

# THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION OF REFUGEE CHILDREN TO AVOID CREATING TOMORROW'S EXTREMISTS

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## **Abstract :**

An estimated 65 million people have been forced to flee their homelands in the last few years. Average length of displacement for a refugee is now estimated at 17 years. A whole generation of young people are forced to spend their whole youth in refugee camps and can only be educated there. On the other side the international community is strongly underfinancing any education efforts by aid agencies and international organizations. So, it is common that classes have as many as 100 children and teachers must deal with inevitable language barriers. We also have to remember that most children are traumatized by their experiences of fleeing their homes. Whereas the focus of most efforts is aimed at primary education it should not be forgotten that it is also necessary to support older children even up to higher education. A lot of the refugee adolescents have to support their families through activities that make education impossible. According to the UNHCR, more than 3.5 million refugee children do not have the chance to attend an appropriate school education. The inclusion of refugees in the national education systems of their host countries is a promising way of softening the challenges but the financial burden is too heavy to be carried without substantial support from the international community. Unfortunately, this is still dramatically lacking. Seeing these challenges in the world's toughest classrooms we need to be aware that missing this opportunity to help and educate these traumatized children will fuel the feelings of being disadvantaged and forgotten by the rest of the world. Such feelings are smoothening the way for disaffection and they may become lured to be part of religious extremist organizations if not sufficiently addressed by providing sufficient infrastructure and finances for proper primary and secondary education.

## **Key Words:**

education, refugee children, refugee camps, religious extremists,

## **Introduction:**

According to the UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, by the end of 2016 a total of 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. Out of this number approximately 22.5 million individuals are registered as refugees. About half of these individuals are below 18 years of age and are in a strong need for primary and secondary education. These numbers do not include displaced individuals who are leaving their homes due to severe situations such as lack of food, water, education or health care. From the school-aged children under the mandate of UNHCR about 50 % do not have a school to go to. Some 1.75 million refugee children are not in primary school and another 1.95 million refugee adolescents are not in secondary school. Young refugees are five times more likely not to be in school than the global average.

One has to understand that we do not just neglect the education of these children, but we also lose the opportunity to transform and build a new generation of adults that can take responsibilities for their lives and families. It will be this generation that gives their experience of having to leave their homes and how they have been treated by the societies hosting them to their children. The way these young individuals are treated and what opportunities they will find to improve their lives will have a sustainable impact on social and political shifts in the coming years.

Feeling the positive support of the international community and having opportunities to learn and being educated will minimize tendencies to extremism strongly. Missing this opportunity to address this generation of refugees will lead to feelings of being forgotten and discriminated and open doors for religious and fundamental extremists to recruit new extremists for their organizations.

Under this aspect it is difficult to understand that the UNHCR refugee camps are constantly underfinanced by the international community and that there is no more earnest approach to address the education needs of these individuals. Especially taking in account that the traumas, size of classes and various languages are asking for highly skilled and flexible education staff and teachers and a lot of the young adolescent refugees are forced to contribute to the survival of their families what gives them a lot of pressure not to attend secondary school but to find ways to generate money through any possible means.

Given this situation, we have to fear that we will generate a lost generation of displaced young people that are suffering minimal education and are not capable to integrate in the society and

business life of their host countries and have no other option that rely on social support or any illegal means to finance their lives and families.

### **The Refugee Crisis**

The world remains on a record height of a population of approximately 65.6 million forcibly displaced people. Out of this number a total of approximately 22.5 million individuals are registered as refugees. More than half of all refugees worldwide are coming from just three countries – Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan. Especially the group from South Sudan is fast-growing and the majority of new refugees are children.

The host countries for the refugees are mainly Turkey (up to 3 Mio. individuals), Pakistan (approx. 1,4 Mio. individuals) and Lebanon (approx. 1 Mio. Individuals). The next host countries with many refugees are Islamic Republic of Iran, Uganda and Ethiopia which are not famous for having a strong economic growth rate and strong economy internally. One can easily understand that these countries will not be in a position to solve the inherent problems of hosting such large number of refugees and meet their special needs.

For years we hear the warnings of the UNHCR that the nutrition and medical situation is dramatically limited in the refugee camps but the international community and the political responsible leaders are not willing to sustainably invest into the well-being and future of these displaced individuals. Today's geopolitical situation does not give a lot of hope that the interests of the leading world powers are allowing the original countries of most refugees to find peace and stability. On the contrary one has to fear more displaced individuals from Yemen, South-Sudan, Democratic Republic of Kongo and possibly Zimbabwe in the future.

The idea of “regime change” by supporting political opposition in unstable countries in Africa and the Near East has not proven to be effective but is still applied today by the leading world powers forgetting that ethical and democratic values are not only empty phrases but are also asking for respectful acting of the elite emphasizing such.

### **Situation in Refugee Camps**

As we have learnt the big refugee camps are located in countries that do not have a largely developed economy. The only exception might be Turkey. Pakistan and Lebanon can be considered middle-income countries at best and Iran, Uganda and Ethiopia have a lot of own

problems to solve either from former sanctions or from a generally struggling economy. It is obvious that the international community has to bear a sustainable share of the burdens coming from hosting such large numbers of refugees as otherwise the social stability of the hosting countries is in danger.

Before we start speaking about the educational situation we have to remind us that it is a nearly impossible task for the UNHCR to finance nutrition of the refugees under their mandate and the necessary funds are provided slowly and unreliably by the donor countries. Insufficient nutrition is one of the major reasons that made refugees leaving the camps in 2016 going on their way to Europe but still politicians in Europe are discussing about fighting against causes of migration and flight but are not keeping their basic promises regarding finances.

But even with this problem solved we have the situation that schools open for refugee children are most often at their organizational limits. It is common to have classes with over 100 students with various mother tongues. Such situation asks for more teaching staff which should be trained on a high standard to address the inevitable language barriers and the traumas of the children. Approximately 79 % of the refugee children have experienced death in their families and a lot of them show symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. These children need psychological and emotional support before they can go back to learn mathematics and writing.

Today most focus lies on primary education in refugee camps. But as the average length of displacement for a refugee adds up to 17 years now we have the situation that most refugee children are spending their whole school careers in camps. If we shift our attention to secondary and tertiary education, we have another obstacle there. Most families are forced to organize additional funds as it is nearly not possible to survive with the minimum support by the international community. So adolescent refugees are pushed to help organizing money for the survival of their families and so do miss opportunities to attend secondary or even tertiary education. They abandon their studies to provide for their families.

One has also to take into consideration that a heavy burden is placed on the education system of the hosting countries and the new problems are also jeopardizing the quality of education for existing students. The educational budgets of these countries are already stretched beyond capacities.

### **Education as a Fundamental Human Right**

The right to education has been recognized as a Human Right by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 13 and 14 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 26 states, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.” Included is also an obligation to develop secondary education accessible to all without discrimination.

If our developed regions of the world are not taking care of the needs of the refugee children and adolescents to be able to access appropriate education, we are neglecting their claims according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As our economic system is - nicely said - not helping their home countries to develop a sustainable economy for themselves and our political leaders deem it appropriate to get involved in the internal political affairs even using them for global strategic goals by arguing with our high ethical standards reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights such behavior seems not very honest. We have a duty to care at least for the education of these displaced and traumatized refugee children.

As mentioned, the educational system of the host countries of most refugees is already stretched to the limits and only sustainable and reliable international support can help to provide necessary resources. It would be easy to grant this fundamental human right to refugee children if the international community would cooperate and take its responsibility seriously.

A pro-active approach by allocating a small percentage of the military budget to education of refugee children and adolescent would possibly generate a much more successful option for several crisis regions in the world to stabilize in the future and become pacificated. As it is agreed on the international level that education is the key for a successful and peaceful future of mankind, we should not only talk but accept our responsibilities today in this refugee crisis.

### **A lost Generation?**

We have to be aware that we should educate the generation that hopefully will return one day to their home country and rebuild and re-shape the future of these countries. It is a unique opportunity to interact with the future generation of these unstable countries and to get appreciation for our values and ethics. Missing this opportunity will make us pay a high price in the future.

We should not deny a whole generation their right to education and leave them to religious extremists group that offer them basic education at the cost of religious indoctrination. It is

human nature that most children are eager to learn and make experiences. By providing secular education we have an unseen opportunity to explain some of our core values and ethical standards to milieus we could never reach before. Being careful not to harm the social and religious manners of their origin we could build new bridges between the cultures to exchange views and idea. We could educate a new generation of leaders for these countries that will remember our support and understanding for their situation and hopefully will be more tolerant and open minded for the benefit of all mankind. The best thing you can offer a child or even an adolescent is empathy and understanding so to help him learn and develop.

On the other side the worst thing that can happen to a child or adolescent is, that he has to leave his home forcibly and the society offering him shelter is making him feel unwelcome, let him starve, deny him education and does not give him any positive perspective for his future. Every young individual will one-day start thinking why he and his family had been forced to leave their home. It is understandable that in most cases there will be a feeling that the leading powers of the world did not play a neutral or innocent role in the events leading to the displacement.

Having complete uncertainty about the future and lack of education will make it easy for religious and other extremists to interact with these young individuals and give them an easy explanation about what is good and bad. Supporting the feeling of being unworthy and forgotten the role model as a victim of international conspiracy against its own culture and society will be emphasized quickly. If such feelings are mixed with religious fundamentalism we are urging these young people directly to organizations that will use them against us. The generation of refugee children growing up in camps would become a great pond for the extremist groups to fish for new victims they can indoctrinate easily with their completely mad concept of an extremist society.

### **(Re-)Integration into Society**

Of course, the forcibly displaced individuals put a heavy burden on their host countries. Mostly they are not really welcomed by the societies that should take responsibilities for them. This is understandable and it should be the first aim to prepare conditions that these individuals can return to their home countries as soon as possible. It is the general expectation that forcibly displaced individuals will move back to their home country if it is possible to do so without high risk. Based on this assumption are the regulations in international law defining the rights of a refugee.

As far as it concerns the generation of refugee children growing up in refugee camps there are two options how they will have to integrate into an existing society. After spending the whole youth in a refugee camp this generation of young people would have to bring an enormous effort to integrate into the society at home - if they hopefully return one day. The society they will find will be unstable and people will be traumatized and without clear perspectives. They have to get accustomed to the manners and behavior of the people that stayed home during these hard times. This is the moment where we could benefit most from this generation that could return educated and open-minded with a perspective in their lives to accept responsibilities for their home countries.

In the past, more often than not, it was never possible for refugees to return to their home countries. In this second scenario all these young people will have to integrate into foreign cultures and societies. It is without saying that education and an open mind are the most crucial precondition for a successful integration. Being able to become a part of the local work force and take responsibility for its own life makes a big difference than to depending on social security and support of the host country. Also, the social tension in the host countries will be less intensive if this generation of young refugees are in the position to show a contribution to the society they are asked to become part of.

If we are not successful with granting these children their right to education, we will generate a minefield of problems in the already stretched societies that are offering a more or less safe place to survive for these forcibly displaced individuals. In both scenarios mankind would benefit largely if these young children would get an appropriate secular education. It is the decision of the developed world how we are going to handle the situation.

### **Climate Refugees**

Today, most registered refugees by the UNHCR are fleeing their country because of wars and terrorist activities. Looking some years into the future we have to expect completely new waves of refugees. According to new studies published in November 2017 tens of millions of people will be forced from their homes by climate change in the next decade. For all these climate refugees it will most probably never be possible to return to their homes.

We have to anticipate that the host societies that have to take responsibilities for these refugees will not be easily ready to take such. We will encounter social and political tension and maybe even violence against refugees. This development could easily become an existential threat to

our civilization in the longer term. As the developed countries will have no other option as to integrate these refugees as returning home will be no option education for these expected group of refugee children and adolescent will become most crucial.

As I explained before a successful integration is asking for a positive contribution of the new member to the society to reduce tension and open perspectives. So today's crisis in education of refugee children can be seen as a test for the coming challenges for our civilization to survive the coming tensions by mass migration caused by climate change and economic disaster.

### **Conclusion**

The international community has a strong obligation to grant refugee children and adolescent their right to education as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We have to offer appropriate education that supports the development of the individuals to build bridges between cultures and find solutions to help this generation to re-build and re-shape their home countries if they can return one day.

If we miss this opportunity to accept part of the burden of the refugee crisis we will see social problems evolving in the host countries. By neglect and non-action we will de facto be offering a whole generation to the religious extremists that can use the uncertainty of the future and the feeling of inferiority in these young people as a promising source for recruiting extremist fighters successfully.

It is an unseen opportunity to successfully master this challenge if the international community puts aside political and geo-strategic short-term thinking and bundles resources to establish a new understanding between cultures and societies and grants these refugee children and adolescent their right to education.

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