

Assessing the effect of COVID-19 on refugee community schools in Egypt

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were 98,385 children registered with UNHCR in Egypt as of March 2020.¹ In 2019, approximately 46,800 children collected the UNHCR education grant,² which indicates that 48 percent of refugee children are in some form of semi-formal or formal education. A sizeable portion of these children attend community schools led by refugees, for refugees.

External funding for these community schools has declined (in step with the decline in UNHCR's funding) since 2018, with the cessation of institutional grants and the reduction in individual student educational grants. Many of these schools operate on minimal costs in order to remain accessible to refugee populations, the majority of which live below the poverty line.

In May, Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) surveyed 51 refugee community schools, which collectively educate over 15,000 children from displaced communities. Of those school leaders surveyed, **94 percent report that they have been unable to pay teacher salaries in full since March, and 82 percent report that they are unable to meet their rental costs.** Many expressed concerns that they will be unable to weather the economic shock of COVID-19, and may not be able to re-open when restrictions are eased.

1. Refugee community schools

Community schools play an important role in educating children from displaced populations.

- At present, refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq, and other countries (approximately 20 percent of the refugee population) are not entitled to access Egyptian public education.
- Additionally, many children of nationalities with a right to enter the state education system (Syrians, Sudanese, South Sudanese, and Yemenis), do not attend for reasons including a preference for their own national curricula, documentation barriers to enrolment in public schools, and xenophobia and harassment in the Egyptian system.

Community schools also act as hubs for displaced communities. In addition to the children they teach, they are utilized by communities for:

- Adult language education (typically Arabic and English);
- Vocational training;
- Cultural activities;
- Women's livelihood activities (for example, cooking and crafting); and
- Sports and recreational activities.

They also provide support to communities through psychosocial care and referrals to service providers.

Community schools rely on fees paid by refugee parents. Until 2017, a number of high-performing community schools received institutional grants from UNHCR, which supported infrastructure costs and educational supplies. These institutional grants were last paid in 2017, at a time when community schools were threatened with closure by the Egyptian government. After it became apparent that community schools were not going to be shut, the institutional grants were not reinstated.

¹ UNHCR Egypt Newsletter – April 2020.

² Notes from the Education Working Group, January 2020.

UNHCR, through its implementing partner Catholic Relief Services (CRS), pays individual educational grants to approximately 46,800 school-aged children.³ These annual grants range from EGP1,250 (\$79) to EGP1,800 (\$114) per pupil, and are not (according to CRS and UNHCR) intended to meet the full costs of education. In line with broader UNHCR budget cuts, this amount has been progressively reduced since 2018, while living costs in Egypt have concurrently risen. Eight in ten of Egypt's refugees live in poverty,⁴ and so are unable to fund education after covering their basic needs. Community schools charge minimal fees in order to cover rent and staff salaries while remaining accessible to refugee families.

The majority of unaccompanied and separated refugee children come from nations (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia) without a right to state education in Egypt. Refugee community schools are the only available option for these children.

Without institutional grants and with decreasing individual grants, community schools have been gradually weakened over the last three years. This has left them less able to withstand financial shocks, and made them vulnerable in the current pandemic.

2. Survey results

In May 2020, StARS surveyed 51 refugee community schools, which collectively educate over 15,000 children from displaced communities. They also operate additional services for the broader community as described above.

- The smallest school surveyed teaches 27 special needs children, with the largest a Yemeni school with 1,500 enrolments. The median school size is 262 students.
- All refugee nationalities are represented, including Syrian, Yemeni, Sudanese, and other sub-Saharan African populations.
- The schools teach from kindergarten level through to secondary education.

The loss of refugee livelihoods, and the associated economic shock, have threatened the survival of community schools.

- 94 percent of schools surveyed have been unable to pay teacher salaries in full since March, with some resorting to partial payments or not paying management staff.
- 82 percent of schools surveyed have been unable to meet their rental costs since March. Some are already several months in debt, and others are trying to negotiate leniency from landlords, with almost no success.

The community schools surveyed also expressed fears for the future once schools are legally able to reopen.

- School premises may be lost as a result of the failure to pay rent. School equipment and property may be 'confiscated' by landlords *in lieu* of rent. A number of schools have already reported that landlords are threatening use of this measure to recoup unpaid rent.
- Parents, having lost income during the pandemic, may be less able to pay school fees, and therefore may not enrol their children in the new academic year.
- It may be impossible to retain teachers if schools cannot afford to pay them. The schools surveyed employ over 950 teachers and support staff.

Community schools may not be able to sustain until the point schools are permitted to reopen. It now seems likely that this may be some time away as Egypt has recently announced that schools will remain closed through all three stages of its COVID-19 re-opening plan.⁵ Should these schools

³ Notes from the Education Working Group, January 2020.

⁴ "UNHCR urges critical support for refugees in Egypt", *UNHCR*. Available [here](#).

⁵ "Egypt's health ministry publishes 3-stage coronavirus management plan", *Ahram Online*. Available [here](#).

collapse, thousands of children from displaced communities will fall out of education. It will also remove an important pillar of community support and services for refugee populations in Egypt.

3. Implications of COVID-19

On 15 March, all schools and universities in Egypt were suspended as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, with community schools observing this mandated closure. Since the pandemic began, a number of surveys have been carried out by multilateral agencies and INGOs with refugee parents and children in Egypt; however, this survey represents the only consultation we are aware of with community schools.

Refugee service organizations operating in Egypt are seeking to support refugee children during this unpredictable time. Proposals have included an online-offline learning platform onto which different curricula and learning materials could be uploaded for use by refugee children. For community schools working outside the Egyptian public system, this would depend on their involvement and participation, which in turn would depend on their ongoing survival.

In their co-authored recommendations for keeping children learning during the pandemic, a number of agencies including UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, state that:

Increased funding will be essential to support the continuation of learning for all children, including marginalized groups ... Measures and additional funding should be put in place to support the most marginalized children and youth.⁶

4. Conclusions

Until such time as all refugee children have meaningful and safe access to state schools, material support is needed for community schools educating refugee children.

- Institutional grants for community schools should be reintroduced. These grants will ensure that community schools can meet their minimum costs, such as rent, during this period of economic instability.
- Individual education grants should reflect the actual costs of school fees. This will enable parents to enrol their children in community schools even where their own livelihoods have been harmed by the economic shock of COVID-19.

Investment in, and consultation with, community schools is necessary to ensure that schools can continue to operate beyond the current pandemic.

⁶ “Learning Must Go On: recommendations for keeping children safe and learning, during and after the COVID-19 crisis”, *Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies* et al, p. 4. Available [here](#).