinizing the government to ensure that they implement these pledges, including those on inclusive education.

Parliamentarians have an important role to play in advocating for and representing the rights and interests of refugees as well as making policy and enacting legislation and shaping and approving budgets which ensure refugees have access to the national education system of their host country.

Comprehensive national education sector plans which address the needs of refugee learners are important tools to increase access to national education systems for refugees.

Budgetary allocation is also a core function of parliamentarians that allows for the deployment of necessary resources to achieve effective inclusion of refugees in national plans. Parliamentarians should develop action plans to follow up on and support the implementation of pledges at the country level.

Parliamentarians can influence governments and the international community to keep education high on the agenda and ensure long-term financing for education. This includes working with governments to open up existing migration pathways to refugees and developing complementary pathways for students to increase third country solutions and access to higher education opportunities for refugees.

Parliamentarians can also engage in regional platforms and leverage regional tools to promote refugee inclusion. For instance, the Pan-African Parliament and the Midrand Declaration adopted by members of parliament from 15 African countries is a tool available to parliamentarians in the region to encourage their governments to address issues relating to statelessness and forced displacement.

Education Priorities – Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusion

1. *Bridging the digital divide during COVID-19*

COVID-19 was highlighted as a key challenge to refugee education. While the pandemic allowed for the rapid development of online teaching platforms, the lack of access to electricity, internet connection and adequate electronic devices prevented many refugees from being included in these platforms.

In response to challenges posed by COVID-19 and the limited access to digital devices by children in **India**, the government set up urban local bodies to support municipal schools and teachers to engage students, including refugee students, without access to digital education through home visits.

At the global level, the **Inter-Parliamentary Union’s Standing Committee on Sustainable Development** was tasked with drafting a resolution on “Leveraging Information and Communication Technology as an enabler for the education sector, including in times of pandemic”.

2. *Funding to Support Major Refugee Hosting Countries*

Around 86% of refugees are hosted by developing countries, where local and national education systems already struggle to meet the needs of national citizens. Therefore, the influx of refugee children to a country adds to already overstretched national systems, which often cannot respond to the rapid increase in children’s education needs.

For example, the current Refugee Response Plan from **Pakistan** includes a commitment to include refugees in the national education system. While this has opened doors for bipartisan support in parliament for enhanced education opportunities for girls, the lack of funding and refugees’ access to documentation may prevent the country from implementing the Plan.

3. *Documentation and Access to Education*

In **South Africa**, a key challenge has been ensuring access to education for stateless persons. While the law provides for education for all, in practice, due to lack of documentation, many asylum seekers and stateless persons are prevented from accessing the education system. The priority for parliamentarians in the country has been to reduce the time it takes for processing asylum requests, which currently may take up to 10 years, meaning child asylum seekers may be deprived from a valid identification document and miss out on their entire education cycle.

In the **Dominican Republic**, advocacy is needed for the execution of the Naturalization Decrees for children pending nationality recognition under the Law 169-14, considering its impact on access to formal education and diplomas for Dominican children of Haitian descent affected by judgment 168-13.

4. *Access to Quality Education*

Parliamentarians highlighted the importance of ensuring the quality of the education available to refugee and host communities. This includes the provision of adequate materials, removal of language barriers and adoption of curricula aligned with the national education framework.

- In the IGAD region, the Declaration of Djibouti on refugee education has been transformative in strengthening the region’s response to refugee education needs. For example, the adoption of a country national action plan to address displacement in **Djibouti** in 2017 led to the approval of a national law on refugees that allows refugees to benefit from protection, fundamental rights and basic social services. As a result, refugee students have benefited from financial support for tertiary education and become some of the best graded students in the country.

- In the MENA region, **Egypt** guarantees the right to primary and secondary education for refugees and migrants. Schools facilitate the admission of students from countries facing political instability including by exempting Syrian, Yemeni, Palestinian and Sudanese students from tuition fees.
- In **Greece** and **Algeria**, the legislative education framework provides that all children, regardless of residence or legal status, shall have access to primary and secondary education.

Key Legislative, Budgetary and Policymaking Recommendations

Members of Parliament made the following legislative, budgetary and policymaking recommendations during the discussions:

1. The international community should support major refugee hosting countries with technical expertise and resources to promote refugee access to quality education and more equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing.
2. Enhanced engagement of think tanks and other actors with parliamentarians is needed to find long-term solutions to access to quality education by refugee children.
3. Parliamentarians should provide adequate oversight of the implementation of education policies to ensure the quality of education available to refugees and host communities.
4. Parliamentarians, with support from UNHCR, the International Parliamentary Network for Education and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, should create a platform to exchange on refugees and stateless persons and collectively advance the four objectives of the GCR.
5. Parliamentarians should use digital and print communication tools (e.g. social media, articles, briefings) to inform their constituencies and enhance their awareness of displacement. Media has an important role to play in the narrative around displacement.
6. Parliamentarians should increase awareness and galvanise support for the [iBelong campaign to eliminate statelessness by 2024](#).

Way Forward

On 14 and 15 December, the High-level Officials Meeting will take stock of the implementation of GCR since the GRF. The first ever [GCR Indicator Report](#) was launched on 16 November 2021. The report measures progress against the four objectives of the Compact, namely: ease pressures on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

Pledges that were made two years ago are an opportunity for parliamentarians to build political commitment and leadership in their countries. MPs are encouraged to access the [GCR Pledges & Contributions Dashboard](#) and familiarise themselves with pledges submitted by their countries with a view to supporting their governments in fulfilling them and being held accountable for them.

In the lead up to the High-level Officials Meeting, parliamentarians can table parliamentary questions to enquire as to their government's engagement at the meeting and the updates they will be presenting.

Parliamentarians are also encouraged to table questions and hold debates regarding their country's progress in implementing their pledges from the GRF. Over the next two years, ahead of the next GRF in 2023, it will be vital that governments are held to account for the pledges and commitments they have made to refugee education.