



Providing Education and Care for Syria's Littlest Refugees

"We are the children whose voices are not being heard: it is time we are taken into account"¹

Given the protracted nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, a response must include a humanitarian approach that is also a sustainable one based on community building. A response starting with the youngest children can be a **resource for development and social cohesion**.

At present, hundreds of thousands of refugee children are severely neglected worldwide. They make up approximately **50% of all refugees**, and they risk spending their entire childhood in refugee camps, urban slums or rural villages away from home.² They are **the most vulnerable** to human rights violations,³ poverty, abuse, violence, exploitation, and trafficking; they experience high levels of toxic stress,⁴ with negative consequences that last into adulthood.⁵ **They need help now.**

Particularly vulnerable are refugee children aged birth-5⁶: early intervention is essential under highly adverse conditions. There is a well-documented **connection between adverse early experiences and a wide range of costly community problems** such as mental/psychological problems, lower school achievement, higher rates of criminal behavior, substance abuse, and chronic diseases.⁷ Refugee children's "development can proceed in a positive direction if parents or other caregivers provide consistent responsiveness and communities provide resources and support that strengthen the families' capacities."⁸ Effective interventions must encompass health, nutrition, protection and education, in a holistic approach.

Help by the international community must incorporate the goals of **UNHCR Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)**, which promote protection and education for refugee children and stress the importance of a resilient approach that strengthens the capacities of communities in the five host countries.⁹ Also needed is the implementation of **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**¹⁰ programs which play a critical role in alleviating childhood trauma, toxic stress and deprivation. It creates the human and social capital needed for development, and contributing to social cohesion and peace building¹¹. ECEC is consistent with the "No Lost Generation Initiative", endorsed by the 3RP.¹²

To provide the education and care needed by these refugee children, we offer the following recommendations:

- Collect **disaggregated data** on children (age, sex, nationality, religion, country of origin, vulnerability, disability etc.) to better inform the planning of services needed;
- Raise **awareness** of refugee children's rights, listening to refugee children's needs and requests, and considering them not as a cause of expenses, but as a source of investment;
- Give refugee children opportunities to heal and thrive through **education, childcare and psychosocial care**;

- Create **jobs, livelihoods and development** initiatives for refugee children, their families, and local populations, employing both refugees and locals to expand facilities, as educators, and as childcare providers;
- Strengthen refugee communities, so that they may **become contributors** to the economy and productive members of the host society;
- Empower refugee women, involving them in childcare initiatives and psychosocial counseling, to reinforce a culturally relevant approach, **family integrity**, social cohesion and improved intercommunity relations;
- **Support mothers** in developing children’s competency skills, cultural identity, relationships, and psychological wellbeing;
- Implement **ECEC programs** through collaboration with grassroots organizations and local NGOs, with cost reduction and increased efficiency in mind;
- Recognize that education as well as childcare and **language learning** can create a more educated, skilled population of refugee children better prepared to be part of a peaceful and constructive settlement in the hosting society.

¹ The Children’s Statement, *A World Fit for Children*, p. 58, UNICEF (July 2008).

² Families remain in refugee camps for an average of 17 years. 85% of refugees live in urban, peri-urban and rural settings. Retrieved from <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/3rp-key-messages-find-pdf>.

³ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes the basic rights of all children, including those living in refugee camps or displaced in urban areas.

⁴ Toxic stress is an excessive and prolonged stress that has lasting effects on the developing brain and body; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience*, Working Paper 13, 2015. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

⁵ Middlebrooks, J.S. & Audage, N.C. (2008), *The effects of childhood stress on health across the lifespan*, Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁶ 19% of refugee children in the countries affected by the Syrian crisis are enrolled in Early Childhood Programs, March Dashboards 2015, 3RP. Retrieved on May 28, 2015 from www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/3RP-Regional-Dashboards-March-2015.pdf.

⁷ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience*, Working Paper 13, 2015. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.3

⁹ Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015-2016, 3RP, UNHCR 2014. The 3RP is a country-driven, regionally coherent plan to address refugee protection and humanitarian needs whilst building the resilience of vulnerable people and impacted communities and strengthening the capacity of national delivery systems in the five most affected countries neighboring Syria (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt). Retrieved from 3rpsyriacrisis.org

¹⁰ ECEC is culturally sensitive, teaching children respect and appreciation for all cultures via intergenerational and intercultural activities; it involves parents and families as significant players; it contributes to laying the groundwork for resilience, recovery and renewed development, helping to reduce inequity and inter-generational transmission of poverty.

¹¹ UNICEF (2013), *Early Childhood Peace Consortium*. The innovative approach of the Consortium utilizes the transformative power of early childhood to promote and sustain peaceful society.

¹² 3RP Roadmap, 1 September 2014. Retrieved on May 17, 2015 from www.syriacrisis.org/publications

About the NGO Committee on Migration

The NGO Committee on Migration is a member of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CoNGO) in consultative relationship with the United Nations. The mission of the NGO Committee on Migration is to encourage the protection of migrants and the promotion of their human rights, in accordance with the United Nations Charter.