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Learning with and from refugees: adult education to strengthen inclusive societies

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Education is interrupted in [contexts of emergencies and humanitarian crisis](#), leaving millions of primary and secondary school-aged children excluded from education provision. Education is a right for all, and the UN [Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education](#) (SDG 4) aims to achieve increased access and provision of quality education by 2030. Adult education, including lifelong, lifewide and [informal learning](#), can contribute to social change and sustainability, and can be key to rebuilding and strengthening both the societies affected by humanitarian crises and host communities.

[Research](#) shows that education remains one of the top priorities for adults in conflict-affected areas, as it can foster wellbeing, resilience, a sense of normality, and an overall sense of safety and security. Education, and even more so adult education, [is, however, not a priority of the humanitarian aid sector](#), with minimal funding allocated to it. Humanitarian responses and funding, even though more substantial than in the past (conflicts and crises are becoming more protracted in nature), still do not cover education provision. On the other hand, development actors (that provide financial support in the aftermath of a crisis with the purpose of supporting development) are unable to meet the needs of refugees and of the displaced population in terms of education.

There are numerous challenges affecting the provision of refugee adult education, ranging from [language barriers](#), to gender issues, and in particular [women's participation in education](#), to the [recognition of credentials](#), and issues related to [insecurities within host countries](#) and [inaccessible fees](#) when it comes to accessing higher education. These challenges, common to most contexts worldwide, have already been well [documented](#).

Integration as a two-way process of mutual learning

Refugee education should not only consider the learning that refugees need for integration into the host communities, but also that learning and education should also involve the host communities themselves as active learners. The integration of people into the host communities should be perceived as an opportunity for the host communities themselves to become more cohesive and inclusive, by learning *with* and *from* refugees. We understand these possibilities of mutual learning as important to: (a) promoting integration as a two-way process and hence strengthening societies; and (b) valuing informal learning and shaping the public opinion, with the hopeful task of contributing to transformation and social change for fairer and more just societies.

Although different countries have [different policies](#) when it comes to the integration of refugees into the schooling system, and into society more broadly, overall, learning programmes for refugees often focus on the acquisition of the language and culture of the host country. In several countries, [these classes are limited](#), underfunded and often driven by volunteer labour. School teachers often become language teachers in their spare time, with little training in how to teach their own native tongue.

Integration, [several academics argue](#), should be a two-way process, where also host communities learn about the newcomers and their new neighbours, in an effort to stretch towards hospitality. Hospitality in our daily life can be first manifested in language and through communication. A few welcoming words in one's own native tongue can make a big [difference](#). The host communities should therefore be ready to familiarise with languages other than their own, and [other than the ones that were learnt as part of the schooling systems](#) (that is, the 'powerful' modern languages that were once studied for tourism and prestige).

Refugee languages and the languages spoken by transnational migrants often do not find a place within the host country education system, with the risk of remaining invisible. However, it is precisely migrants and refugees that can [teach us to live in a multilingual, globalised world](#).

A recent [project](#) in Scotland is piloting the teaching of Arabic (the most used refugee language in Scotland) to Scottish educators. By the end of the course, the educators who have taken part will be able to hold simple conversations in Arabic. Although the focus is on language learning and educators will indeed learn language skills, they will also put themselves in the language learners' shoes, and they will help newcomers (both children and their families) feel welcome within educational settings by getting closer to them, in language. Language education can have a transformative power, one that has wider social and individual repercussions.

Other important [research](#) with refugees also suggests that host communities should learn about the experiences of forced displacement and war, to strengthen empathy and develop cohesive societies. Learning from refugees can also help fight misconceptions and negative media narratives that foster hate speech and racism, dividing communities rather than strengthening them.

Valuing informal learning

Learning occurs in our everyday life, mostly informally and often unexpectedly, and is not always driven by instrumental needs. Lifelong learning promotes and values all the kinds of learning one has access to, including [informal learning](#). In the case of refugee adult education, [informal learning is critical](#) to adapting and integrating into the host society.

This is not to ignore the importance of the evaluation and recognition of credentials and of formal adult education, but it is important to value [the grassroots responses](#) that are unfolding nowadays, and the place that informal learning can have in shaping the public response, and hence, potentially, to have a strong impact on the development of future refugee policies.

Thinking about the future?

In the last month, since the 24th February date that marked the invasion of Ukraine, different countries developed and quickly implemented new admission policies (e.g. [Canada](#), the [European Union](#)). Although these are mostly temporary, scholars are already wondering whether we are seeing a new era of refugee policies. Adult education, and especially informal education, can trigger responses and

influence the public in pushing governments towards developing more hospitable and fairer policies for refugee integration and for the development of diverse, inclusive and sustainable communities.

National governments face tremendous challenges in providing adult education and employment opportunities for refugees, due to the assumption of the situation as temporary. It remains to be seen how long Ukrainians will be forcedly displaced from their country, but there is a risk of the situation becoming [protracted](#) and of [host communities being unprepared](#). If it is protracted, issues such as reskilling and [deskilling](#) will become particularly relevant. Will the professional qualifications and training be recognised outside of Ukraine by the host country? What burden of proof and credentials will be needed for these refugees to be able to work and contribute to the new societies?

At national level, it is important that professional regulation bodies (e.g., the General Medical Council in the UK) work proactively with refugees with professional background so that they can take up meaningful work in host countries. In the UK, for example, where there is a severe doctor shortage, refugees who are doctors could be fast-tracked into medical work. This would mean that professional qualifications and training will need to be recognised within the host country, in addition to granting permission to work to also those who are in the asylum process. In 2019, the [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning higher education](#) was adopted by UNESCO, becoming the first United Nations treaty on higher education with a global scope. Article VII of the Convention, on the 'Recognition of Partial Studies and Qualifications Held by Refugees and Displaced Persons', states that the recognition of qualifications should be promoted even in cases when documentary evidence is missing. Governments who have already ratified the Convention (e.g., the UK) should work proactively towards its full implementation.

Governments should also financially support community development programmes. For example, the Scottish government is leading an [ongoing project](#) which involved a £2.8 millions of funding spread across already established organisations which work on refugee integration, through small, medium and large grants. The impact of this project is yet to be evaluated but its aims are to promote employability, education, health and social connections for refugees.

At local level, grassroot and community-based work is crucial to promote inclusive societies. The [efficacy of adult education programmes of international and local non-governmental organisations](#) has been proved. Through community-based activities (e.g., mentoring programmes), and informal learning, NGOs can continue to campaign to raise awareness of the issue, and lobby governments on new issues facing refugees.

Finally, we encourage all stakeholders to further promote and effectively implement [safeguarding](#) policies and procedures within and beyond their organisations. The [UN](#) has warned about heightened risks of trafficking and exploitations especially for children and [women](#) fleeing wars. Safeguarding measures, raised awareness, and strong, collaborative efforts from all individuals in reporting and responding to those issues are required, especially in situation of crisis.

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