

YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

How the Global Compact on Refugees can protect young refugees and prove their potential

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YOUNG REFUGEES AT A CROSSROADS

With the development of the Global Compact on Refugees, the international community has an important opportunity to safeguard young refugees and partner more effectively with them to improve their lives. Based on our extensive experience working with young people¹ in crisis around the world, Mercy Corps sets out below a number of key practices to protect young refugees and prove their potential.

¹ Mercy Corps defines young people as ages 10-24 years, and emphasises the need to intentionally engage adolescents ages 10-19 years.

A comprehensive refugee response should promote young refugees' well-being, provide them with flexible education opportunities, help them access safe and fair employment, and give them a voice in their communities. Finally, young refugees should be engaged as partners in designing and implementing this response.

Mercy Corps is a global humanitarian organisation empowering people to recover from crisis, build better lives and transform their communities for good. Since 2010, we've worked with 3.5 million young people

across 33 countries around the world.

Of the world's 22.5 million refugees, more than half are children under the age of 18.² Approximately one third of refugees are between 10 and 24 years old.³ These young people are facing the challenges of displacement at a time of intense cognitive, physical and social development. On top of these challenges, young refugees are often dealing with significant psychological stress.

At the same time, young refugees demonstrate immense potential to contribute to host states, improve humanitarian responses and help build durable solutions for their host communities and, perhaps someday, home communities. A comprehensive refugee response must address the needs of young people and also empower them to make positive changes in their lives.

COMPONENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE REFUGEE RESPONSE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

To protect young refugees and prove their potential, a comprehensive refugee response needs to promote

young refugees' well-being, provide them with formal and non-formal education, help young refugees access safe and fair employment, and increase young refugees' engagement in their communities. This comprehensive refugee response should be designed and implemented with young refugees as partners.

WELL-BEING

Mercy Corps recognises that young refugees often experience profound stress at a critical time in their lives and development. Research shows that prolonged stress can change adolescent brain chemistry, inhibiting adolescents' ability to assess risk and severely curtailing young refugees' prospects for future development.⁴ Amongst Syrian adolescents living in Jordan, for example, widespread deprivation and prolonged stress contribute to the deterioration of their well-being and human capital, resulting in mental health issues and increased incidences of high risk behaviour. A staggering 41% of Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon report having suicidal urges.⁵

Any comprehensive refugee response with young people should view well-being as foundational to its approach. Young refugees should have access to safe spaces with opportunities to establish peer and mentor relationships that help them make better

choices and cope with profound stress. Mercy Corps and research partners have documented that safe spaces and social support alleviate insecurity, distress, and mental-health difficulties among young people.⁶

Creative and physical expression, like art and sport, combined with

4 Mercy Corps, *Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence* (February 2015), 42, available at https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf.

5 Mercy Corps, *Advancing Adolescents: Evidence on the Impact of Psychosocial Support for Syrian Refugee and Jordanian Adolescents* (November 2016), 2, available at https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Advancing_Adolescents%20Report_FINAL_ONLINE.pdf.

6 Catherine Panter-Brick et al., "Insecurity, distress and mental health: experimental and randomized controlled trials of a psychosocial intervention for youth affected by the Syrian crisis," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (forthcoming 2017), available at http://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Panter-Brick_et_al_Psychosocial_Trial_Syrian_crisis_JCPP_2017.pdf.

2 UNHCR, "Figures at a Glance" (last updated 19 June 2017), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

3 UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service, *A Global Review: UNHCR's Engagement with Displaced Youth* (March 2013), 20.

mentoring can also help adolescents understand their stresses, peacefully work through problems and set goals for the long term. Programming in relationship-building has been shown to help young refugees establish trust, social cohesion and friendships within refugee and host communities.⁷

Without a foundation based on well-being, work to support young refugees in the areas of education, employment and community engagement is likely to see limited impact.

EDUCATION

Young refugees often see their education disrupted. Half of all primary-school aged refugee children and 75% of secondary-school aged refugees are estimated to be out of school. Only one in one hundred refugees enrolls in university or other tertiary education.⁸ Numerous factors block access to education for refugees, including prohibitively high costs, legal and administrative barriers and lack of quality instruction in host countries. Disruption to education has profound consequences for these young people, who lose their chance to learn, grow and lay the groundwork for a strong future. Education is not only critical for accessing safe and fair employment, but it is also necessary for building links to host communities and cultures.

Mercy Corps has found that young refugees display a passionate desire to begin or continue their education. In 2016, Mercy Corps with the Norwegian Refugee Council asked 120 refugees aged 14-25 in Greece what their greatest needs were. Every single refugee ranked education as among his or her top five needs.⁹

7 Mercy Corps, *Advancing Adolescents*, 7.

8 UNHCR, *Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis* (September 2016), 6, available at http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/missing-out-refugee-education-in-crisis_unhcr_2016-en.pdf.

9 Mercy Corps and Norwegian Refugee Council, *Don't Forget Us: Voices of Young Refugees and Migrants in Greece* (September 2016), 9, available at <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/>

Throughout a refugee response, host states, international organisations, and other partners should provide formal and non-formal education for young refugees. A comprehensive refugee response should expand on past efforts that focus largely on getting learners back into traditional classrooms by building and rehabilitating schools, training local teachers and partnering with local governments to enhance their education systems. Much greater emphasis and

resources are needed to advance non-formal education built on certified basic education modules (such as reading, writing and numeracy) alongside life skills and vocational training outside the traditional classroom. This flexible approach to education is particularly important for adolescents and youth who are unlikely to return to formal education due to increasing obligations in support of their families. Education, formal and non-formal, should include access to health information, including providing girls with trusted and safe resources for family planning and reproductive health services to prevent early marriage and pregnancy.

It is essential that education programming for young refugees be user-centered, meeting young people "where they are at" in terms of physical location, work schedules and educational attainment. By designing programmes with participants and taking into account their particular contexts and needs, humanitarian actors can reach the most vulnerable young refugees.¹⁰ Mercy Corps' Learning and Empowerment for

Adolescents in their Neighbourhoods (LEARN) programme in Turkey, for example, reached young refugees who were otherwise unable to participate in formal education. LEARN's flexible


[files/Dont_Forget_Us_Report_0.pdf](#).

10 Save the Children et al., *Promising Practices in Refugee Education: Synthesis Report* (2017), 14, available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Promising_Practices_in_Refugee_Education.pdf.



design included tablets with curated software that students could use offline and in a location of their choice. This flexibility met the needs of vulnerable refugees, like child labourers and young mothers, who would otherwise have not been able to participate.¹¹

EMPLOYMENT



EMPLOYMENT, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND OTHER INCOME-GENERATING OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDE MORE THAN ECONOMIC BENEFITS— THEY GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE A PURPOSE AND A SENSE OF STATUS AND BELONGING.

At the same time, many young refugees are forced to earn an income at an early age because of their families', or their own, dire economic reality. A comprehensive refugee response should ensure that young refugees have employment opportunities. It should also protect young refugees from child labour, exploitative conditions, and work that may cause harm, with a focus on gender-specific safety initiatives for girls.

A comprehensive refugee response should create avenues for older adolescents to gain skills and transition safely to decent and equitable work opportunities. Adolescents should be provided with market-driven skills training and safe, non-exploitative apprenticeships, so that they are equipped with in-demand skills.

Mercy Corps applies this approach in our Youth for Tomorrow: Building Opportunities through Skills and Wellbeing programme in Lebanon. Working closely with local partners, we provide psychosocial support and market-driven skill-building opportunities to adolescents. Coaches help adolescents learn skills while also helping them to develop empathy, connect to their communities and set goals for the future. Courses are based on interests and needs identified by adolescents. These courses have included English language, hairdressing, computer skills, mechanics, and online courses through Edrak, a platform offering Arabic-language academic courses. Mercy Corps will connect adolescents who demonstrate interest and dedication to a particular skill to our complementary

livelihoods and economic development programmes.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Young refugees often lack opportunities to participate in the decision-making and governance processes that affect their lives. Leaders and communities' common indifference to young refugees' perspectives increasingly alienates young people, fuelling unrest and squandering their ability to prove their potential for transformative change.

There is tremendous benefit and opportunity when young refugees engage with their communities and host communities. When young people are able to contribute to their communities and participate in decisions that affect their lives, they gain confidence and status, and they strengthen their relationships with peers and adults. Moreover, communities ultimately benefit from young people's bold ideas and openness to change.

Mercy Corps' experience shows that by increasing young refugees' community engagement, humanitarian actors can improve ties between refugee and host communities. For example, our Nubader programme in Jordan works with community youth centres and identifies supportive adult mentors who work with young Syrian refugees and their host community peers to lead community projects and advocacy campaigns on topics of shared interest and concern. By bringing together young people across host-refugee divides, and strengthening their connections with community leaders, Nubader aims to increase young people's social capital. Our research shows that, when compared to young people who did not participate in the programme, past participants have more friends outside their community and of a different nationality, benefit from improved safety and security and are more optimistic about the future.¹²

PARTNERSHIP

A comprehensive refugee response should be designed with young refugees, not for them. Young refugees are best placed to know what will work for them and what won't. Conversations with young people about their priorities, fears, daily commitments and safe and unsafe places in the community should shape the design of any service or activity. Humanitarian actors should account for sex- and

11 Ibid.

12 Mercy Corps, *Advancing Adolescents*, 4-6.

age-specific vulnerabilities, needs and capacities, co-designing programme activities with young refugees accordingly. Once these activities have been designed, young people should be provided with opportunities to actively lead and take ownership of programme activities, not just show up and participate in activities led by adults.

Mercy Corps' new GRL Power programme exemplifies this approach. Mercy Corps' Regional Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Girls and its partner, ActionAid, are piloting girl-led research in a nine-month Girl Research and Learning Power programme (GRL Power) in Amman, Balqa and Madaba, Jordan. GRL Power is establishing and building the skills, knowledge and capacity of 18 girl researchers. These researchers will provide exclusive insights on the unique needs, opinions and perceptions of adolescent girls on what makes public spaces safe. The girl researchers will demonstrate the capacity of adolescent girls as researchers and the impact of investing in their empowerment. Their newly formed and empowered Girl Research Unit will be able to partner with other actors to provide research services for the increasing demand for such innovative, youth-led services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the development of the Global Compact on Refugees, the international community has the opportunity to improve the way it responds to the needs and potential of young refugees. The following recommendations set out concrete steps that should be taken in a comprehensive refugee response. Mercy Corps encourages UNHCR and its international partners to capture these best practices in the Programme of Action for the Global Compact on Refugees.

The Global Compact on Refugees should also draw on existing standards on young refugees, including

the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (2016) and the October 2016 Conclusion on Youth of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.



RECEPTION AND ADMISSION

At the onset of a large movement of refugees, receiving States, in cooperation with UNHCR, international organisations and other partners, should:

- **Systematically collect and use age- and sex- disaggregated data** to tailor programming according to age- and sex-considerations, and track impact accordingly.
- **Provide for adequate, safe and dignified reception conditions** for young refugees. A key part of ensuring safety for young arrivals is establishing community-based protection networks and safe spaces for young people. Local government should partner with an array of community actors and organisations-- including school directors, local non-government organisations, religious groups and employers-- to identify and engage young refugees at risk of isolation. Local government can coordinate communication among stakeholders to improve access to resources and services that respond to abuse or harassment based on stigmatisation or prejudice.

- **Partner with young people by investing in mapping and analysis** to better understand their needs and assets, in particular those of adolescent girls. This mapping should help identify services and get a sense of whether they 1) are located in a place where young people, girls in particular, can access them and 2) are user friendly for young people.
- **Partner with young people in implementing and evaluating programmes**, ensuring that girls and young women are explicitly engaged.
- **Promote well-being and resilience through targeted psychosocial support** for young people. Psychosocial support should be integrated into activities for young people across all sectors. To help ensure that young people receive appropriate psychosocial support, government and humanitarian actors should receive orientation and training focused on the psychosocial needs of young people.
- **For young people, as for all refugees, seek to respond in ways that ultimately contribute to the self-reliance and resilience of both individuals and communities.** This would mean, for example, responsibly distributing cash instead of commodities, as this supports both refugee independence and stimulates markets, and moving as quickly as possible to interventions that increase refugee education and access to livelihoods.

SUPPORT FOR HOST COUNTRIES AND COMMUNITIES

States, UNHCR, and relevant partners should:

- **Facilitate the creation of networks and partnerships** between young refugees, civil society and local government. Invite the opinions and voices of young refugees and their host community peers into local humanitarian response and development planning, and be open to being influenced by those opinions and voices.
- **Support initiatives that build tolerance and trust** between young refugees and their host communities, such as sports, recreation and civic activities.

SUPPORT FOR IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING NEEDS

States, in cooperation with donors, should, in coordination with receiving States:

- **Use sex- and age-specific data analysis and community mapping** to tailor refugee services and support to the needs and potential of young people.
- **Increase and earmark funding and other resources** for holistic programming for young people. Donors should fund programmes tailored to the needs of young people. They should also fund programmes that prioritise engaging young people in cross-sectoral work such as education, cash programming and urban response.
- **Accurately track and report on how resources earmarked for young people are spent.** Donors should require humanitarian actors to collect and report age- and sex- disaggregated data on programming with young people.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Host States, in cooperation with UNHCR and other UN entities, international organisations, and other partners, should:

- **Increase access to quality formal and non-formal education** for young people. Non-Formal Education (NFE) should be an increasing area of emphasis starting in adolescence, as many young people are unable or unwilling to enroll in formal education. Within this response, promote new technologies that provide relevant and certified education while addressing issues of displacement, dispersion, language and certification challenges. Young people should receive training that includes transferable and life skills.



- **Improve young people's access to productive, safe and equitable work opportunities**¹³ in order to foster self-reliance and enable young people to make the best use of their skills and capabilities and contribute to local economies.
- **Leverage resources into targeted industries and businesses** that can meet the growing demands for jobs. Donors, regional governments, and NGOs should conduct value-chain and market analyses to assess potential areas for business growth and develop well-matched workforce programmes. Refugee youth should then be linked to market-driven accredited training programmes and work opportunities.
- **Consider developing a vocational certification** for refugees that is not sector-specific but that measures a basic level of literacy, language, communications, teamwork and critical thinking skills.
- **Invest in long-term integration programmes** to promote positive relationships between refugees and hosts and to prevent conflict.
- **Foster reconciliation and dialogue** by creating safe spaces where youth can convene to identify common priorities and develop a shared voice across ethnic groups or host-refugee community divides.

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¹³ See Mercy Corps, *Guidance on Safe and Decent Work for Adolescents and Youth* (May 2016), available at <https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsd/ docs/ GuidanceSafeDecentWork4AdolescentsYouth.pdf>.