



Global Refugee Forum 2023

Pledging Guidance on Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in education + Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

Contextual overview

The current global context is increasingly uncertain for children and young people. As forced displacement grows, so does the vulnerability of children and youth to trauma, stress, and anxiety that can impact their mental health, psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional development. There is an urgent and unmet need to invest in mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, including in and around the school community. While momentum is building, MHPSS + SEL is largely overlooked and remains one of the most underfunded areas of humanitarian assistance. MHPSS + SEL interventions can help address barriers to learning while simultaneously nurturing healthy development and critical social and emotional competencies that give displaced children and youth the skills they need to overcome adversity and set them on a path for a more equitable, peaceful and prosperous future.

Promoting MHPSS + SEL in national education systems for refugee, displaced and host community children and youth:

Mental health, psychosocial wellbeing and social and emotional development underpin the quality of teaching and learning, especially for refugees. Refugee children and youth face extreme hardships from exposure to violence, exploitation and abuse, as well as social exclusion and discrimination. This is compounded by exposure to adverse events that have led to their displacement from their countries of origin or during transit to host countries and communities. The effects can be severe and far-reaching, impacting children's mental and physical health, cognitive development (e.g., brain health) and learning outcomes. Refugee teachers are also directly impacted by crisis and displacement and therefore require their own set of mental health and psychosocial support interventions. MHPSS+SEL interventions in and around the school community are low-cost and scalable, whereas the costs of inaction are significant.

Specific actions that can be pledged at the Global Refugee Forum

- 1) Commit to reform national education sector plans to **embed MHPSS + SEL interventions into national education curriculum, teacher training, student assessments and budgets**, starting from early childhood education through to secondary and post-secondary education. Ensure that school-based MHPSS interventions appropriately focus on the promotion of mental health and wellbeing and that there is adequate provision for referrals to community-based services and specialized care delivered by trained professionals (e.g. health and mental health providers, social workers).
- 2) Commit to **strengthen referral systems** to ensure that every school (including formal and informal) has a well-defined process to identify and refer individuals to locally available mental health and psychosocial support services (including in-person or telehealth). These services must be gender-responsive and age appropriate, provided by trained professionals (e.g. health and mental health providers, social workers). This also includes scaling-up and investing in specialized MHPSS focal points and/or counsellors at the school-level to ensure teachers are not expected to take on the role of trained mental health care providers.



- 3) Commit to **invest in the training of teaching staff, school administrators and those involved in the care and support of students** to enhance their capacity to deliver MHPSS + SEL interventions. This includes embedding MHPSS + SEL into national pre-service and in-service teacher training and professional development opportunities to strengthen teachers' knowledge and capacity to promote student mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional skills. Teacher training and resources should be designed to ensure that MHPSS + SEL interventions are inclusive, gender-responsive and appropriate for the age and developmental stage of the child.
- 4) **Commit to strengthen national education policies and programs that support safe and nurturing learning environments**, including curriculum that promotes social and emotional learning as a complement to literacy and numeracy outcomes. Ensure that teachers are trained and supported to deliver SEL, including through play-based approaches and active collaboration with children and youth in their own learning and wellbeing.
- 5) Commit to **strengthen policies and programs that promote and protect teacher mental health and psychosocial wellbeing**. This includes investing in initiatives that specifically target the MHPSS needs of teaching staff, school administrators and those involved in the care and support of learners in schools in protracted displacement crisis or under-resourced contexts.
- 6) Commit to **invest in school- and community-based awareness raising campaigns** to address the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. These campaigns should encourage children, youth, parents, caregivers, teachers and community leaders to talk openly about mental health and wellbeing, build communities of support and raise awareness of available services. Campaigns should be locally designed, inclusive, gender-responsive and age appropriate.
- 7) Commit to the design and delivery of MHPSS + SEL interventions that promote **equity and inclusion**, with specific consideration to the needs of the most marginalized members of the refugee and host communities. This includes very young children and their caregivers, girls, LGBTQI+ children and youth and those living with disabilities.
- 8) Commit to **increase the level of flexible and sustainable funding** to support national, local level projects and refugee-led programs that explicitly support the delivery of MHPSS + SEL interventions across the education system.
- 9) Commit to increase the level of funding to collect data and **generate evidence to better design, target and measure the delivery of future MHPSS + SEL interventions in refugee hosting schools**.
- 10) Commit to ensure that MHPSS + SEL interventions in refugee-hosting schools are designed in collaboration with other relevant Ministries, including health, protection, gender and social services, to provide **multi-sectoral and comprehensive support for children, youth and teachers**.

For more information on pledging at the [Global Refugee Forum](#) or the [GRF Education Alliance](#) please visit UNHCR's website.