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When Should Refugee Children Attend Public Schools?

Over 20 million people around the world have been displaced from their home country, more than at any time in history. Over half of those who have been displaced are children under the age of 18. These children have the right to education, but must seek it in a new place under great uncertainty. They often need help catching up on academic subjects and need psychosocial support after experiencing trauma.

The strategies implemented by educational systems to address the educational needs of refugee children can be placed into two broad categories of integration and customization. The selection or combination of these approaches represent different answers to the question: Should refugee education help children integrate into the host country's public education system or should education be tailored to their own needs and heritage? When integration is prioritized, displaced children are often included in the national educational system as quickly as possible and expected to learn in the dominant language of instruction. When customization is opted for, civil society and international organizations support a parallel education system that tailors the school content to the unique needs of refugee children. These parallel schools may use curricula from the children's country of origin, teach in their mother tongue, and often include psychosocial support.

The urgency that surrounds enrolling refugee children in education often results in decisions being taken due to immediacy as opposed to strategic planning. Such strategic planning should consider the political and economic uncertainty affecting refugee education, conflicting rights-based frameworks, and the best interests of the children. If the host country lacks the political support to enable refugees to integrate, why should the learning of children be slowed by forcing them to transition to a new curriculum and a different language of instruction? If refugees are not legally allowed to work in the host country's formal economy, what impact will this have on child labor, school enrollment, and children's motivation to complete schooling? And most importantly, what form of education will be in the best interest of the children?

This presentation will discuss examples of the two strategies, their interaction with political and economic uncertainties, and potential avenues for combining them. The effective provision of education for millions of refugee children requires the combination of these two approaches and requires changes to policy domains outside of the education system, particularly immigration and employment policy.