9.1 Why is this question being asked?

The challenges of education in emergencies are a significant issue in international education today. The term education in emergencies refers to the provision of “learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher, and adult education”.¹ Such crises include conflicts, situations of violence, forced displacement, disasters, and public health emergencies.²

Of the 82.4 million forcibly displaced people around the world, 35 million are children under 18 years of age.³ UNESCO observes that

Conflicts, disasters caused by natural hazards and pandemics keep millions of children out of school and the numbers are rising. In crisis-affected countries, school-age children are more than twice as likely to be out of school as their peers in other countries.⁴

Children’s education is often one of the first activities abandoned when such crises occur, yet education can play a critical role in building the resilience of children and their communities in these adverse circumstances.⁵ The families affected recognize this. The International Network for Education in

¹ Education in Emergencies | INEE.
² Ibid.
³ UNHCR - Refugee Statistics.
⁴ Education in emergencies (unesco.org).
⁵ Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change | Plan International (plan-international.org).
Emergencies (INEE) notes that “when children and parents living in emergency and crisis situations are asked what they need most, time and time again they tell us they want to continue their education.”

Determining how best to serve children who are geographically displaced often requires consideration of language of instruction issues. This is particularly the case where people have been displaced across national borders, where the language of schooling and the national curriculum are usually different from that of the refugees' original location.

However, the issue of language of instruction for displaced children also brings many questions of its own. One of the central issues has to do with expectations about how long displaced populations will be out of their original community settings. Where it is expected that children will return to their home countries in the short term, it is reasonable to incorporate the curriculum of the home country into education provision. However, the reality is that short-term refugee status is not the norm. The general estimate is that worldwide, refugees spend an average of 17 years away from their home countries. Such longevity of displacement has serious implications for curriculum choices, including language of instruction.

9.2 The context

The education needs of refugee children encompass both pedagogical and socio-emotional support. Minimizing the disruption to a child’s learning career is crucial, as is providing a secure environment in which children can not only learn but feel safe in doing so (Smart et al. 2020). Organizations that focus on education in emergencies expend a great deal of energy and resources on providing these pedagogical and socio-emotional benefits. Once on the ground, practitioners find that the language in which these program benefits are delivered is central to their effectiveness and impact on the children (Hicks and Maina 2018).

However, the unfortunate reality is that language issues are all too often missed in planning and implementing refugee education. Trudell, Teera, and Nannyombi (2019:5) argue that in many cases the language mismatch between pupils and teachers, and the related language fluency issues, are “the elephant in the room” where refugee learning is concerned. They underlie poor literacy levels and poor student placement; they also link to student dropout, teacher frustration and inadequacy, and poor learning outcomes generally. Learners are not able to tell the teacher what they know, and they cannot ask the teacher for help with what they do not know. The content knowledge that a student brings to the classroom is of no help if he or she cannot communicate in the classroom.

This language mismatch between pupils and their teachers has severe implications for learning (McCarty 2012; Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin 2007:112). It is particularly problematic where learning to read is concerned. The ability to read, a foundational skill for success in formal education, requires competency in the language of the text. Reading is largely a linguistic task, and reading comprehension depends on fluency in the language of the text (Grabe 2009, Trudell and Adger 2014:12).
In the refugee education context, these negative implications of language mismatch are multiplied by the curricular environment and challenging classroom contexts. Trudell et al. (2019:10) studied the language-related learning challenges faced by refugee children in Ugandan refugee settlements, where children from countries where English is not the language of instruction have been entering Uganda in large numbers. The figure below describes the multiple challenges to children’s learning in the Ugandan refugee context.

Figure: Language-based challenges to learning for refugees.

### 9.3 Some ideas to try

Language solutions to the challenges of refugee children’s education are typically shaped by four contextual parameters:

- The length of time expected in the refugee situation, and whether short-term or long-term education solutions are being sought. This parameter shapes assumptions about whether the child’s learning experience will be based on the curriculum and language of instruction (LoI) of the host country, or those of the home country.
- The type of educational programming that is feasible, whether formal, classroom-based education or nonformal learning alternatives.
- Assumptions about the LoI to be used: the LoI of the host country, the LoI of the home country, or the language(s) that the refugee population have brought with them (if they differ from the LoI in either host or home country).
The degree of linguistic heterogeneity in the refugee population: whether the population is comprised of one primary language community, or whether the refugees have come from a range of locations and language areas.

A few possible LoI strategies are described below. These strategies are presented as “ideas to try”, and several of them are based on existing program experiences.

9.3.1 Internally-displaced people (IDP) in multilingual contexts

LoI challenges for IDP children are most acute when their new location is in a different language community from their home location. Where local LoI are part of the national curriculum, the IDP child may be faced with a local LoI that he or she does not understand; where the school LoI is the same in the new location as it was in the previous location, this curricular obstacle is less acute. However, the socio-emotional obstacles faced by IDP children, as well as the substantial amount of time these children are likely to be spending out of school, speak to the value of focused attention to the use of their home language for learning.

Nonformal programming that features reading materials in their own languages will help to ameliorate both the socio-emotional dysphoria and the learning gap faced by these children. Easy-reading materials could be developed that use the child’s home language, focusing on both skills development (math, reading, etc.) and themes that provide a sense of identity and stability for the young reader (e.g., “my family”, familiar animal stories, “life in the city”, etc.). Reading clubs, reading camps, and facilitators who speak the child’s language could help to build the child’s reading skills in a nonthreatening way. Such programming could be offered alongside formal education if the latter is available.

Alternatively, tablet-based learning could be considered as a way of providing local-language materials to children in conflict-affected and disaster-affected areas. An example of tablet-based learning technology for rural IDPs is the Kio Kit (Kio Kits: Created for Africans, By Africans (borgenproject.org) developed by BRCK Education, a Nairobi-based software innovation company.

9.3.2 Linguistically homogeneous cross-border refugee camps

Given the typically long-term experience of most refugees in cross-border refugee camps or settlements, such refugee learners are generally expected to be accommodated in the schools—and LoI—of the host country. This means that the refugee learner has few opportunities to learn in the language of his or her home and/or home country. This in turn can cause a sense of sociocultural dislocation and loss of connection with the home-country context, making any eventual return to the home country difficult.

One way this challenge can be addressed is by means of targeted home-language reading materials. A Norwegian Refugee Council-led project carried out in Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya (primarily populated by Somali refugees) in 2017 focused on the development of 50 Somali-language books for use in community development and accelerated education programs in the camp. The books included not only fictional stories, but also addressed issues of livelihood, values, physical protection,
and concerns about being able to eventually transition back to life in Somalia. The stories were all loaded onto tablets and were received with enthusiasm by the young Somali learners.

### 9.3.3 Refugee settlements with large, multilingual population intake

Where conflict situations are chronic and geographically broad-based, refugee services may have to manage large numbers of arrivals from different locations daily. The refugee population may be comprised of many recent arrivals, along with many long-term residents, and the number of languages represented among the population may be substantial. Lack of proficiency in the LoI of the host country poses a serious language obstacle to the children’s long-term educational success.

The refugee settlements in western Uganda experience these challenges in their classrooms. Strategies used to cope include the recruitment of teacher assistants who speak the language(s) of the children to help communicate the learning content and answer questions. A stronger solution is posed in the study: Save the Children-Uganda (Trudell et al. 2019): a 6-9 month bridging program that focuses on teaching literacy skills in several of the large home languages, as well as English language learning. Such a program could facilitate the streaming of refugee children into the local school system, as they would be somewhat conversant in the language of the school, and able to read and write as well.

### 9.3.4 Host-language learning for long-term education access

As noted above, the limited fluency of refugee children in the host country’s LoI can be highly problematic. Lack of language proficiency in the LoI of the host country hinders the refugee child’s optimal participation in the formal learning system and impedes the child’s ability to make a decent future life for himself or herself in the host country.

The Syrian civil war that began in 2011 posed just such a problem for the many Syrian refugees in Turkey. In response, the government of Turkey announced its intention to ensure that all Syrian refugee children would be integrated into the Turkish national education system. The Ministry ordered all temporary education centres for the refugees to offer 15 hours of Turkish language instruction per week to prepare students for the transition to Turkish schools. With the financial support of the EU-funded Facility for Refugees in Turkey, the Ministry of Education implemented a large-scale project through which Turkish language classes, academic support programs, school materials, and subsidized transportation could be provided, and teachers could receive additional training (UNHCR 2019:19). Such an approach is a realistic and inclusive response to providing educational assistance to long-term refugee populations.

### 9.4 Conclusion

Research on the many challenges of refugee education has generated several proposed solutions to those challenges. However, the context of emergency response and the demographic fluidity inherent to
refugee crises can make implementation of any but the simplest strategies a challenge in itself. The issues surrounding language of instruction are no different. More research is needed on issues such as refugee language demand, and on the options for either transitional or maintenance multilingual education models for the larger and more stable refugee populations.

References


