



Education Away from Home

Supporting education
for Afghan refugee
children and youth in
Iran

Education Brief
(November 2023)



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Contact us

UNHCR Iran, External Engagement Team
irnteer@unhcr.org

UNHCR Iran
Giulia Raffaelli, Senior External Relations Officer
raffaalg@unhcr.org

Cover photo

January 2023: Iran, Ansar school in Semnan refugee settlement.
© UNHCR/ Hossein Eidizadeh

Overview

For over 40 years Iran has provided refuge to Afghans fleeing violence, insecurity, repression and deprivation in Afghanistan. This includes an estimated 1.5 million¹ Afghan children currently in Iran, many of whom arrived in the country since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021. With Afghanistan experiencing an unprecedented convergence of crises, including the effective exclusion of women and girls from society, the likelihood of sustained cross-border movements into Iran remains significant, adding to existing pressures.

Thanks to the Government and people of the Islamic Republic of Iran refugee children can access education despite their displacement given the country's refugee inclusive education policy. This policy, one of the most progressive in the world, gives hundreds of thousands of refugee children equal access to the national education system as their Iranian peers.

However, the increase in the Afghan refugee population in Iran since 2021 has put an unprecedented strain on Iran's generous hosting policies. As a result, the national education system has become overwhelmed, especially in refugee-hosting areas. Many Afghan children are unable to enrol in school simply due to a lack of physical capacity. At the same time, many Afghan families in Iran also face financial challenges in supporting their children to attend school, with affordability reportedly the most common reason for children not attending school among the at least 25% of school-aged Afghan children in Iran estimated to be out of school (with some estimates indicating that the actual percentage may exceed 50%²).

Afghan students also often require additional support to address the impacts of learning loss, support the transition to formal education, and to aid their mental and physical well-being or facilitate their passage to tertiary education. Ensuring access to a quality education, which nurtures children in a protective and safe learning environment, is likely to become more challenging as demand for education services increases.

Non-participation and sub-optimal participation in education has far-reaching consequences. In

the immediate term, education provides an entry point to address cross-sectoral needs that can shape a child's physical and mental wellbeing. Over the longer-term, education has far-reaching implications on living standards and community resilience, with level of education a key determinant of employment prospects and future earnings, as well as a key enabler in facilitating voluntary returns. Further, strategic investments in education for girls benefits the whole society, helping to support communities, enhance wellbeing at the household level, strengthen the economy and reduce systemic inequalities. Moreover, investment in education can contribute to social cohesion and co-existence between communities, benefitting Afghans and Iranian host communities alike.

There is a need for a significant scale-up of assistance to ensure Afghans children and youth in Iran can enjoy sustained access to quality education. In addition to addressing barriers to accessing education, complementary actions are needed to ensure that once in education, children are given the necessary support to attain their learning goals.

This Education Brief provides a detailed analysis of education-related needs among refugees and their host communities in Iran, as well as the capacity of the education system to accommodate these needs. In defining the gaps and challenges to education in Iran, international aid organizations call on increased responsibility-sharing to ensure that Afghan children and youth do not become a lost generation. This acknowledges that, as the largest recipient of Afghan refugees and with education opportunities for Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan restricted, the inclusive education policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran provide a lifeline for millions who may otherwise be out of school. As such, **Iran provides the best alternative in ensuring continued education for Afghan children and youth, especially for women and girls.**

Building on the momentum of the Global Refugee Forum, scaled-up support is required to (i) maintain a comprehensive inclusive approach to education based on the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the national education

system; (ii) assist the most marginalized who are at greatest risk of being left behind, through assistance that addresses all facets of their physical and mental wellbeing; iii) promote pathways for life-long learning that spans early childhood to adulthood, also recognizing that education for Afghan's youth is the only means to achieve durable solutions.

To advance towards these objectives, **seven international aid organizations are actively engaged in supporting education responses to Afghan Refugees and Iranian Host Communities and are appealing for US\$ 119.2 M for education under the Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation (RRP) 2024-25**. This coordinated and needs-based inter-agency strategy supports education for Afghan refugees and Iranian host communities alike, prioritizing efforts to:

1. Improve access to equitable, safe and inclusive education for Afghan refugees and their Iranian host communities, with a particular emphasis on reducing barriers to education for girls.

2. Enhance the quality of education opportunities available through the development of a safe and protective learning environment that improves overall learning outcomes and enhances resilience, with an emphasis on life-long learning.

These organizations bring a wealth of experience and expertise; implementing complementary yet diverse programmes that seek to mitigate the multiple dimensions and drivers of education-related needs in close partnership with the Government of Iran. Applying an integrated approach, partners interventions under education also contribute to a range of multi-sectoral outcomes, particularly in relation to protection (child protection), WASH, health and nutrition that support the overall physical and mental wellbeing of young persons.



Girls participating in remedial courses – Primary School-Khorasan Razavi 2023. @UNICEF/ Relief International.

The situation in Afghanistan and displacement to Iran

Afghanistan is facing an unprecedented convergence of humanitarian, human rights and education crises. There has been a collapse in public services, a deteriorating human rights situation and increasing barriers to accessing education. As a result, there has been a reversal of many of the gains made during the previous 20 years. In particular, Afghanistan's de facto authorities have implemented an almost-total exclusion of women and girls from public life, the workplace and education, curtailing their rights and freedoms. In response to this, more than 1 million Afghans have fled into Iran since August 2021 and others continue to do so.

Afghanistan's Multi-Dimensional Crisis

Since August 2021, there has been rapid economic decline and a collapse in public services, leading to almost universal poverty and increased levels of malnutrition. According to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Afghanistan (HNO),³ a total of 28.3 million people (two-thirds of the population) are in need of humanitarian assistance to survive, of whom 14.7 million are in extreme need. There also remain some 3.4 million people internally displaced by conflict.

At the same time, there has been severe deterioration in the human rights situation in the country. The denial of women and girls' right to education (as outlined below) is a violation of their human rights. Alongside this, the de facto

authorities have also implemented numerous other edicts which have led to a wholesale retrenchment of human rights in Afghanistan, including the right to freedom of opinion, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

Household data shows that the costs associated with education in Afghanistan have also become prohibitively expensive at all levels. As economic shocks continue, it is expected that the number of out-of-school children will rise beyond current levels of 40%.⁴ Proposed changes to the national curriculum could also further propagate gender inequalities and promote extremist ideologies. The suspension of direct international development assistance, which previously accounted for 75% of public expenditures (and up to half of Afghanistan's spending on education), will further jeopardize the reach and quality of education services in Afghanistan.⁵

The denial of the rights of Afghan women and girls

Since September 2021, secondary education for girls has been suspended beyond grade six in Afghanistan, leaving girls in 21 out of 34 provinces with no access to education, while access remains compromised across the 13 remaining provinces.⁶ Banning access to education for girls contravenes obligations of the de facto authorities under human rights instruments signed and ratified by Afghanistan including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (article 13),

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (article 10), and Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 28 and 29). According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for Afghanistan, this has pushed an estimated 1.1 million secondary school-aged girls out of school, with no clear pathway to return to education. In addition to a wide range of restrictive edicts, as of December 2022, women have been barred from attending universities, further undermining their ability to meaningfully participate in and contribute to society and the economy, and, if not reversed will exacerbate critical capacity deficits in key sectors such as health. This ban on girls'

education makes Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls and young women are forbidden from attending secondary school and higher education institutions.

The consequences of these policies are extensive. They negatively impact the economic, social, physical and psychological development and wellbeing of women and girls with potentially catastrophic implications far into the future. Of particular concern are the increased risk of violence and exploitation that women and girls face including forced and child marriage,

gender-based violence and other forms of abuse and sexual exploitation. According to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on discrimination against women and girls “the denial of education is having a crushing effect on women and girls and is a significant driver for Afghans to leave the country, as parents want to provide education opportunities for their daughters.”⁷

Impact of cross-border displacement into Iran

Following the events of August 2021, there have been sustained high levels of cross-border movements of Afghans seeking refuge in Iran. Although this has reduced from its peak of over 5,000 individuals per day in August to October 2021, UNHCR estimates that between 3,000-5,000 Afghans continue to enter Iran daily and require international protection and humanitarian assistance. Over this period, the main drivers of cross-border displacement have shifted from violence and insecurity to the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the curtailment of rights in Afghanistan. In addition, asylum seekers include persons affiliated with the previous government or military and groups who have opposed Taliban policies. There have also been considerable movements of persons from ethnic and religious minorities, such as Shia Hazara and Tajiks, who fear persecution and discrimination in Afghanistan, including from extremist groups like Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) who have undertaken deadly attacks on mosques, schools and public areas.

Many Afghan women, girls and their families are seeking asylum in Iran due to the discriminatory gender policies implemented by the Taliban. UNHCR continues to observe a large number of women approaching its receptions in Iran, many of whom are considered “woman at risk”. These women cite the lack of access to basic rights as one of their reasons for flight. This also includes the families of school-aged girls and single female university students fleeing to Iran in the hope of continuing their education. These newly arrived female university students are often highly vulnerable.

Overall, it is estimated by the Government of Iran that more than 1 million Afghans have sought refuge in Iran following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. These have added to the millions of Afghans already hosted by Iran for over four decades. In 2022, the Government of Iran concluded a large-scale Headcount exercise that saw 2.6 million new arrivals and previously undocumented Afghans provided with headcount slips. These slips are intended to prevent refoulement and facilitate equal access to inclusive services, such as primary healthcare and education. As a result, the number of refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation hosted in Iran has increased to approximately 3.4 million (of some 4.5 million Afghans in the country with varying statuses),⁸ resulting in Iran becoming the largest refugee-hosting country in the world.⁹

Against this backdrop, the potential for sustained and increased levels of cross-border displacement into Iran, especially of women and girls, is significant. At the same time, with little prospect of improvements in the situation of Afghanistan in the near- to mid-term and with high-levels of multi-dimensional poverty, support for education for Afghans in Iran is important both in addressing immediate needs/ deprivations and as an investment in the capacity of Afghans to rebuild their country as and when conditions become conducive to return.



A group of Afghan students going home after school in Semnan Refugee settlement, Tehran Province. @UNHCR/Hossein Eidizadeh

Education Needs Overview

As a result of Iran’s inclusive education policies, hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugee children have equal access to schools in Iran as their Iranian peers. However, since the increase in the Afghan refugee population in the country after 2021, the Iranian national education system has been overwhelmed, especially in refugee-hosting areas. Many Afghan children are unable to enrol in school simply due to a lack of physical school spaces. At the same time, many Afghan families in Iran cannot financially support their children to attending school. They also face institutional and administrative challenges and socio-cultural issues which reduce access to education.

Iran’s refugee-inclusive education policies

In 2015, the Supreme Leader of Iran issued a decree to formalize access to primary and secondary education for both undocumented Afghan children and those of other status in Iran (noting that Amayesh and Hoviat refugee card-holders enjoyed access prior to this decree¹⁰). This enables them to study side by side with Iranian children and to follow the same national curriculum. In May 2016, refugee-specific school fees of USD 70-90 were also removed for all Afghan students. As such, Afghan children residing in Iran are granted the same access to schooling as Iranian children.

This is in line with international commitments made by Iran through signing and ratification of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, specifically Article 22 which commits to accord refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to ‘elementary education’ and for other

forms of education to treat refugees as favourably as possible.

These progressive policies are also consistent with commitments made under the New York Declaration and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which call for all refugee children to receive access to quality primary and secondary education in safe learning environments within a few months of arrival in host countries. To sustain such policies, the GCR also underlines the need for the continued investment and support of the international community to help shoulder the financial costs of inclusion.

However, despite the adoption of these progressive policies, in reality many children face significant challenges to access education. At the same time, where Afghan students are in education, they often require additional assistance to support their physical and mental wellbeing which addresses their trauma of displacement and mitigates the impact of learning loss.

Challenges to accessing education

Overburdened infrastructure and physical capacity barriers

The Government of Iran estimates that since August 2021, an additional 200,000 to 300,000 Afghan students have newly arrived in Iran and require school placement. This has resulted in existing schools being unable to accommodate all new students. In 2022, during the enrolment period, many Afghan children, especially those recently arrived and undocumented, were unable to obtain places.

The most recent figures from the Iranian Supreme Council of Education indicate that 614,199 Afghan children were enrolled in schools for the 2022-23 academic year.¹¹ This includes 314,281 male students and 299,918 female students. In Tehran province alone, there were 144,226 Afghan students studying in schools. This represents a 11% increase in the number of Afghan students enrolled in education from the previous year.

This increase has contributed to overcrowding of schools, with up to 40 to 50 students reported per classroom in some densely populated

refugee hosting areas. Overcrowding can negatively impact learning outcomes and impact school retention, particularly in highly vulnerable households where education is often deprioritized in favour of other basic needs.

The Iranian Government estimates that between 820,000 to 1 million Afghan students will require primary and secondary education in the country for this upcoming academic year. However, many Afghan children have once again been unable to secure a school place.

To address this lack of capacity, the Government of Iran has indicated that an additional 150 schools are required across the country to accommodate out-of-school children and reduce overcrowding in the most densely refugee-populated areas. In addition, there are a significant number of schools partially rehabilitated which require completion or further expansion to reduce overcrowding. The capacity of the Government to shoulder these costs alone is limited, with entrenched economic challenges linked to sanctions and the global cost of living crisis resulting in decreased government revenues.

Human resource constraints

In addition to the overwhelmed physical education infrastructure, there is also an insufficient number of teachers within the national education system to support schooling for these newly arrived Afghan students. The Government estimates that an additional 14,000 to 21,000 trained teaching personnel are required. Shortages in teaching personnel can increase the number of classes that a teacher is allocated, lead to higher average class sizes, or lead to teachers being assigned subject areas in which they are not fully qualified. This has a negative impact on teacher motivation, the quality of work and, ultimately, learning outcomes.

Increasing the numbers of female teachers is a vital component in reducing the overall deficit. For girls, a lack of female teachers can spell the end of their secondary education, as parents in some conservative Afghan communities will not allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher. Most importantly, a female role model can inspire and support girls to complete their studies – and even motivate them to become teachers themselves.

Financial challenges

Of particular concern is the reported increase in non-enrolment of children in education, particularly for those children above the age of 11. The Ministry of Education estimated that 900,000 children across Iran dropped out of school in the 2021-2022 academic year, with 'poverty' reported as the primary driver as families face a cost-of-living crisis.¹²

Indeed, in 2022 UNHCR observed that 81% of refugees and asylum seekers reported having experienced reduced incomes. Against this backdrop, UNHCR has observed that 95% of refugees and asylum seekers reported recourse to harmful coping mechanisms in the first six months of 2022, with implications on access to education for school-aged children. In one survey, among refugee households with school-aged children, 25% reported that their children did not go to school (ranging from 16% for Amayesh card holding households, to 38% for those who arrived after August 2021).

For these families, despite the removal of refugee-specific school fees in 2016, financial challenges are reported as the main barrier to schooling for the vast majority of out of school children. Indeed, UNHCR has observed that 57% of households with out-of-school children report that they cannot cover associated costs (also incurred by Iranian students), 44% report that they cannot pay for school materials and 33% report that they cannot pay transportation fees. Approximately 5% of refugee households

attribute non-attendance at school to children having to work for cash or food. However, the number of children undertaking paid work may be significantly higher than this figure suggests given the difficulty to reach this group. These financial challenges are likely to disproportionately impact the most marginalized who face multidimensional poverty. This includes female-headed households, an estimated 55% of whom are in the bottom income decile.

Afghan university students in Iran also face similar financial difficulties which prevent them from continuing their education. Many university-aged Afghans, including female students who fled Afghanistan after they were banned from continuing their education, have had to prioritize their immediate needs, such as employment, shelter and food, despite their interest in continuing their tertiary education. This situation has been exacerbated by rising university tuition fees and living expenses for students. Between 2021 and 2022 tuition fees for university students increased by 42%. For some subjects, this was considerably higher, e.g. rising by 137% for medicals students.

Furthermore, after completing university, these students often face difficulties in obtaining employment, with only a small number of low-skilled jobs being available due to labour regulations and restrictions on the availability of work permits for women. This forces many to work irregularly and in fields unrelated to their qualifications which can heighten the risk of exploitation and abuse.

Provision of Stationary kit for student-Primary school, Qom, 2022-2023. NRC Iran provided student kits for 10,047 Students in different provinces in Iran in 2022-2023. @NRC



Maryam and Hamza, a brother and sister aged 11 and 13 respectively, have not been able to enrol in school in Iran. Along with their single mother, they instead work packing goods at their home. “It is okay, but I would prefer to go to school” Hamza says. Their mother, Eli, interrupts “He’s just being brave, it is very difficult. At night, he is always complaining about pain in his arms and feet because of the work.” Maryam adds “We love education and to be at school. I want to play with classmates, but I prefer studying.”

From interview with an Afghan refugee family (their names changed) who arrived after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The two children were unable to enrol in 2022-23 school year due to a lack of school places and the need for the children to support the family’s income.

Institutional and administrative challenges, including documentation

A number of bureaucratic impediments further limit opportunities for Afghan children to enrol in school. Circulars on enrolment for Afghans are routinely issued after the start of the school year and for specific cohorts, with undocumented Afghan children generally invited to enrol later than the children of Amayesh card holders. With school spaces limited, local educational authorities have reportedly turned Afghan students away until the enrolment of Iranian students is complete.

Afghan university students also face limited and difficult options regarding their legal status in

Iran. For example, Afghan students with Amayesh cards, have to give up their Amayesh status and apply for a student visa in Kish Island in the southern part of Iran in order to enrol in Iranian universities. The 32 USD visa fee and associated costs of transport to Kish, accommodation and food can present another financial barrier to them accessing in tertiary education.

Although details remain limited, it is expected that opportunities for improvements in access and efficiency are a planned result of the new *Smart Governing Scheme for Foreign Nationals*. However, the planned phased rollout over the coming months could also present additional challenges in accessing education particularly in its initial stages.

Socio-cultural issues related to girls education

The combination of supply-side challenges as well as the prevailing patriarchal attitudes and lack of awareness among some Afghan parents regarding the importance of education, presents a considerable barrier to school enrolment. These risks are particularly acute for girls, as well as children with disabilities. This can result in a prioritisation of boys’ education or even in girls being prevented from attending school, particularly where households face financial challenges. School retention and school enrolment levels are lower in poorer provinces, such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Kerman where only one-third and one-half of school age Afghan children respectively are estimated to be in school. In these areas more conservative norms intersect with higher levels of deprivation. In part due to their marginalization from education, girls are also likely to face an

increased risk of exploitation and abuse, including as a result of forced and child marriage, gender-based violence and other forms of abuse and sexual exploitation. This presents a vicious cycle where a lack of education for girls perpetuates poverty, further entrenching inequalities. Moreover, there is a considerable psychological impact for those at risk of missing out or being marginalized from education, with those in such situations more likely to experience anxiety, depression and a sense of hopelessness. This impact is likely to be particularly profound for women and girls who, having already seen their access to education in Afghanistan curtailed and, against prevailing patriarchal attitudes, are likely to be the most marginalized in community and household level decisions around enrolment. This will take a further toll on the emotional and psychosocial wellbeing of Afghan women and girls, 47% of whom were found to have ‘high psychological distress’ according to a 2021 survey.¹³

Education for Refugees in Iran

In addition to barriers to access, Afghan children often have specific or additional needs which if not addressed can impact learning outcomes, potentially compromising school retention and continued learning. Over the longer-term, this can undermine household and community resilience by limiting livelihood opportunities. Simply ‘being in school’ is not enough. Refugee children and youth need to have access to quality early childhood development and education programmes (ECDE), inclusive formal primary and secondary education, non-formal education to support the transition to formal education, as well as increased opportunities for continuous learning, whether this be through technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or higher education.

Early Childhood Development and Education Programmes (ECDE)

ECDE for Afghan refugee children and most vulnerable host community children in Iran is largely unavailable. ECDE is foundational to a child’s development; helping to advance key outcomes that realize a child’s potential. ECDE prioritizes support to children between birth and five years of age, providing integrated and multi-sectoral support in these critical developmental years. ECDE is particularly important for young refugee children who are often contending with the developmental and psychological consequences of displacement and may face

challenges in adapting to new surroundings. Although preschool is not universal or mandatory in Iran, it is generally advised that children whose mother tongue is not Farsi are enrolled in pre-school to facilitate their transition to formal primary education. For Afghan families, the costs associated with ECDE are often prohibitive. These children may enter primary schools without basic skills and they face numerous challenges compared to their peers who have gone through ECDE, particularly where they do not speak Farsi as their mother tongue. These children face the risk of dropout and/ or repeating the grade which brings multiple costs for the family and the education system.

Formal Primary and Secondary Education

Teaching personnel are instrumental in shaping a child’s learning pathways. In Iran, many teaching personnel are not trained on how to effectively include Afghan children in formal education settings. In particular, refugee children’s learning is constrained by a lack of teachers trained in managing multi-cultural classrooms (e.g. teachers with Pashto or Dari). Not only does this compromise learning outcomes but could also jeopardize school enrolment and retention more generally as it may lead families to question the value of education and the opportunity cost to schooling.

These challenges underline the importance of promoting whole of society approaches to education, which engage all education stakeholders in a child’s schooling including,

crucially, teachers, parents and/ or primary caregivers. This is particularly important in addressing gender-related barriers to education, with decisions around schooling and education – particularly at secondary level – still shaped by discriminatory gender norms.

Tailored approaches are also required to ensure equitable participation of marginalized groups and persons with specific-needs in formal education, such as students with disabilities. Learners with disabilities are at particular risk of non-enrolment in formal education or of dropping out. Additional investments are required to accommodate these specific learning requirements, including through the recruitment of specialized teaching staff, expanding teacher training initiatives, increased classroom support and providing customized learning resources which ensure that learning is fully accessible to students with mobility issues.

Non-Formal Education

Challenges in transitioning to formal education can be particularly high for Afghan children. Effective inclusion and retention in formal education requires increased non-formal and accelerated learning opportunities. Non-formal education, including through the establishment of Community Learning Centres (CLCs), can also help to nurture transferrable life skills which can be applied to support formal learning as well as access to future livelihood opportunities.

Linked to the above, the provision of Farsi language classes is essential in facilitating the effective inclusion of Afghan children, particularly those of Pashtun ethnicity, in public schools. Without dedicated language classes for non-Farsi speaking children, retention will remain low and learning outcomes jeopardized. At the same time, elective language classes are required to ensure first language maintenance, with non-

Continuous learning – Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education

As of 2023, only a minority of students in their final year of secondary school continue their education. As noted, cost represents the fundamental barrier to higher education for Afghans wanting to continue their study to tertiary education. This includes tuition fees and costs associated with their programmes such as supplies, materials, textbooks and equipment which they must cover themselves. They also have to support themselves with the cost of living, such as renting accommodation, food expenses and transport fees. In addition, limits on acquiring work permits to gain official entry into the labour market for Afghan university graduates, particularly in the saturated job market in Iran, both obstructs and disincentivizes young Afghans from continuing their education. Nevertheless, tertiary education opportunities are essential in contributing to self-reliance and resilience among refugee communities, providing a foundation for sustainable voluntary returns as/ when conditions become viable.

At the same time, many refugee children lack the skills to facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary education. At present, there are no dedicated post-secondary education learning opportunities to support Afghan youth. Post-

retention of first languages likely to limit future opportunities for voluntary repatriation as/ when the situation in Afghanistan improves. In order to address disproportionately low levels of retention in the formal education systems among refugee children, shorter duration catch-up classes (required to enrol in formal education) and remedial classes (e.g. literacy and numeracy) or tutoring are also required. Such interventions are particularly critical for Afghan refugee children who arrived after 2021 and likely seen significant disruption in their education. Moreover, ensuring access to digital connectivity and resources, as well as developing universal digital literacy for teachers and students is critical in equipping young people with the skills to thrive. In line with this forward-looking approach, environmental literacy and consciousness is also essential in enabling young people to contribute to greener societies, particularly given the multiple environmental and climate-related challenges Iran and Afghanistan face.

secondary learning – including language training, IT/ digital proficiency courses and catch-up/ bridging courses – can provide a platform to expand access to tertiary education for Afghan youth in Iran, including through complementary pathways and third-country solutions.

Further consideration is also required on how opportunities for TVET can be expanded at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. Providing formal and non-formal TVET programs for Afghan adolescents and youth, with a focus on green and market-driven skills, could increase Afghan youth's chances in the labour market. TVET not only provides a pathway for lifelong learning but can also contribute to more durable solutions.

Refugees, particularly youth, however, continue to face significant barriers to TVET in Iran, including transportation difficulties, conflict with work hours, lack of diverse or advanced training course, and lack of access to job opportunities after graduation. Women face additional access challenges such as cultural barriers, conflict with childcare and caring for elderly parents.

In response to this, further efforts are needed to enhance the access of Afghan youth in Iran to higher education. This includes expanding UNHCR's support through the DAFI scholarship programme which provides financial assistance to help cover their tuition fees and living costs while they undertake their studies.

Social Emotion Learning (SEL) and loss of potential

The absence of a protective learning environment presents a heightened risk of child protection related issues, such as exploitation, abuse and child labour. A lack of or absence of education, can also deeply impact children's mental wellbeing, creating despair and disengagement and increasing the risks of psychological problems, such as depression, self-harm and suicide. Marginalization and curtailment of fundamental rights (including the right to education), is likely to have a particular impact on the mental health of Afghan women and girls. In light of this, across both formal and non-formal education programmes, psychosocial and social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical in efforts to facilitate education access and retention. Efforts to strengthen SEL including scaling-up teacher training not only on SEL itself, but also on positive discipline and trauma-

informed approaches, are a key component of these efforts. Employment of specialists such as counsellors and psychologists can also be important in enabling early intervention and dedicated treatment for children exhibiting signs of distress, while supporting extracurricular activities can help nurture self-expression and relationships.

As well as helping refugee children overcome the often highly distressing experiences that led to their arrival in Iran, SEL also contributes to educational achievement, employment outcomes and overall life satisfaction. Such interventions are particularly critical for at-risk children, including Afghan children in street situations. More generally, improving alternative care options and family tracing and reunification for Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASCs) is critical in enabling appropriate responses.

The opportunity costs of a lost or interrupted education are enormous. *Yasaman*, a 19-year-old who had won prizes for public speaking in Afghanistan currently cannot afford to enrol in university in Iran without a scholarship given her family's financial situation. She told UNHCR: "I want to study journalism or law because it would help my community. I could show the power of Afghan women to the world and the pain of the experience that we have been forced to undergo. I wish I could be the voice of the silenced women of Afghanistan to the whole world."

From interview with family (names changed) who fled violence in Afghanistan after August 2021.

Students taking a health screening test- Primary school, Sistan and Baluchestan, 2022-2023. UNICEF Iran supported the Health Screening Programme for 97,454 children, including refugee children, in Iran in 2022-2023. @UNICEF



Call to Action

In view of the increased strain on the education system in Iran, there is a need for greater and sustained responsibility-sharing by the international community to enable the Government of Iran to maintain its inclusive policies to Afghan children and simultaneously ensure quality education opportunities for refugees and host communities alike. Without such support, those Afghan refugee children, especially girls, remain at risk of being left behind and a lost generation.

Building on the situational and needs analysis presented in this Education Brief, the argument for scaled-up and sustained support for education in Iran, consistent with the commitment to responsibility-sharing is undeniable:

- The volatile situation in Afghanistan is likely to continue to have a profound effect on the ability of children to access a safe and protective learning environment in their home country. This is particularly apparent for women and girls, who have seen their right to education in Afghanistan denied and for whom Iran presents the best opportunity to continue their learning.
- Since 2021 there has been a significant increase in Afghan students in Iran who require education and multi-sector assistance to ensure their wellbeing, maintain living standards and avoid a lost generation. Continued arrivals over the foreseeable future remain likely. The newly arrived, join hundreds of thousands of Afghan students living in protracted displacement for whom education is a lifeline that allows them to continue to learn and develop, while offering the hope of a better future.
- Against this backdrop, the overburdened education system in Iran risks being put under yet further strain, compromising access to education and potentially eroding the scope of the Government's inclusive policies. Longer-term, as and when conditions in Afghanistan become conducive to return, gaps in education will compromise the ability of Afghan youth to meaningfully contribute to the development and future of their country.

To support all stakeholders in pledging assistance for education in Iran, seven international aid organizations are appealing for a combined **US\$ 119.2 M for education** under the **Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for the Afghanistan Situation 2024-2025**. This coordinated and needs-based inter-agency strategy supports education for Afghan refugees and Iranian host communities alike, prioritizing efforts to:

1. Improve access to equitable, safe and inclusive education for Afghan refugees and their Iranian host communities, with a particular emphasis on reducing barriers to education for girls
2. Enhance the quality of education opportunities available through the development of a safe and protective learning environment that improves overall learning outcomes and enhances resilience, with an emphasis on life-long learning.

In contributing to these objectives, RRP partners plan to undertake a range of activities:

- **Targeted support to Afghan students and their families, specifically those from the most economically disadvantage backgrounds to enable them to access education** (awareness raising, cash and in-kind) – **US\$ 3.26 million**
- **Enhance schools and education facilities environment through construction, rehabilitation, renovation and provision of classroom equipment** – **US\$ 102 million**
- **Support teachers in their professional development** and equip them with the skills

that enable them to provide tailored support to students – **US\$ 800,000**

- **Support access, reintegration and retention in formal education** to Afghan children and adolescents, particularly girls – **USD\$ 4.3 million**
- **Support Afghan children, particularly girls, with specialized services that address risks and negative coping mechanisms**, including those resulting from psychosocial distress – **US\$ 900,000**
- **Support the wellbeing of students, particularly students with disabilities** – **US\$ 3 million**
- **Parents and caregivers of Afghan children are equipped with the basic skills** to identify specialized needs and provide support – **US\$ 800,000**
- **Students/ prospective tertiary education students are provided with opportunities for life-long learning** through increased access to higher education as well as technical vocational education/ training programmes. This includes through the - Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) Scholarship Programme – **US\$ 3.79 million**

The 2024-2025 Education appeal under the RRP looks to capitalize on momentum of the upcoming **Global Refugee Forum (GRF)** to advance the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) **Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugee (SSAR)**. In line with this the “Multi-Stakeholder Pledge for Resilience and Solutions: ReSolve” provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to contribute to Afghanistan’s future by pledging support for Iran, including through financing the 2024-25 RRP. This also further builds on the priorities of the Government of Iran, who continue to see access to inclusive education and retention in schooling for Afghan refugees as a principal objective. It also recognizes the reality that Iran presents the best opportunity to invest in education for Afghans, particularly women and girls.



Under its school-based programmes, WFP distributes “School Snacks” amongst 8,700 refugee students and their teachers residing in 20 settlements. @WFP / Mohammad Khodabakhsh.

End notes

1. As per 2023 Planning Figures for the [Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation 2023](#).
2. The range of these estimates are an assessment by UNHCR based on the best available secondary data and 2023 Planning Figures.
3. For more information on humanitarian needs in Afghanistan, please see [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 \(January 2023\)](#) and [Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan \(2022\)](#).
4. From [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 \(January 2023\)](#), page 29.
5. See endnote 4, page 6.
6. See endnote 4, page 39.
7. UN Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, [Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan \(A/HRC/53/21\)](#), 53rd session of the UN Human Rights Council, 15 June 2023.
8. For more details on Iran's Afghan population please see [UNHCR Iran's Operational Data Portal](#).
9. For more information on global rankings please see [UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2023](#).
10. Amayesh (pertaining to Afghans) and Hoviat (pertaining to Iraqi) cards grant the holders temporary stay in a given province for the period of their validity and enable the holders to apply for work permits. Entitlements conferred by Amayesh and Hoviat status includes access to education, health services, health insurance and employment within pre-defined fields. Possession of these cards also provide protection from arrest, detention and deportation.
11. Tasnim News, More than 600,000 'citizen students' are studying in the country's schools, 19 June 2023, available at [TasnimNews](#).
12. GIRI Parliamentary Report (2022).
13. Kovess-Masfety V, Keyes K, Karam E, Sabawoon A, Sarwari BA., *A national survey on depressive and anxiety disorders in Afghanistan: a highly traumatized population*, BMC Psychiatry. Available at the [PubMedCentral](#).

An Afghan student doing sport at school. @UNHCR/Sebastien Rich

