

Educating Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon: Challenges & Opportunities

Overview

The conflict in Syria entered its sixth year in March 2016. Half of the population in Syria was forced to leave their homes to become either internally displaced people or refugees in the neighboring countries of Syria or Europe.

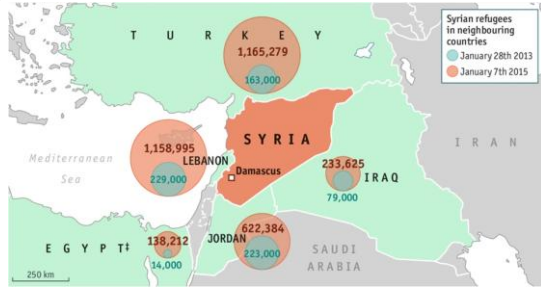


Figure 1: Syrian Refugees in the Region (Source: The Economist)

Refugee Children in Lebanon

Lebanon hosts the largest number of Syrian refugee children than any other country. Fifth to third of the population in Lebanon is now Syrian refugees. In April 2014, the UN Refugee Agency estimated that the number of the Syrian refugee children in Lebanon at the school age is 400,000 children, to put this in context, this number is 25% higher than the number of the Lebanese students in Lebanese public state-run schools.

While Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN refugee convention that ensures the right to education for refugee children at least in elementary schools, the Lebanese government agreed to open the public state-run schools in the country to provide education for the Syrian refugees; Syrian children were given the right to attend public schools as well as private schools (if they can afford the tuition fees) in spite of missing two years or more of schooling due to the conflict.

In public schools, tuition fees and expenses for textbooks and educational material for the Syrian children have been funded and covered by the UN; however, public schools do not have the capacity to accommodate all Syrian refugee school age population during regular teaching hours. This limitation gave the opportunity for only 45,000 children to enroll in the mainstream first shift schooling. Other students were enrolled in second shift schooling hours (from 2pm to 5:30/6pm) that the Ministry agreed to start in selected schools in Lebanon. The second shift schooling created new educational opportunities for another 45,000 children making the total enrolled in schools 90,000 out of 400,000 Syrian refugee children at the school age. The Ministry is trying to increase the number of the second-shift schools for Syrian children every year but there is still a huge funding gap to reach all the children. The number of public schools that were selected for second shift schooling was 90 in 2013 but it increases every year if more financial support is provided to the Lebanese Ministry of Education. In 2015/2016 academic year, the number of second shift schools was 238 schools with a minimum of 300 students per school.

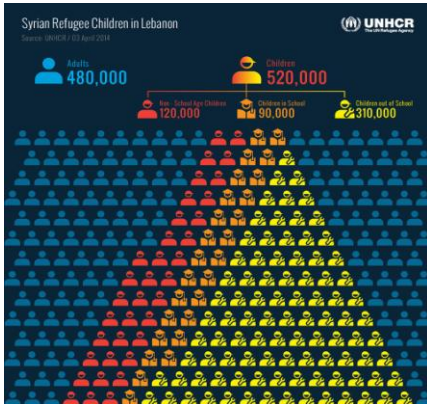


Figure 2: Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon (Source: UNHCR Data Portal)

How can Syrian refugee children receive education in Lebanon?

1. Lebanese Private Schools

Private schools in Lebanon accept enrolling Syrian children if they are able to pay for the fees which are normally high. However, most of Syrian refugee families are unable to afford these expenses. In addition to the high cost, the main language of instruction and curriculum in the Lebanese schools (private or public) are either English or French, while in Syria, students study completely in Arabic. This language barrier created huge difficulties for even those who can afford going to these schools.

2. Lebanese Public Schools

The main way for the provision of education to Syrian refugee children has been to mainstream them with the Lebanese students in the regular public schools. As stated above, these schools have limited capacity for new students so only 45,000 children were enrolled in the mainstream first shift with Lebanese students, others were asked to enroll in the second shift that was started for Syrian children.

The language difference of the curriculum remains a challenge also in public schools in both shifts and led to a high drop-out rate among the Syrian students. In addition to the language and capacity challenges, there is a huge access challenge. Many Syrian refugees live in rural areas in Lebanon that are far from public schools in Lebanon and can't be reached without transportation.



Figure 3: Informal Camps in Lebanon (Source: UNHCR)

The transportation costs are very high in Lebanon and the UN is unable to support all the children so the access to these schools remains difficult even if these schools can accommodate Syrian students.

3. Syrian-Run Schools

Syrian schools in Lebanon are informal school established by Syrian refugee teachers and administrators who used to work in schools in Syria before the conflict. Many of them were able to find ways to fund these schools from individual and private donors. The key difference is that the Arabic-based Syrian curriculum is taught in these schools instead of the Lebanese English/French-based curriculum. This makes these schools a pleasant place for Syrian refugees not only because of the language but also these schools are staffed by Syrian teachers from within the refugee community and those teachers understand the needs and the challenges of the children as they have been through the same situation back in Syria.

The main problem with these schools is that their education is not recognized or certified by the ministries of education in both Syria and Lebanon. The schools administrators argue that it an emergency situation and the option here is not education with certification or without it, but it is education or no education. Now that it is been five years of the conflict in Syria with no end in sight, this argument may not be true.

4. NGOs/Community Schools

The last option Syrian students have to get education in Lebanon is going to the informal educational schools or community schools that NGOs fund and operate. These schools provide alternative education to the Syrian children and also provide psychosocial support to the traumatized children. Like the Syrian schools, these program are not accredited, however, some NGOs provide accelerated learning programs for the children who missed out more than two years of education.

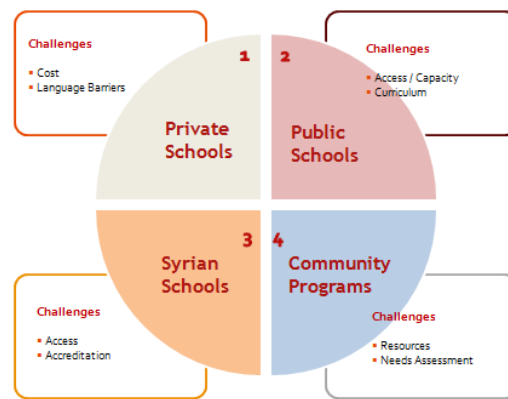


Figure 4: Educational Alternatives for Syrian Children in Lebanon

Policy Recommendations

There is no magic solution to these challenges, but having a comprehensive strategy in place that is flexible and scalable is very important. I believe that the following recommendations provide a realistic pathway to improving the provision of education to Syrian children:

1. Engaging Syrians

While there is no legal framework to involve Syrians in the refugee response by either hiring them or having them as volunteers, I believe the Syrians themselves can relate to the children and understand their needs better than anyone else. The refugee communities have a good number of Syrian teachers and hiring them would inject positive energy within the refugee communities and would be a great investment towards Syria's future.

2. Support Informal Education

So as long as formal education is not available, NGO schools can solve big problems. I encourage the Lebanese Ministry of Education to cooperate with the NGOs and lead their efforts to better educate the children instead of only recognizing the formal education programs.

3. Teacher Training

Most of the Lebanese teachers in the public schools have never received training on how to work with children who have war trauma or psycho-social issues, and most of them find it difficult to work with children who have been out of school for years. Mastering the learning techniques is a difficult task even for experienced teachers, so continuous support and follow-up with the teachers in the second shift would leave a great impact on both the teachers and the students.

4. Partnership with the Private Sector

Many big companies have corporate social responsibility programs and are eager to help; multinational companies spent millions of dollars on their community service programs so why not benefit from these programs to support the education of the Syrian refugees at least for the informal education programs. On the other hand, I think the Lebanese private schools have a great role to play; many small private schools have capacity and can take a few students and engage them with their Lebanese peers easily.

5. Creating More Educational Opportunities

The Syrian adolescents are the most at risk from loss of educational opportunities. Offering vocational, language or technical skills training would harness the energy of a large cohort of youth, instead of them sitting at home doing nothing or joining extremist fighting groups in Syria.