

Virtual Panel Discussion

Refugees, Education and Conflict

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Event Report

World Refugee & Migration Council

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► Refugees, Education and Conflict

On January 27, 2021 the World Refugee & Migration Council (WRMC) hosted an event with the US Institute of Peace (USIP) to explore linkages between refugees, access to education and conflict. Three distinguished panelists — international consultant Marc Sommers, Dr. Sarah Dryden-Peterson of Harvard University's School of Education, and Suha Tutunji, academic director of Jusoor in Lebanon — discussed refugee education policies and practice, and the implications of limited access to education for refugee youth. US Institute of Peace President and CEO Lise Grande introduced the program. The discussion was moderated by Elizabeth Ferris, WRMC Vice-President of Research and Research Professor at the Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University.

As mentioned by Dr. Dryden-Peterson, at the peak of the pandemic in 2020 91 percent of schools around the world were closed. With this in mind, it is crucial to note that education is a global public good that is important at the micro level for individuals and families to form lifelong attitudes towards others, while at the macro level education is one of the greatest tools of peacebuilding, leading to global progress and security. Education itself is a central pillar of the WRMC. The Council sees education as an essential human right, but also seeks to use education as a way to transform the world refugee system. On a daily basis, refugee children struggle to find a place of learning, protection, well-being, sustenance, and freedom. This struggle has been compounded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

► Discussion: Access to Education

The discussion began by looking at how refugee education has typically been organized. Dr. Sarah Dryden-Peterson, of Harvard University's School of Education, noted that prior to 2012 most refugees around the world accessed education through two types of school systems – both of which were separated from local education systems and provided only temporary fixes. In one, community-led education programs functioned to create opportunities for children. In the other, albeit less common than community-led initiatives, refugees attended education programs set up by global agencies, often in refugee camps or in urban areas where they were accessible to refugee children.

Dr. Dryden-Peterson continued to note that today, on average, displacement lasts between 10-25 years, three times the average time in the early 1990s. With growing awareness of the protracted nature of displacement, there was a realization that the education systems for refugees needed to reflect this reality. Stemming from a new strategy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there have been increasing efforts since 2012 to integrate refugee schooling systems into national education systems and create a more permanent education system for refugee children.



Refugee children take classes in Azez, Syria

Image credit: [shutterstock.com/quetions123](https://www.shutterstock.com/quetions123)

► Discussion: Access to Education

Yet despite efforts to integrate refugee and national education systems, the most common model continues to be one of separate schools where refugee and local students learn at different times, and are not fully integrated into the local educational system. This presents challenges for including refugees in the wider community where they live. For example, Dr. Dryden-Peterson recounted how a teacher in Lebanon is confronted with the challenges of helping his Syrian refugee children integrate into a society where they are still rejected and seen as outsiders.

“It's not fair because the main language of instruction is French or English, and this is a big obstacle for Syrian population”

Suha Tutunji

On structural barriers to accessing education for Syrian refugee youth and children in Lebanon

To address this issue the UNHCR 2030 education strategy is seeking to address not only access to education, but the quality of education, focusing on inclusion and belonging for refugees and young people. This strategy seeks to provide the kind of enabling environments that help refugee children and youth to use their education to contribute to peace and sustainable futures. However, as Dr. Dryden-Peterson noted, this is much easier said than done, and there will be an onus on global actors to share responsibility to provide not only the financial resources needed to reach these education goals, but also to ensure that when the plans are implemented, they are done so in an equitable way that meets the need for meaningful inclusion of refugee children and youth.

Dr. Dryden-Peterson's presentation was followed by Suha Tutunji, who works with an NGO in Lebanon that focuses on Syrian refugees and education who gave a snapshot into the reality of the situation on the ground in Lebanon. Ms. Tutunji noted that the issue of inclusion is pervasive in

the national refugee education plan in Lebanon – which operates on a school system with temporally divided learning times for local and refugee students. Approximately 40 percent of the children attending public school in Lebanon are Syrian, yet only 250 of the 1,260 public schools are open for Syrian refugees, which means that less than 60 percent of potential Syrian elementary students actually attend school.

In addition to the lack of schools open to refugee children, refugees face difficulties in accessing schools as many of them are located far from where they live, or the expenses of travelling to attend classes is beyond their financial capacity. Additionally, the language of instruction in Lebanon is in French or English while most Syrian refugee children speak only Arabic. These difficulties mean that many refugee families do not believe in the education system available to their children, leading to an increase in societal exclusion for refugee children and youth.

► Discussion: Peacebuilding and Conflict

“Many of us recognize and truly believe that one of the greatest tools of peacebuilding is universal, progressive education.”

Lise Grande

On the relationship between access to education and peacebuilding in conflict effected regions

International consultant Dr. Marc Sommers then turned to the issue of education as a fundamental element in peacebuilding and the problems refugees have in this regard. Drawing on his research with South Sudanese refugees, Dr. Sommers discussed the fallout from extremely limited access to schools and programs, and the implication of the stark differences in donor investments in education for refugees in different countries.

For South Sudanese refugees in East Africa, 88 percent of refugee youth are not in secondary school despite their desire for education. Many young refugees face the double downside of a lack of access to schools and lack of social inclusion.. Those without access to education – particularly young men – have a disproportionate chance of being caught up in conflict, including gang activity. Without access to education there are few opportunity costs for disenfranchised and excluded youths from engaging in violent, or criminal activity.

To address this, Dr. Sommers recommended that peacebuilding efforts take a regionally strategic approach and, when designing educational programs for refugee children and youth, strategies should prioritize their effective inclusion. By focusing on inclusive education, donors and agencies provide avenues for refugee children and youth to enhance their skills. This also gives them an outlet for their energies and an opportunity to engage in socially productive activities rather than negative ones such as participation in gangs or militias.



Syrian and Lebanese students in class in Beirut, Lebanon
Image credit: [flickr.com/DFID](https://www.flickr.com/photos/DFID/)

► Discussion: Opportunities

Building on this point, during the Q&A session, participants discussed the urgent for opportunities for youth that do finish school. If these economic opportunities don't exist, youth face the same risks as those who never had access to education, including the risk of joining in criminal or violent activities. A lack of prospective economic opportunities upon leaving school also leads to higher drop-out rates of high school students. Therefore, it is important to address education opportunities in the short and long term, but also necessary for organizations and institutions to work to increase opportunities for refugees who leave the education system. Further, as young men and women face different challenges in both the educational system as well as post-school job prospects, long-term planning needs to include a gendered analysis of the needs for both young men and women.

"The differences in the quality of education in two neighboring East Africa African countries were dramatic, and the differences between the lives of South Sudanese refugee youth who attended school and those not in school were equally dramatic."

Marc Sommers

On access to education for South Sudanese refugee youth and prospects for social mobility

To learn more about the WRMC's work on education and conflict we invite you to visit our website at wrmcouncil.org/education where you can re-watch this event and access reports and other information.

▶ Panelists



Elizabeth Ferris, Moderator and Vice President of Research, World Refugee & Migration Council

Elizabeth Ferris is a research professor with the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. She also serves as a non-resident senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution. From January to September 2016, she also served as senior adviser to the UN General Assembly's Summit for Refugees and Migrants in New York. She is an expert in the areas of migration, refugee protection and humanitarian assistance, and continues to conduct research and lead projects in these areas.



Marc Sommers, International Consultant

Marc Sommers, PhD began working on education and youth challenges in war-affected contexts 25+ years ago. He has written books on education for South Sudanese and co-ordinating education during emergencies and reconstruction, co-authored a book on education in post-war Kosovo, and wrote a seminal assessment on children, education and war for the World Bank. More recently, he conducted field research and then led the design of an innovative regional peacebuilding program for refugee and IDP youth from South Sudan.



Dr. Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

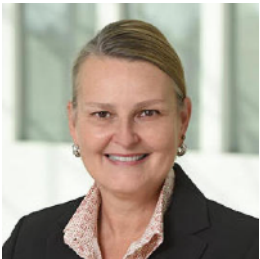
Sarah Dryden-Peterson is Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Director of Refugee REACH, bringing together educators, researchers, and policymakers in co-creating quality education and welcoming communities in settings of mass displacement. She teaches courses on qualitative research methods, education in armed conflict, and education in uncertainty.

▶ Panelists



Suha Tutunji, Director, Jusoor Refugee Education program

Suha is the director of the Jusoor Refugee Education program in Lebanon. She has an MA in school management and supervision. Her first classroom experience was as an English teacher. She has 25 years of experience in education, with 18 years as a school administrator. She worked as principal of the elementary school at Quaker-run school in Lebanon and went on to serve in the Emirates as the Vice Principal of an international school with more than 15 different nationalities of teachers and students. She has extensive experience running workshops for educators in Lebanon, the Emirates and the UK. Suha eventually came back to Lebanon to serve as the principal of a school in an underserved community in north of Lebanon. While principal, she co-ran a project on participatory action research in the school.



Lise Grande, President and CEO, U.S. Institute Peace

Lise Grande is the president and CEO of the U.S. Institute Peace, an independent, nonpartisan, federally funded institute charged with the mission to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict around the world. She has 25 years of continuous overseas experience leading, managing, and coordinating complex operations for the United Nations. Ms. Grande has held leadership positions in humanitarian, stabilization, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and development operations in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caucasus.



World Refugee & Migration Council

Chaired by former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, the World Refugee & Migration Council offers bold thinking on how the international community can respond to refugees through cooperation & responsibility sharing.

This conference was made possible through a partnership with [Cuso International](#).



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