

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES: THE CASE OF SYRIA

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Abstract: The refugee crisis is also a crisis in education. While attention is frequently directed toward primary and secondary school levels, higher education is a strategic issue for refugees, both as individuals and for long term processes of post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding. Education prospects and content are drivers of onwards migration, but also affect economic structures on return. Higher education has the potential to support sustainable socio-economic development, but impacts will depend on which strategies are adopted and which types of capacity are prioritised. The article examines the issue of access to higher education for Syrian refugees, describing the situation in Lebanon in particular. Foreign interests can fuel sectarianism as well as creating economic structural dependencies. Both existing and possible future options supported by the international community are considered here, and discussed with respect to how they might affect opportunities for democratic and autonomous societal developments.

Key words: Higher Education; Refugee Education; Syrian Refugees; Radicalisation; Peacebuilding; Economic Dependency; Social Justice; Socio-economic Development.

Introduction

‘We are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Above all, this is not just a crisis of numbers; it is also a crisis of solidarity’ (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015a: 5). This statement by the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, in August 2016 calling for global solidarity, points to the urgent need for an appropriate ‘action’ to find a durable solution for the rising numbers of ‘persons of concern’ who are mainly refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers, returned refugees and stateless persons (UNHCR 2017). It also refers to the limited financial resources of the United Nations (UN) and

its high dependency on wealthy member states. The number of registered refugees grew from 1.7 million in 1955 to more than 21.3 million in 2016, while the number of ‘persons of concern’ amounted to 65.3 million in 2016 (UNHCR, 2016a; UNHCR, 2017). The main countries of origin of refugees in 2015 and 2016 were Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, all countries which have experienced long-term conflicts (UNHCR, 2015a: 5; UNHCR, 2016a). However, the ongoing conflict in Syria ranks as the worst since the end of the Cold War (Gates et al., 2016).

Only 18 per cent of the world’s refugees are hosted in developed countries of the global North, while 82 per cent are hosted by countries in the global South (UNHCR, 2015a: 5). Social and economic impacts on host countries are considerable (UNHCR-UNDP, 2015; Awad, 2015; Zirack, 2016), and lack of sufficient humanitarian and development assistance may trigger a new set of crises, creating a self-perpetuating vicious circle of dependence and distress (Wazani, 2014, UNHCR-UNDP 2015; Awad, 2015, Zirack, 2016). With regard to the Middle East and North Africa, global responses have been severely questioned, and Awad (2015: 25) argues that they have contributed to the ‘fragility of nation-states in the Middle East’.

Various suggestions have been put forward by the UN to alleviate suffering and to overcome socio-economic challenges in the host countries. Such suggestions include resettlement and return programmes, while emphasis has been placed to differing degrees on self-reliance or integration in the host country (UNHCR, 2015a: 23). However, long term developments observed for previous waves of refugees suggest that efforts have so far proved insufficient to avoid continued or escalating crises in host countries. Examples include the deteriorating situation of Palestinian refugees in camps in Lebanon and Jordan since the 1960s, or the Dadaab camp in Kenya established in 1991 to provide refuge for people fleeing civil war in Somalia (Aljazeera, 2016b; Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Yeung, 2016). Strategic reflection on how to create more favourable conditions for countries affected by massive forced displacement is complicated by the fact that countries that organise and financially support

humanitarian and development efforts in the wake of armed conflict, may at the same time be contributing to such conflicts. Geopolitical agendas are pursued either directly by military intervention or, indirectly, through logistical support and arms deliveries to the parties in conflict (Selby and Tadros, 2016).

This article will discuss the significance of higher education (HE) for refugees in the context of the Syrian crisis. Constraints affecting access to education in Lebanon and other host countries are outlined, as well as some of the strategic choices to be confronted to avoid cycles of violence and increasing loss of autonomy in the long term.

Higher education for refugees: Educating for a shift in paradigm

Among the arguments for prioritising higher education for refugees is the stabilisation of society by combatting radicalisation. We argue that, in the long term, ‘security’ cannot be achieved by military control and repression. Besides external interests that might - for religious, ideological, economic or geopolitical reasons - be financing radical groups in countries such as Syria or Iraq, the societal conditions for radicalisation in the Middle East often stem from a lack of hope. This hopelessness is often rooted in a lack of viable alternatives for the future in a context of political repression and rising socio-economic injustice. Turning the tide amounts to creating a basis for visions of hope and empowerment and, here, rhetoric is not enough: the perspectives for the future need to be credible. This involves creating a vibrant economy, serving real needs and creating sustainable livelihoods, as well as improving the environment and increasing future resilience in times of global turbulence. It also means stepping out of the paradigm of colonial dependence and subordination, collective humiliations, political repression and corrupt government or political-economic elites (Selby and Tadros, 2016). These processes require international efforts of solidarity, with agenda-setting determined by the people concerned.

There are three interrelated sets of issues that are fundamental for refugee higher education, which relate to the society-building and long-term

functions of higher education. Firstly, refugee HE needs to build capacity for addressing new and rapidly changing problems, in settings with a high degree of instability (Bryan, 2015; Munck et al, 2013). Secondly, these problems are situated at the level of society as a whole – they are massive in scale, cutting across sectors, institutions and national borders (Bryan, 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Thirdly, funding needs to be mobilised for the public good, addressing long-term challenges at a time when HE is increasingly tied to private sector interests and mechanisms of marketisation (Bryan, 2015; Morrow and Torres, 2000).

A fourth set of issues relates to the conditions of refugees as students and the often dire circumstances of their daily lives. In many cases, being a refugee means you have experienced violence and lived under humiliating conditions. Surviving day to day can be a challenge. Even those fortunate enough to escape the worst situations are affected by ongoing events within conflict zones. The fate of friends and family, as well as the constant feeling of uncertainty and insecurity, all create huge mental and emotional pressures. These are preconditions for radicalisation and extremism. Under such circumstances, HE has the potential to open a window beyond the conflict in the home country and the miserable situation in their refugee camp (UNHCR, 2015b).

Kirk and Sherab (2016) argue that HE will protect refugees against marginalisation and abuse, as well as enable them to support their communities in exile and contribute to the future development of their home countries. So, in this sense, HE can be considered as a ‘bridge between emergency response and sustainable development’ (Kirk and Sherab, 2016: 13). Importantly, also, the perspective that sees education as the realisation of individual aspirations (or as the societal challenge to provide education for a number of individuals) differs from the perspective of considering the educational needs of society and society-building. Thus, for instance, when individuals pay for higher education, it would typically be directed at enabling a personal career and socio-economic advancement that will eventually justify the money invested in studies.

Under a situation of massive destruction or protracted conflict, social reconciliation and reconstruction efforts need to be considered in terms of society-building, rather than simply re-establishing previous structures. In the case of Syria, a number of deficits existed pre-conflict, in educational capacity (Said, 2013). But as a result of the conflict, a new set of problems have been created most notably including the issues of radicalisation and polarisation. The demographic profile of different areas and of the country as a whole has changed as a result of the conflict (Eskaf, 2016; Picali, 2016), resulting from calculated changes to the ethnic, religious and political characteristics of different zones. Additionally, the future economy and institutions will need to function with fewer qualified people, as a consequence of massive brain drain as well as losing years of training and schooling (Deane, 2016).

Not only do societal institutions need to be established in a situation where resources will probably be scarce and society is fragmented, but these structures must be innovative and function adequately from the outset, to avoid a new cascade of destructive crises. Such innovation is not a luxury or an add-on. On the one hand, there is a likelihood that various aspects of existing institutions contributed to the dynamics of the conflict in the first place. But on the other, and importantly, the post-conflict situation will in itself demand new types of structures. A deep-reaching renewal of structures is further needed because the region - and indeed the planet - is in a period of rapid transition (Munck et al, 2013), with factors such as climate change contributing new pressures (Bryan, 2015). The impacts of rising food prices or changing weather patterns are particularly acute for vulnerable populations, and additional economic crises and unfair policies could cause extreme social volatility. According to a study by Barakat and Milton (2015: 1) higher education:

“...is able to act as a catalyst for the recovery of war-torn countries in the Arab world, not only by supplying the skills and knowledge needed to reconstruct shattered economic and physical infrastructure, but also by supporting the restoration of collapsed

governance systems and fostering social cohesion. As home to the strategically vital 18-25 age group, higher education can help shelter and protect an important subset of young men and women during crisis situations, maintaining their hopes in the future, and preventing them from being driven into the hands of violent groups”.

Against this background, refugee HE is not primarily a question of providing conventional schooling or training to a particular population living today under difficult circumstances (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), but rather reimagining education so it can support members of a society who have experienced a certain degree of violence and psychological trauma and who will in the future be facing a particular set of challenges. A wide range of technical and organisational capacities are required (Deane, 2016), alongside powerful peace-building strategies and a value system based on freedom, participation and democracy.

While attention needs to be devoted to HE sensitive to the immediate and urgent needs of refugees as students, the long-term effects of strategies for refugee HE must not be neglected. This implies a focus on HE above all as a question of local and regional autonomy in terms of the ability to set agendas (Hickling-Hudson, 2000). HE centred on the refugees’ own local context is further required, both to ensure sufficient understanding of the needs and interests of the local population, rather than foreign interests (Selby and Tadros, 2016). This is paramount so that reconstruction does not lead to subsequent positions of structural dependency, where economic development is driven by foreign commercial interests, while ensuing social and environmental costs are paid by international humanitarian agencies.

Strategies in refugee education for Syrians

In a crisis such as the ongoing war in Syria, the demands are so vast and the resources so limited that it is difficult to know where to start. The urgency of the situation, as well as a humanitarian framing of the issues at stake, tends to place emphasis on immediate needs rather than long term developments

(Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Selby and Tadros, 2016). Higher education may in such contexts be seen as less fundamental and urgent than questions of survival. It could also be argued that individuals should finance studies themselves, since the educated are more likely to be earning higher salaries post-HE. But deprioritising HE for refugees and decentring it from the region has serious consequences. The policy increases brain drain on the one hand, and on the other, creates a ‘lost generation’ of young people (Deane, 2016).

As many reports emphasise, in the case of Syria, far too many young refugees are missing schooling today (London Progress Report, 2016). But more attention needs to be devoted to the ways in which education relates to livelihoods and future educational pathways. The type of education refugees can access today does not help them access decent jobs (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), particularly in view of various obstacles they face on the labour market in the host countries. In Lebanon and Jordan, for instance, Syrians are not allowed to work in a number of professions, and securing work permits is time consuming and expensive (Armstrong, 2016; Wazani, 2014: 103). Importantly, offering primary or even secondary education locally in the regional host countries is not enough, since as long as further education prospects are closed in the region, people are likely to seek a better future abroad.

University-aged Syrian refugees were estimated at 150,000 in 2016. At best, six per cent of these will have the opportunity to study at universities in the host countries or in so-called ‘third countries’ (Luo and Craddock, 2016), while the majority are barred from access to further educational pathways. These young people are likely to find themselves among the unskilled, illegal and underpaid labour force in the host countries, or become potential candidates for recruitment in regular or irregular armed forces (Barakat and Milton, 2015; Deane, 2016). Their motivation to work in harsh conditions, or to be involved in conflict, lies in earning money to fill the financial gap for their families and be independent of charity and aid. It is also based on the need to claim an identity, redefine their role in society and

do something to change their miserable status. In short, the socio-economic conditions under which the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan are living are well short of basic human dignity (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Jamjoom and Khalaf, 2015).

Refugee camps in Lebanon are illegal (although they exist in practice), while the camps in Jordan are described by refugees as akin to a large prison, since strict rules control the movement inside the camps and the infrastructure is poor (Barolini, 2016). Nonetheless, the majority of Syrian refugees in both Lebanon and Jordan are living outside regular camps and suffer high levels of discrimination from the local authorities and communities (Dahi 2014; Jamjoom and Khalaf, 2015). Lebanese apprehensions are no doubt coloured by the country's experience with Palestinian refugees, who became long-term camp residents living in dire conditions (Aljazeera, 2016a), and whose presence has served as a pretext for occupation and attacks. The tensions in Lebanon, in particular, can be understood in light of the close but complex historical relationships between Syrians and Lebanese. Today, low-paid Syrians are pushing down wages and competing for jobs with the poorest sections of Lebanese society (Oxfam, 2017). Lebanon's involvement in the conflict through Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime, on the one hand, and the Sunni community's support for the opposition on the other, has also exacerbated the effects of the conflict on all sides (Dahi, 2014; Khatib, 2014).

The HE situation of Syrian refugees in the region is largely dependent on higher education provision and the levels of socio-economic development in the host countries. Lebanon and Jordan suffer from serious socio-economic problems, such as unemployment, income inequality and social injustice (ILO, 2013, UNHCR-UNDP, 2015: 13-15). At the same time, both countries follow a neoliberal economic policy that tends to worsen problems rather than resolve them (Selby and Tadros, 2016). Private schools and universities for the wealthy have a long tradition in these countries, and elevated fees prevent access to HE for the children of domestic workers, farmers or low-income employees. Public education is under-funded and the

quality of provision was already deteriorating before the current crisis (Frayha, 2009: 1; Tabbaa, 2011).

While HE in Lebanon and Jordan remains out of reach for most refugees, opportunities outside the host countries of the region are not unproblematic. Studying abroad involves devoting a disproportionate amount of time, resources and energy, to meet formal entry requirements and overcome other obstacles. Another key higher education issue in third countries lies in the fact that, although the diaspora can perform valuable services in many ways - such as in the case of Ethiopia (Amazan, 2014) - it will not replace the need for local people with relevant educational attainment. Importantly, existing HE curricula in third countries help build capacity in society through the provision of training and skills but do not meet the present and future regional needs of the Middle East, and in particular the specific dimensions connected to post-conflict recovery and reconciliation processes.

The case of Syrians in Lebanon

Before the Lebanese government closed its borders to Syrian refugees in January 2015, they could easily travel to Lebanon and get a visa on the border. There were nonetheless a number of obstacles to HE, particularly financial resources and required school or university documents (ILO, 2013). Refugees without secondary school leaving qualifications could not gain an equivalent Lebanese certificate, since Syrian students were not allowed to enrol in public schools until 2014. Today, Syrian children are allowed to attend public schools, but not together with Lebanese students and they are only allowed to attend evening shifts. Moreover, many cannot afford to go to school because they lack the money to cover transport and other costs (ILO, 2013; Interview with HN, a Syrian activist and expert on education for Syrian refugees in a Lebanon-based NGO, Berlin, 27 December 2016).

The cost of education is a major impediment to attending HE. Examination fees at the Ministry for Education and HE reach up to \$100 for secondary school leaving certificates and up to \$200 for Bachelor diplomas.

Student fees at Lebanese universities vary between \$600 at public and more than \$4,000 at private universities. After January 2015, access to HE became even more difficult, since universities started to ask for residency permits, which denied a large number of illegal refugees access to higher education. Obtaining residence permits is not only expensive, but the conditions that applicants need to meet are prohibitive. Legally enrolled students at universities get six month to one-year permits. Securing a permit extension is a time-consuming process, as it requires all the documents that were already provided for the first application (Interview with HN, 2017).

While some families try to provide a future for their children by migrating, or sending their children away alone, others invest in local education as a step to later pursue education abroad. Many humanitarian organisations and private schools stress English language skills, which can be seen as an approach aiming to facilitate further schooling abroad. Gaining competence to study in countries outside the region, however, is an inefficient and costly way to be educated, whether from the perspective of individuals or in considering the impact of resources invested by NGOs with a humanitarian or development agenda. Long years are lost in acquiring residency status, validating prior qualifications, learning foreign languages, and gaining social capital in the countries of study

For Syrian, as well as other war refugees, migration polices in Europe, generally aim at integrating the educated refugees in their own labour markets, rather than offering capacity-building training and supporting reconstruction of the home country of refugees (European Parliament, 2016). A mismatch of curricular content available abroad to regional conditions contributes to preventing the future return of an educated diaspora, as well as favouring less than optimal solutions when professionals do return to their communities, as in the case of Ethiopia (Amazan, 2014). Refugees also need to earn their living quickly, and their choice of education pathway will be influenced by their individual perceptions of future opportunities. The strategy of studying abroad thereby increases both short and long term dependence on foreign expertise, and reduces the capacity for strategic

reflection and agenda-setting locally. Additionally, the question of ‘localising’ knowledge and know-how gained during studies abroad is far from straightforward. Most knowledge is very tightly linked to specific technology, which in turn is linked to powerful companies that control these technologies.

At a societal level, consolidating a foreign-educated elite (Hickling-Hudson, 2000) can increase social divisions and distance the educated from concerns of the wider communities. Inversely, if HE curricula were centred on society-building and the needs of the community, social cohesion could be increased. Models for new forms of institutions, technologies and structures could be tested locally and refined. Importantly, when the educated are able to serve their own communities, the need for external support is reduced.

Current responses to refugees’ higher education needs

Higher education directed towards refugees has not received as much attention as primary and secondary education, either from the humanitarian agencies or from donors (Barakat and Milton, 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Kirk and Sherab, 2016). The response to the lack of HE opportunities has generally speaking been limited to scholarship programmes, distance learning, providing e-learning platforms and some projects to found universities for refugees (Barakat and Milton, 2015: 6; Luo and Craddock, 2016). However, HE for refugees has increasingly come to the fore as a key issue since 2015 - one year after the large wave of young refugees travelling to Europe.

Higher education was expressed as a priority in the UNHCR 2012-2016 education strategy (UNHCR 2015c: 1), and several initiatives have emerged since. In the case of Syria, scholarship programmes have been expanded to cover larger numbers of students and provide HE opportunities at universities in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. In addition, many capacity-building and training courses have been announced for skilled Syrian refugees such as the Tahdir programme of Arab Reform Initiative 2017 (O’Keeffe and Pásztor, 2017). Capacity-building and HE as a contribution to

reconstruction in post-war Syria is becoming a mainstream topic in several international reports and press articles (Magaziner, 2015; UNHCR, 2016b; Gonzalez, 2017). Donor countries as well as international development and humanitarian organisations have made efforts to coordinate their activities related to higher education. These activities aim to support refugees to be independent, get decent employment in the host countries and become potential actors in the reconstruction of Syria (Lindsey, 2016). The foundation for refugee students (UAF), German Academic exchange services (DAAD), the Swedish Institute, the international NGO SPARK, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), as well as Al-Fanar, are some examples of the initiatives that deliver HE to Syrian refugees (Bollag, 2016; CAE-team, 2017).

Such initiatives solve the financial and administrative problems of many fortunate and well-qualified refugees, who secure these scholarships. However, they do not address the overall problem of interrupted schooling for young people who have not obtained secondary leaving qualifications. In 2015-16, only two per cent of Syrian refugees between 15-18 years were enrolled in the school system in Lebanon and only six per cent of refugees aged 14-17 years received secondary education in Jordan (Kirk and Sherab, 2016; London Progress Report, 2016). That means there are more than 150,000 students of HE-age in Jordan and Lebanon without a secondary leaving certificate, and who will not be able to take advantage of the HE opportunities outlined above. In addition, scholarship conditions to study in Europe or non-Arabic speaking countries are quite demanding for a refugee student, who has limited opportunities in the camps to improve English language skills or access e-learning programmes. Thus an additional challenge for an effective refugee HE strategy is to ensure that students with interrupted and inadequate secondary education can move on to further education (ILO, 2013: 17).

Practical challenges in developing refugee curricula for higher education

Considering the gap between the scope of existing initiatives and the level of demand, we need to create a HE curriculum for capacity-building equal to the highly complex cross-sectoral issues and wide range of geographical and institutional settings pertaining to refugees. The underlying problem here is financing and legitimisation, considering that HE is typically institutionally supported and financed either by national or commercial actors. Another set of HE institutions in the Middle East have been established by foreign political actors, including the American, German and Islamic universities, as a part of their foreign policy or so-called ‘soft power’ (Nye, 2005). It is thus difficult to find actors who would be motivated to sponsor relevant HE for reconstruction and recovery of a country other than their own, unless they have commercial or political interests.

Collaboration across HE contexts in the global South facing similar post-conflict or development challenges is a possible strategy to address refugee education needs. But this is also not unproblematic, for a variety of reasons. Besides the issue of overall access to resources in contexts of post-conflict reconstruction, countries in the global South are themselves in positions of dependency towards stronger actors. The same types of quality criteria, accountability and assessment mechanisms are applied globally, as in the global North, leaving little space to establish relevant curricula. Access to international publications and databases is costly and therefore tends to be reduced in southern contexts. Communication and instruction mediums remain a concern, when collaborating across linguistic borders. Academic environments are not only under pressure from commercially or geopolitically motivated actors, but by local elites and bureaucracies, often beset by rival factions or ideologically and religiously motivated interests.

While Syria can draw on diverse perspectives and alliances that can potentially enrich intellectual development (Amazan, 2014), there is also a real risk that sectarian and political conflicts among foreign parties involved in the Syrian conflict may cascade into refugee communities educated in

different contexts, and obstruct future cooperation in the reconstruction phase. A number of Islamic education projects in particular are tied to the interests of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States. Under the circumstances, possible strategies include: 1) diversifying dependencies to increase autonomy; 2) working with global networks and NGOs; 3) working with institutions or HE departments which have a progressive agenda and may already be oriented towards such concerns; 4) developing networks of such HE environments to mutually increase capacity in areas of society-building competences; and 5) working with the diasporas.

Combining diversification and networking can reduce vulnerability and dependency. An additional advantage is that Syrian academics and wider society can benefit from inputs from a wider range of HE traditions, and more particularly traditions which allow the development of creativity and critical thinking skills. Advocates of internationalisation have long stressed the benefits of learning from other cultures and societal models, as well as opening enriching dialogues across cultures and contexts. International networks thus have considerable potential. At the same time, building new structures requires sustained attention and commitment over time, and that is challenging even within a given local context. These challenges multiply when involving multiple, geographically dispersed actors.

Conclusions

While conflict represents the greatest direct cause of vast waves of refugees, poverty, economic crisis, political repression, social injustice and climate change have also been significant factors in displacing millions of people. Highly complex geopolitical and global economic forces thus contribute to creating and perpetuating intolerable life conditions for refugees. This implies that any response to the ongoing crisis needs to address the roots of the crisis, and long-term consequences of action that is taken. Strategies in this field notably need to consider in which ways action may stop the spiral of armed conflict, improve socio-economic development and contribute to stabilisation and de-radicalisation of societies.

Regardless of how the situation evolves, in the case of Syria, a large proportion of Syrians who fled the conflict will remain in other countries. Clearly, the main efforts of education - at primary, secondary or tertiary levels - are and will be oriented towards integration into host communities. But focus on these legitimate objectives should not detract attention from the long-term impact of HE strategies, and the need to build capacity that will benefit conflict-afflicted regions (Deane, 2016). There is thus a need for refugee higher education, oriented toward the needs of future reconstruction, peacebuilding, and economic recovery. This kind of capacity will also be needed to build a bridge between the Syrian diaspora and reconstruction efforts within Syria itself.

At the global level, HE strategies for refugees cannot be considered in isolation from the socio-economic context of the affected country and the host countries in the global South that bear the heaviest load of refugees. Therefore, HE strategies have to be well coordinated with other socio-economic development strategies in and for the regions. To find sustainable solutions, high coordination efforts are also required at a global level to deliver HE to refugees, and more generally, deliver relevant and equitable HE in the global South.

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