



Keeping Promises

The time to keep our promises to refugee children is **now**

The Voluntary Repatriation Process

The facilitated voluntary repatriation of refugees from the Thailand – Myanmar border is underway and could potentially herald the **end of one of the worlds most protracted refugee situations**. An estimated 14,000 – 15,000 refugees have ‘spontaneously’ returned since 2010 and more recently (Oct 2016 and May 2018) two groups of refugees (164 refugees) have been supported to return through the government-led UNHCR facilitated voluntary repatriation process. It is anticipated that facilitated returns will increase in the coming year/s, with the Thai and Myanmar governments agreeing in March 2018 to authorize two refugee movements per year.

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Refugee Education and Barriers to Education Access in Myanmar

Refugee children and youth, many of whom were born and raised in the camps, account for almost half (46%) of the refugee population and approximately **24,500 children are currently receiving their basic education in schools in the camps**. Education for the refugee population has been strongly influenced by ethnic education provision in contested areas of southeast Myanmar, where the majority of refugees originate. Refugee education is administered mainly by Karen and Karenni refugee education authorities in the camps, with the support of international NGOs. The children's mother tongue is predominately used as the language of instruction with Burmese and English introduced as language subjects by Grade 3. The curriculum is mostly localized, making it relevant to the ethnic identity and culture of the children. This however has meant that refugee children's education is not recognized by the Myanmar or Thailand education systems, jeopardising education continuity when children leave the camps.

This presents significant challenges for refugee children and youth repatriating to Myanmar. It means that generations of refugees who have completed their education in the camps may not have their education qualifications recognized upon their return, hampering their efforts to gain employment or pursue higher education opportunities and limiting their potential to benefit from and contribute to economic development in the country. For those children currently attending school

Lessons from Recent Returns

Our studies² of refugee students who have returned to Myanmar has found that while there are some localized solutions there is no guarantee that children's rights to continue their education will be upheld. Indigenous providers of education have developed refugee student transition guidelines to support enrolment and integration into community schools throughout southeast Myanmar but lack the resources to scale up education services to absorb potentially large numbers of returning students. In government and mixed-controlled areas where government schools are available, refugee student experiences vary greatly. In some areas, local education authorities have accepted camp-based education certificates and allowed refugee students to enrol at the appropriate grade level in government schools. In other areas, refugee students have been required to take a placement test in the Myanmar language based on the Myanmar curriculum, for which they are ill prepared given their lack of exposure to the

in the camps, lack of Myanmar language skills, curriculum alignment and official policies and procedures to support the enrolment and integration of refugee students into government schools means that **refugee students are at risk of joining the estimated 2.7 million out of school children** in Myanmar¹.

The risks are compounded by the lack of education services in many conflict-affected areas of southeast Myanmar, where the majority of refugees originate. While indigenous providers of education have long provided education services in these areas, the lack of funding to support teachers and teaching and learning resources is hindering their capacity to expand and strengthen education service provision in areas where refugees are likely to return. Furthermore, as donors continue to normalize relations with the Myanmar government and scale up funding to the Myanmar Ministry of Education (MoE), education services provided by indigenous providers continue to be marginalized. At the same time, the MoE is expanding government education services into contested areas where indigenous providers affiliated with armed non-state actors (NSAs) serve local communities. Government expansion is being undertaken without proper conflict sensitive consultations with local indigenous providers and communities and this is damaging confidence in current ceasefire agreements and the on-going peace process.

Myanmar curriculum and sufficient Myanmar language study. While in other areas, refugee students have been refused enrolment. In the most extreme cases, the lack of secondary schools in return areas has resulted in the 'spring back' of refugee students who have returned to the camps to complete their education.³

Research into the challenges facing returning refugee students also found socio-cultural misconceptions or bias against refugee students in some receiving communities. Refugees along the Thailand – Myanmar border are associated with the struggle of ethnic armed NSAs for self-determination in Myanmar and therefore refugees have often been stigmatized as 'rebels' and 'trouble makers.' For some refugee students who have returned to government schools, this has resulted in bullying and teasing and has led in some cases to children dropping out of school.

Our Promises

In response to the growing number of both migrants and refugees in the world, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants in September 2016, reaffirming that member states *will actively promote durable solutions, particularly in protracted refugee situations, with a focus on sustainable and timely return in safety and dignity. This will encompass repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities*' (UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/71/1, 19)⁴. For refugee children, ensuring schools are available and have the capacity to absorb returning refugee students; ensuring that their prior learning is recognized so that they can continue their education; providing education transition support to ensure that refugee students integrate well and are supported to effectively learn in schools; and supporting social cohesion within return communities are all essential to upholding children's rights to education and actualizing the promises made in the New York Declaration.

Furthermore, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the pledge to 'leave no-one behind' cannot be achieved without upholding the rights of the world's most vulnerable, including refugees. For education, SDG4 advances inclusive and equitable education and promotes lifelong learning for all. SDG4 is recognized as both a fundamental human right and an enabling right. In other words, through education other rights are realized and can be achieved, such as gender equity and ending poverty.

¹ Myanmar Ministry of Education, *National Education Strategic Plan 2016 – 2021*, p. 20.

² Between February and April 2018, Save the Children Thailand conducted consultations with 136 people in relation to refugee student return, including 107 (66 females/ 41 males) students, parents, teachers and community leaders in non-government and mixed controlled areas and 29 (9 female/ 20 male) Karen State Education Department state and township authorities and head teachers from government schools. See also World Education (2017), *Refugee Integration Education Review*, (<https://www.worlded.org/WELInternet/resources/publication/display.cfm?atGeoArea=INTL&id=19389&thisSection=Resources>) and Save the Children Thailand (2015), *Beyond Access: Refugee Students' Experiences of Myanmar State Education*, (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/50226>)

³ UNHCR reported at the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) Education Sub Committee meeting on 26 September 2017 that 6 of the 29 refugee students who returned as part of the first voluntary repatriation group in October 2016 returned to camp to continue their education.

⁴ www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A.RES.71.1.pdf



Call to Action

- The Myanmar MoE, Indigenous Providers of Education, Refugee Return Committees, and UN agencies and development partners need to establish a cross border coordination platform to effectively share information and plan for the re(integration) of refugee students in return areas, including targeted support for the most vulnerable, such as refugee students with disabilities. This could take the form of a taskforce or sub-working group within existing coordination platforms, such as the education sector working groups in Mon and Kayin States.
- Refugee education authorities, with the support of development partners and donors, should ensure all refugee students are provided with their academic transcripts and school transfer letters as evidence of their learning achievement and to support enrolment upon return.
- The Myanmar MoE, Indigenous Providers of Education, Refugee Return Committees, and UN agencies and development partners should ensure that all refugee families are provided with accurate information on the education systems availability in areas of intended return, including which schools (e.g. community or government) and grade levels are available, the period and procedures for enrolment and the curriculum and language of instruction. Written information should be distributed throughout the camps and verbally shared during pre-departure orientation sessions.
- Development partners in cooperation with refugee education authorities and with adequate funding from donors should establish a refugee student transition program in the camps. The program should include Myanmar language enrichment classes and psychosocial support so that refugee students are better prepared for return and re(integration).
- The Myanmar MoE should include returning refugee students in Education Sector Plans and should develop and implement clear policies and procedures to support the enrolment and successful re(integration) of refugee students, together with IDP children and youth. This should include supporting the MoE to develop and implement education transition support programs in government schools (language support programs, teacher training support, social cohesion programs) in return areas.
- Donors and development partners should take a balanced and conflict-sensitive approach to supporting education provision in southeast Myanmar and should support Indigenous Providers of Education to expand education services in under-served post conflict affected areas. This should include support to expand community schools and quality education provision (schools, classrooms, facilities, teaching and learning materials, teacher training support) in return areas.
- Adequate development funding and support from the Myanmar MoE and Indigenous Providers of Education will be required to expand access to alternative education and vocational training for out of school youth returning from the camps.

Returning refugees have much to offer and, if adequately supported, can significantly contribute to positive community and economic development in Myanmar. Investing now to support the successful return and (re)integration of refugees along the Thai – Myanmar border is an investment in the future of those most affected by Myanmar's long history of conflict. We have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world that peace pays dividends and that the promises made by all 193 Member States of the United Nations in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants can be realized and drive global learning and change in the way the world protects and upholds the rights of refugee children.