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Language, education and migration in the context of
forced displacement



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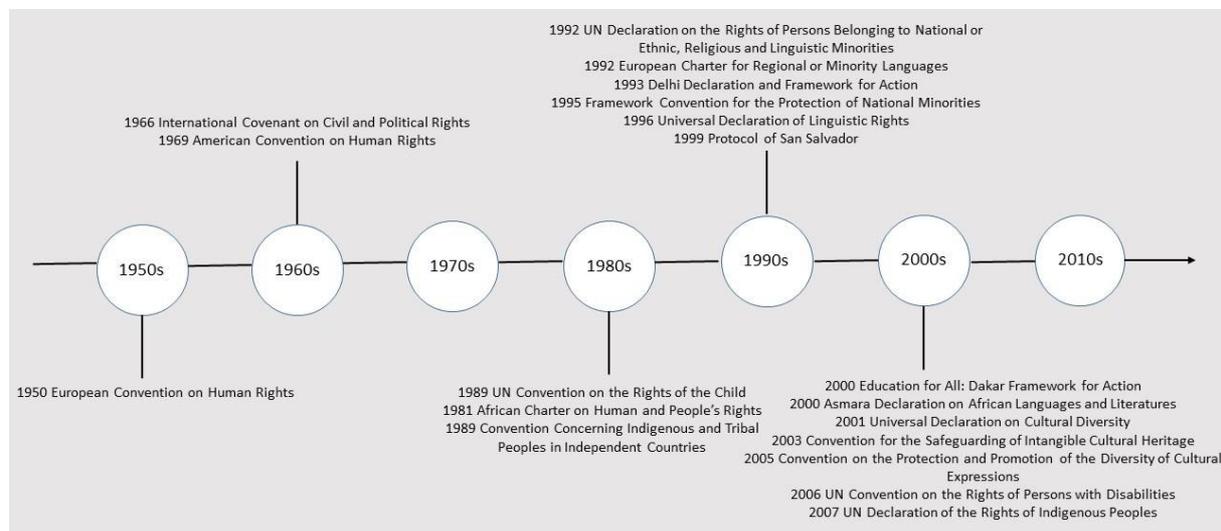
Our global challenge

A surge in global migration, spurred in part by conflict, emergency, and fragility, has elicited increased attention to the specific needs of migrant and refugee learners. The international community faces an urgent global challenge: more people are now displaced than since the end of the Second World War. Half of those displaced are under the age of 18. Further, while two-thirds of international migrants are in high-income countries,¹ 85% of those displaced by conflict and natural disaster now live in low-income countries.² Forced displacement creates particular vulnerabilities, including access to education free from discrimination. Meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030 demands that all children, youth, and adults receive an inclusive and equitable quality education. Education is a right that plays a critical role in advancing both sustainable development and peace. Yet refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers encounter numerous barriers to an inclusive and equitable quality education in host countries worldwide.

The number of school-aged migrant and refugee children worldwide has grown by 26% since 2000.³

Why a focus on language?

Decades of research on language and education support the need to develop explicit and inclusive language policies that meet the needs of all learners. The right to education and the right to language are enshrined in multiple international conventions, declarations, and charters. However, the international community has not sufficiently addressed the intersection between migration, education, and language in the context of forced displacement. Indeed, the SDGs, while encompassing educational rights, fall short in explicitly identifying language as a source of concern, “largely due to a more general failure to recognize the consequences, both positive and negative, of linguistic diversity among vulnerable populations.”⁴

Figure 1: Selected international instruments that mention language rights


There are 68.5 million displaced people worldwide.⁵ Of these, 66% are in countries with a different official language than their country of origin.⁶ Of these displaced people, 52% are school-aged children and youth,⁷ which means that *31 million young people are learning in a language that differs from the official language of their country of origin.*⁸

These issues are as significant in high- and middle-income as they are in low-income countries. Indeed, approximately 60% of students in high-income countries are assessed in a language that does not match their country of origin, leading to poor outcomes and increased drop-out rates.^{9,10}

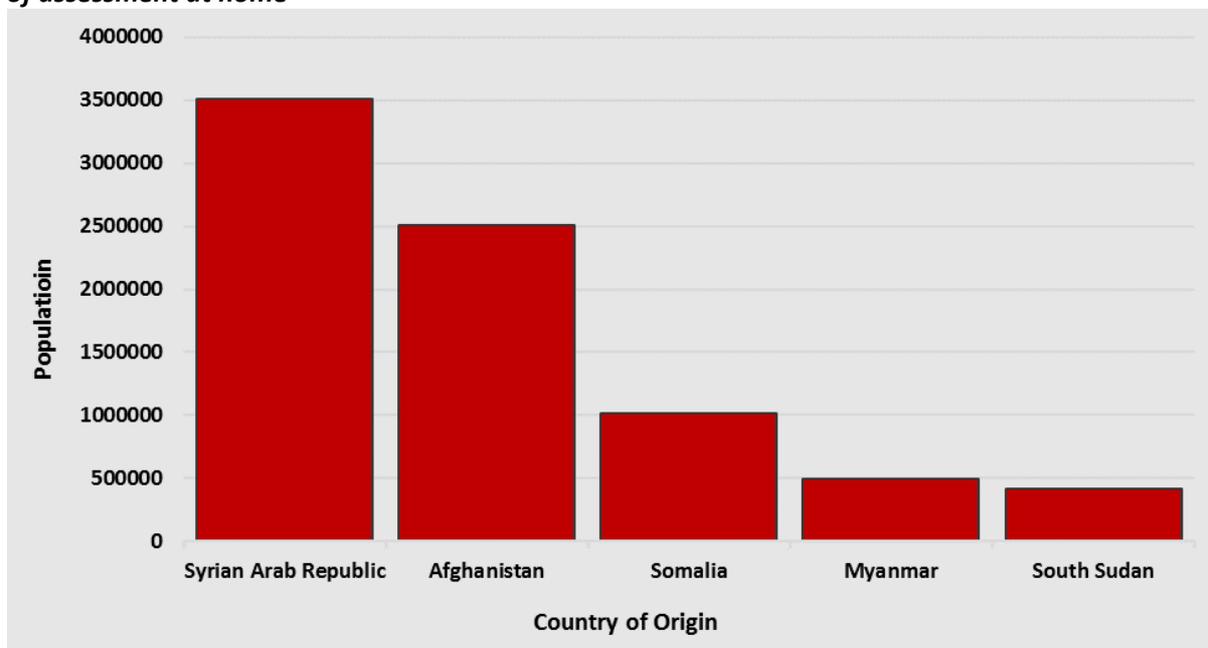
Figure 2: OECD countries where more than 50% of migrant students do not speak the language of assessment at home

Country	% of First Generation Immigrants
Finland	88.8
Iceland	87.9
Czech Republic	85.2
Slovenia	85.2
Sweden	83.1
Israel	81.5
Singapore	77.1
Norway	77.0
Italy	72.3
United States	71.6
Austria	71.3
Germany	70.6
Luxembourg	66.8
Netherlands	66.2
Denmark	66.1
United Kingdom	64.9
OECD Average	64.0
Canada	62.3
France	58.5
Switzerland	58.0
Greece	56.8
Qatar	56.4
New Zealand	55.3
Ireland	54.9
Belgium	52.1
United Arab Emirates	50.8

Source: OECD Database (2018). Data is from the 2015 release.

Low-income host countries also contend with challenges concerning language and education. Additionally, they often face numerous longstanding crises relating to poorly-resourced public education systems, low-quality school infrastructure, and limited social supports for migrants and refugees. Notably, the top 5 countries of origin where migrant students do not speak their host language of assessment at home—Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Myanmar, and South Sudan—are all contexts of forced displacement.

Figure 3: Top 5 countries of origin where migrant students do not speak the host country language of assessment at home



Source: UNHCR Global Database (2018). Data is from the 2017 release.

Whether permanently settled or in temporary asylum, migrants and refugees often face the subordination or illegitimacy of their languages in educational systems that deepen their vulnerabilities. Furthermore, those with temporary status find their language and educational aspirations entangled in a hope for repatriation and the possibility of indeterminate or permanent displacement.¹¹

Arguably the most pressing and pervasive challenge to ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality education in the context of forced displacement relates to language. Student outcomes are strongly linked to language-in-education policies. And yet few host contexts have clear language policies tailored to these displaced populations.

Language ought to occupy a core area of education policy for the international community and national governments. A very large, interdisciplinary body of research presents important evidence on language and education, which can help address many of the challenges facing governments, ministries, and schools. Yet within the policies of international organizations, limited attention has been paid to the intersecting issues of language, education, and migration within the broader context of forced displacement. Targeting language-in-education policy is essential for meeting the international community's commitment to the right to education and for meeting SDG goals.

Framing the issues

Language-in-education policy often treats *language as a problem*, and yet the international community frames *language as a right*, and evidence from learning systems worldwide demonstrate that *language is a resource* for individuals, communities, nations, and economies.¹²

Approaches to language-in-education policy are highly contextual and embedded in the ideologies produced by sociopolitical and economic conditions.¹³ National education systems in host countries employ different official or *de facto* language policy models with differing social integration goals. These goals are linked to various factors, such as histories of migration and contact with other peoples; ideas about national identity; longstanding beliefs about diversity; and the strength of host economies at the time of reception.^{14 15 16}

Sound language planning in education hinges on recognition that attention to the language needs of learners is strongly linked to educational outcomes, including retention and progression. In the context of forced displacement, migration leads to linguistically heterogeneous learning spaces that often pose significant challenges to the learning communities, as well as to the authorities responsible for education. While potentially attractive for administrative, managerial, and political reasons, one-size-fits-all policy solutions pose grave risks for educational outcomes, as well as for linguistic and cultural diversity. Language planning, as a process of moving towards consensus on the aims, models, and hopes for languages and their speakers, must engage the positions, views, and needs of relevant stakeholders and take into account the larger social, historical, and political context of learning.^{17 18}

UNESCO has been a leading proponent of language planning that advances linguistic diversity, recognizing language as a right and a key component of culture and identity. Furthermore, UNESCO has been a champion of language-in-education policies that safeguard linguistic diversity and recognize it as one of the most urgent challenges facing our world.

“Education in many countries of the world takes place in multilingual contexts. Most plurilingual societies have developed an ethos which balances and respects the use of different languages in daily life. From the perspective of these societies and of the language communities themselves, multilingualism is more a way of life than a problem to be solved. The challenge is for education systems to adapt to these complex realities and provide a quality education which takes into consideration learners’ needs, whilst balancing these at the same time with social, cultural and political demands.”¹⁹

Indeed, scholars have argued that a plural vision of language in education that reflects the complexity of global migration and the different histories, needs, challenges, and aspirations of learners is the only way to educate children, youth, and adults in the twenty-first century.²⁰

Key issues as they relate to inclusive and equitable quality education

Language is a pathway for access to equitable quality education

It is well established that people cannot learn in a language they do not know. Moreover, the development of language to perform academic tasks takes longer than the uptake of spoken expression. And yet, in many countries around the world, school-aged learners are expected to undertake assessment in a new language within one year of arrival. While such policies are concerned with educational equity and accountability for migrants, they neglect the required conditions for language development. Consequently, as UNESCO has noted, “When home and school languages differ, there is an adverse impact on test scores.”²¹

Evidence of equitable quality education goes beyond assessment outcomes. While different language-in-education policies and models have been attributed to positive learning outcomes for migrants, learning in a home language has been linked to stronger outcomes in both high- and low-income countries. These include better proficiency in a second language^{22 23 24} and student engagement in education over the long term, leading to higher rates of enrollment, attendance, retention, and progression.^{25 26 27} Moreover, research has shown that learning in a home language as well as other languages promotes complex cognitive development, socialization for a diverse world, and preparation for a global economy.²⁸

At the same time, language is a barrier to progression and serves as a primary contributor to school leaving in both high- and low-income countries. It is also a principle reason why youth and adults do not pursue or complete higher education, vocational and technical training, and other educational programming that promotes lifelong learning. Students are often required to follow a course of study in a language they do not know within a predetermined or unrealistic timeframe.²⁹ As a result, data from high-income countries suggest that dropout rates can be markedly higher for students for whom language is a barrier, than for students from other historically marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities or students with low socioeconomic status.

Language is a pathway to inclusion

While there has been progress towards the inclusion of migrants and refugees into national education systems among both high- and low-income countries, challenges remain.³⁰ Poor attention to language-in-education policy within the broader context of forced displacement may result in missed opportunities to provide programming that contributes to inclusive education. Learners who develop their home languages alongside the official languages of their host communities are more likely to gain symbolic and instrumental access to the narratives and sociocultural practices of school and wider society. This knowledge enhances the prospects of inclusion into the social, economic, and political system, and positive longer-term contributions to diverse democracies. Inclusion in turn may serve to promote equity and educational rights for historically marginalized populations based on gender, language, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, socioeconomics, and other statuses in both origin and host countries.

For adults, learning a new language in a host country can mean access to resources, social services, civic participation, and support to dependents. However, many adults arrive with little formal education from their home countries, making the challenges of acquiring another language even more profound.³¹

Language is a pathway to enhancing educational experiences for all

Effective language-in-education policies enhance the educational experiences of both migrant and host communities. Policies that promote learning in multiple languages signal respect for diversity and enhance the status of speakers, including those of ethnolinguistic minorities in historically diverse host communities. Well-designed policies also create opportunity for all learners to develop their linguistic and cultural repertoires and for educators to reflect on their teaching practices. At the same time, insufficient attention to language issues or a narrow technical focus on language acquisition in the dominant language of a host society can lead to missed opportunities for education policy to contribute to social cohesion, acceptance of diversity, and peace.

Key issues as they relate to conflict, resilience, and social cohesion

Language is a driver of conflict and a pathway to peace

Language-in-education policy may be a driver of conflict, or it may reflect or exacerbate existing tensions between language and ethnic groups.^{32 33 34} Language-in-education policy has implications for access to inclusive and equitable quality education, and so is often contested and may erode social relations between different linguistic groups. Language issues may be a serious source of grievance linked to cultural recognition or intergenerational inequality for migrants and refugees. Yet demands for language rights are often viewed as socially disruptive and administratively problematic.³⁵

However, consultative processes in the design of language-in-education policy may create opportunities to engage with critical issues, bridge relations, and address long-standing grievances. In short, inclusive language planning that involves concerted policy dialogue may lead to greater social cohesion and peace.³⁶³⁷

Language is an overt identity marker

As an overt identity marker of ethnic or political differences, language can further marginalize children, youth, and adults or exacerbate the risks faced in educational and noneducational settings through targeted violence and discrimination.³⁸ Language and identity are intertwined.³⁹ While national ideologies throughout the world have linked language to identity unidirectionally, research with learners in diverse contexts suggests that this linkage is complex,⁴⁰ whereby migrant and refugee learners articulate their citizenship and belonging as taking place in two or more languages.⁴¹

Language issues are dynamic and linked to migration processes

Forced displacement often strips populations of their material resources and social networks, exacerbating inequalities and access to social goods such as education. Thus, language plays a key role as an inclusion/exclusion factor within this dynamic. Forced displacement leads to greater linguistic heterogeneity of social and educational spaces, and particular language-in-education policies within those spaces may privilege certain groups. Migrants and refugees must learn the language or face further exclusion. However, if they do not learn in their home language(s), then the possibility of returning to their country of origin to complete school is diminished. In contexts of conflict, this dynamic is further complicated by the fact that language policies shift with an evolving political situation.⁴²

Officials are often confronted with dilemmas in terms of which language or languages to support and how

While it is clear that teaching in a learner's home language alongside the language of wider society is linked to better learning outcomes, it is not always possible or optimal to do so in the context of conflict due to resource constraints and buy-in from all stakeholders. For example, home language instruction requires a written form of the language; support among policymakers, educators and parents; teachers with proficiency in the home languages of instruction and who are trained in the principles of second language and literacy learning; and instructional materials in the particular languages. These conditions are not always possible to achieve. As a result, officials are often faced with serious dilemmas concerning language policy and planning within the broader context of conflict, fragility, and displacement.

Language may be linked to psychosocial well-being

Multiple interconnected risks accompany migrant and refugee children to their spaces of displacement, including violence, trauma, loss, insecurity, poverty, and exclusion. Often these risks also characterized their learning contexts before arriving at their new destinations. Psychosocial well-being has been linked to learning in a home language, leading to improved self-esteem and sense of identity.⁴³ In the context of forced displacement, home language learning has been linked to a greater sense of empowerment or control over circumstances and a stronger sense of safety and resilience. In contexts of conflict, youth in particular associate language issues with their political and economic insecurity and unequal life chances.⁴⁴ Given the trauma often experienced with forced displacement, greater evidence regarding the link between home language instruction and psychosocial well-being is worth exploring.⁴⁵

Policy gaps for language, education, and migration within the broader context of forced displacement

Although the international community widely agrees that language acts as a key barrier to learning for migrant and refugee children, youth, and adults, certain areas are in need of increased attention in the policies of organizations and governments.

Absence of concrete and stable language-in-education policies for migrants and refugees

Despite increased attention to migration and education, many international organizations and host countries do not have concrete policies on the particular issue of language in education for migrants and refugees. Explicit policies are critical to protecting the right to education and linguistic human rights. Furthermore, a problematic aspect of those policies which are in place is lack of stability, where shifts in position and process are common. For example, Malawi quickly moved from a mother-tongue learning policy to English-only in 1996, as did the Netherlands in 2004. Education policy is often designed at the municipal level, and changes in government or leadership can mean abrupt shifts in policy on language of instruction.^{46 47 48} This instability contributes to an absence of consistency necessary for both educators to teach effectively and for students to learn.

Lack of data on language policy and migrant education in the context of forced displacement

Data on migrant and refugee students, their home languages, past schooling, and current achievement levels are readily collected in many high-income countries. However, in low-income countries, where the vast majority of the world's displaced people are hosted, data are limited, collected irregularly or not at all. Little is known about accessibility to language learning for migrants and refugees, nor their experiences in schools in terms of language of instruction. This absence of data leads to gaps in knowledge that might inform policy design and effective implementation. Ideally, data should be collected in a coordinated way, from host governments, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations serving these populations.^{49 50 51} Data can moreover incorporate success stories, told and documented by community stakeholders.⁵²

Need for long-term policy guidance on language issues in the context of forced displacement

Policies and programs on migrant and refugee education are often short-sighted and target a brief period of schooling. Evidence shows that academic language learning takes at least 6 years, yet many policies include an expectation that students will learn the host country language very quickly. Short-term programs are unrealistic and lead to poor achievement once language instruction stops. Moreover, global conflicts are lasting longer, where refugees stay in host countries for over 10 years on average.⁵³ Given that displacement is often indefinite, policies must consider the long-term language learning needs of those forcibly displaced and align programs across the age span, from early childhood through to adulthood.^{54 55 56} Education policy must pay explicit attention to language, aligning any guidance on language learning with long-term national education sector planning.⁵⁷

Need for increased community participation, collaborative decision-making, and inclusive policy design

Language-in-education policies designed without the participation of migrant and refugee communities cannot adequately address the needs of those who are displaced and seek an education for themselves or their children. For instance, those who are displaced can share their educational expectations, which may be different from host communities, and their needs beyond core curriculum, such as psycho-social support. Migrants and refugees can inform policy-makers of nuanced politically and historically-based rationales for learning or not learning in particular languages or dialects. Moreover, many assets exist within displaced communities, including linguistic resources and teachers. Research informed by collaborative processes will lead to more relevant policies, and participation of migrant communities in decision-making and policy design is key to successful language learning and long-term educational outcomes⁵⁸⁵⁹

Promising pathways to inclusive and equitable quality education

Some promising practices in the broader context of forced displacement are worth highlighting.

Promising Practice for Policy Design: Inclusive Participatory Approaches to Language-in-Education

The perspectives of linguistic minority groups, including those forcibly displaced, are rarely understood nor elicited by policy-makers. Yet evidence shows the effectiveness of consultative approaches and the direct involvement of migrants and refugees in collaborative decision-making—described as “bottom-up language planning,” which includes participatory research, frequent dialogue, and contributions to policy writing.⁶⁰

Promising Practice for National Education Systems: Explicit Integration of Language Policy for Migrants and Refugees into Sector Plans

Language is largely neglected in policies on migration and education. The issue of language ought to be streamlined within national education planning, with clear guidance on not only integrating migrant and refugee students into schools, but also providing access to home language learning. Education policies must explicitly include tailored language programming for students who have been forcibly displaced, from early childhood through to adult education.⁶¹

Promising Practice for Schools: Teaching Linguistic Rights in Educational Settings

Despite that numerous global conventions and declarations have promoted linguistic rights, people in host countries may be unaware of the multifaceted significance of migrant and refugees’ home languages. But this awareness can be raised in schools and other educational settings, by teaching all children, youth, and adults the valuable relationship between language and one’s personal identity and culture. Integrating language rights into curricula can also foster increased social cohesion by laying the foundation for understanding and respect between host and migrant communities.⁶²

Promising Practice for Global, National, and Community Stakeholders: Promote an Understanding that Multilingual Societies are not a Problem to be Solved

Rhetoric and policies often frame multilingualism as problematic, and they convey an assumption that a single national language is best—a normative belief that often informs educational programming. However, research supports the intrinsic and extrinsic value of home language learning, which leads to better learning outcomes overall while also contributing to social cohesion.^{63 64} The international community, government officials, and educational leaders should promote respect for linguistic diversity and an understanding that multilingualism ought to be embraced rather than remedied.

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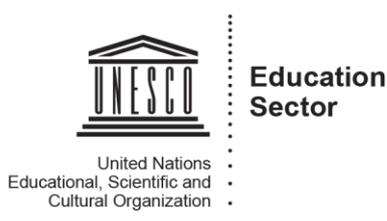
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UNESCO Education Sector

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation on which to build peace and drive sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education and the Education Sector provides global and regional leadership in education, strengthens national education systems and responds to contemporary global challenges through education with a special focus on gender equality and Africa.



The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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