

# *Secondary Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Syrians' Education in Turkey*

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*Utilizing a rights-based approach, this policy brief attempts to assert the need to tackle the secondary impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on refugee education with a focus on the Syrian children in Turkey. It utilizes an evidence-based framework provided by ACAPS – a non-governmental organization providing essential humanitarian analyses to help crisis responders. Building upon the previous experiences during the Ebola outbreak, ACAPS offers a road map for the pre-outbreak context and identification of problems that have compounded effects on humanitarian sectors in the context of large-scale disease outbreaks. Benefiting that, the policy brief asserts that the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the education sector may extend beyond school-closures-related loss of learning by causing a set of secondary impacts. Assessing the limited impact of distance/remote learning programs as an alternative to conventional education, the policy brief acknowledges the negative consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on the realization of the right and access to education for Syrian children in Turkey and offers a set of policy suggestions.*

**Keywords:** *Refugee education, Covid-19, Turkey, Syrians.*

## INTRODUCTION

Posing several challenges to humanitarian sectors in conflict-affected contexts, the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to worsen already difficult refugee situations in the short and medium terms with its long-term effects yet to be seen. While the primary impact of the pandemic is seen with increasing number of people being hospitalized or dying, secondary impacts include subsequent effects of interaction between policy and behavioural responses to the pandemic (ACAPS 2016a). Building on a recent review of the research on the educational impact of previous disease outbreaks, Hallgarten's (2020, 3) work on the existing efforts to mitigate the secondary impacts on the education sector asserts that "the education in emergencies literature has an emerging evidence base across refugee education contexts ... but has not yet learned from or applied this evidence to disease outbreak situations".

Previous research showed that the effects of loss of learning spaces are not just limited to lost learning. The impact extends beyond the period of school closure (Global Business Coalition for Education, 2014). The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE 2020) drew attention not only to disruptions to education caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 but also to other issues resulting from and shaped by education responses to the crisis. These issues are associated with the consequences of the outbreak such as school-closures-related dropouts, loss of education and so on. According to the briefing,

the negative impact of disruptions to education is expected to be multiplied by gender-based discrimination especially on girls and young women due to a loss of safe learning environments. The Malala Fund (2020) estimates that the Covid-19 crisis will leave 10 million more, secondary school-aged girls, out of school. That in turn may increase the risks of child and forced marriage, early pregnancy, and domestic and sexual violence.

Taken as an enabling right, the inalienable right to education constitutes "an indispensable means for the full realization of other human rights" (Moumné and Sakai 2017). Therefore, the right to education for refugees, who are often unjustly deprived of basic human rights, is a highly significant issue of concern and can be regarded as "the primary way by which displaced and marginalized migrants can lift themselves out of poverty and participate meaningfully in their societies. Refugee access to education therefore holds the high potential to empower refugee children and adults to lead fulfilling lives" (UNESCO 2019). Embodied in the international law, a human rights framework recognizes, promotes and protects the right to education for all at all levels both locally

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and globally through legal arrangements (Tomaševski 2001). Rights-based approaches to education offer an extensive framework in investigating universal access to education across diverse situations that may arise from distinct realities on the ground.

Considered as the largest refugee-hosting country, Turkey currently hosts nearly four million refugees and asylum-seekers, including Syrians. 98 per cent of all Syrians live in 81 cities across the country. (UNHCR 2019). Syrians, registered under temporary protection status, constitute the largest group with a population of nearly 3.6 million people. Syrians are followed by Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians in much smaller numbers (DGMM 2020). In line with the international human rights framework, the Syrian refugees are granted access to education at public schools in Turkey. On the other hand, the integration of Syrian children into the national education system is challenged by distinct limitations on the ground.

Before moving any further, a distinction between structural and relational integration must be made. The structural elements of integration primarily revolve around refugees' inclusion in global and national policies, and their access to institutions and services while relational integration incorporates individual or group level factors (Dryden-Peterson 2020). Framed this way, it appears that the current refugee policies in Turkey largely neglect the relational aspects of the refugee integration into the national education system. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to understand how policies are translated into practice in school

settings, Çelik and İçduygu (2019) suggest that the monocultural environment and monolingual organizational practices of Turkish public schools create an exclusionary institutional habitus that undermines the efforts to ensure the realization of the right to education for Syrian children in Turkey.

Against this backdrop, it is worth admitting that the structural integration of Syrians into the Turkish national education system is a breakthrough and it has enormous potential for the realization of the rights of Syrians. However, considering the current state of the Turkish education system and dominant practices within, it is also important to contemplate the obstacles in the realization of these potentials. Therefore, any analysis of the impact of Covid-19 crisis on refugee education should build upon the educational context before the outbreak. Situating the educational responses to the crisis within this frame, it becomes possible to realistically assess the impact of Covid-19 crisis on the education of Syrians.

In an attempt to examine the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on refugee education in Turkey, this study focuses on the secondary impacts by benefiting from but not limited to the international human rights framework. It will utilize the framework developed by ACAPS (2020a) to assess secondary humanitarian impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on humanitarian sectors). ACAPS is a non-profit organization providing essential humanitarian analyses to help crisis responders. The policy brief will use first

three pillars of ACAPS' road-map: pre-outbreak context, the crisis, and impact to lay out its main line of argument, which is that the Covid-19 crisis may not only undo the progress that has been made so far — namely, increasing schooling rate of Syrian children (MoNE 2020a), but extend beyond that through subsequent effects of prolonged school closures.

### Analytical Framework: Evidence-based model utilized during the Covid-19 and Ebola outbreaks

This section will benefit from an evidence-based approach to analyze the secondary impacts of large-scale disease outbreaks on humanitarian sectors developed by ACAPS. With a diverse set of donors, ACAPS team is a self-proclaimed independent information provider offering humanitarian actors evidence-based needs analyses and assessments.

The justification for the utilization of the selected framework approach in the present study comes from ACAPS' (2016b) demonstrated ability to produce cross-sector analyses of a previous large-scale disease outbreak namely Ebola in humanitarian contexts. Between 2014 and 2015, ACAPS implemented two research projects to analyze the impact of Ebola outbreak on the needs of the affected populations across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Employing qualitative methods, the Ebola Needs Analysis Project in 2014 captured a comprehensive picture of humanitarian needs across priority sectors such as health and education. The Ebola

project in 2015 furthered these efforts and offered a structured insight into secondary problems across humanitarian sectors such as health, protection, education and food security and livelihoods.

Currently, ACAPS (2020b) gathers worldwide data on government measures and secondary impacts of Covid-19 on humanitarian sectors. The Covid-19 project is a product of ACAPS's collaboration with Save the Children, MapAction, Mercy Corps and H2H Network. The analytical framework and preliminary results of the Covid-19 data collection have been made publicly available (on <https://www.acaps.org/projects/covid-19>). The publicly available framework provides researchers and crisis responders with a set of valuable tools to analyze the impact of the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The framework (ACAPS, 2020a) offers a four-pillared road-map that is applicable at global, regional, country or crisis level. These pillars include the crisis — encompassing essential information regarding policy and behavioural responses to the crisis; pre-outbreak context — covering factors highlighting the backdrop within which the crisis occurs; impact — addressing impacts on humanitarian sectors. The end purpose here is to uncover the effects of the pandemic on the last pillar, humanitarian outcomes across different sectors. The fourth pillar is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Case of Turkey: Access of Syrian children to education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section elaborates the case of refugee education in Turkey with a focus on Syrian children by utilizing the first three pillars of the aforementioned road-map: pre-outbreak context, the crisis, and impact.

### *Pre-outbreak Context*

Since 2014, Turkey has pursued a temporary protection regime for Syrians, enacted through the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and the Directive of Temporary Protection issued in 2014 (DGMM, 2014). As an emergency response to the mass flow of displaced persons from Syria, the regulation ensured basic access to free health-care, education and social assistance. However, it is far from offering a sustainable, extensive rights-based framework for the reception of the displaced Syrians in the country mainly due to its temporary nature and services-based solutions to refugee situations (Yıldız and Uzgören 2016).

The national education system in Turkey operates as a largely unified and highly centralized state apparatus that reproduces a homogenizing national identity across an ethnically and religiously diverse population (Gök 2007). The integration of refugees in the national education system has not appeared as a prominent issue before the crisis in Syrian in 2011 (Çelik and İçduygu 2019). On the other hand, the arrival of Syrians into Turkey exerted significant pressure on the national education system (Crul et al, 2019).

Dealing with such pressure and managing successful integration of Syrians in the Turkish education system at all levels is of utmost importance as it holds the high potential for the realization of rights of an entire generation of Syrians (Yıldız, 2019).

Characterized as “a standard global policy approach”, the inclusion of refugees in national education systems reflects the nature of protracted refugee situations in which temporary and structurally exclusionary solutions to education are no longer viable (Dryden-Peterson, 2020). In line with that, the Turkish government's policies towards the education of Syrian refugees evolved from separate schooling through temporary education centres to providing access to public schools at all levels. Temporary education centres – of which the curriculum was determined by the Syrian Interim Government, catered Syrian children only and employed Syrian teachers exclusively (Çelik and İçduygu 2019).

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The efforts to mainstream refugee education at policy-level are challenged by a combination of factors on the ground. Despite the positive national legislation towards the inclusion of refugees in the national system, the delivery of inclusionary quality education is left to the discretion of the teacher and school principals who often

lack the capacity to meaningfully include refugee students (Aydın and Kaya 2019). In this regard, there seems to be a need to further the distinction made between structural and relational integration of refugees presented earlier in the paper. In the broadest terms, structural integration refers to global and national policies providing a group's access to institutions and services whereas relational integration refers to sociocultural processes and individual-level factors such as belonging and connectedness to the host country or group-level factors such as social cohesion of communities (Dryden-Peterson 2020).

While it should be noted that the structural inclusion of refugees in the Turkish national system is a huge step forward, it would be fair to say that the current policy appears to ignore the relational elements of integration due to its failure to accommodate sociocultural aspects of the inclusion process. Findings of focus group discussions conducted within the comprehensive Syrians Barometer 2019 suggest that discrimination is a growing problem area for Syrian refugees across different contexts including schools. Touching briefly on the subject, the barometer quotes a Syrian woman based in Istanbul stating that "Since I work at a Turkish school, I am seeing Syrian children suffering from discrimination. I think, MoNE needs to define strict rules to prevent this" (Erdoğan 2020, 144).

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### **Refugee Education in Crisis**

The first positive case of Covid-19 was confirmed on March 11 in Turkey (Anadolu Agency, 2020a). With an increasing number of positive cases, Turkey activated a National Response Plan and introduced a wide range of public health measures (Demirbilek, Pehlivanürk, Özgüler and Meşe 2020) which included a shift from traditional in-class learning to TV-based remote learning on March 16 (Anadolu Agency, 2020b). It is accompanied with the measures of curfew during the weekends and national holidays and all-time curfew for those aged under 20 and above 65 years for specific hours (Anadolu Agency 2020c). School closures left 19 million children – 680.000 of which are refugees, out of school in Turkey (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2020). Access to education may be further restricted due to reduced access to livelihood opportunities especially in poor and hard-hit refugee communities by the current crisis (ILO and UNICEF, 2020).

To ensure the continuity of education throughout the country, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) re-introduced its already existing digital education platform Education Informatics Network (EBA) to the country-wide audience with the backing of the national public broadcaster the Turkish Radio and Television. EBA TV is a whole new television channel introduced due to the Covid-19 measures. It broadcasts lecture videos following the curriculum of the MoNE on three different channels; primary school, middle school and high school. Turkey's attempt to gradually relaunch face-to-face education at the beginning of the new school year (Anadolu Agency 2020d) came to a halt on November 18 (MoNE 2020b). This new development once again proved the crucial role of the distance/remote education to ensure the realization of the right to education for millions of students including Syrian children in Turkey yet distinct limitations for access to distance learning opportunities remain.

### Secondary Impacts

A lack of appropriate quality education, reduction in utilization and availability of, and access to education services may lead to slow progress or reduction in learning outcomes of affected populations through secondary impacts on education sector such as loss of quality learning, loss of self-esteem, school dropouts, children being at higher risks of abuse as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - The secondary educational impacts of large-scale disease outbreaks

Causes of Problem	Problem	Secondary Impacts	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> School closures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diversion of resources and teachers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of at-home educational materials</li> </ul>	Reduction in availability of education services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊗ School drop outs</li> <li>⊗ Children at higher risk of abuse</li> <li>⊗ Loss of confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>⊗ Loss of quality teaching and learning</li> </ul>	SLOWER PROGRESS OR REDUCTION IN LEARNING OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Restriction of movements</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reduced financial resources</li> </ul>	Reduction in access to education services		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of reliable information on progress of disease and school reopenings</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fear of school return and emotional stress caused by outbreak</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> New financial hardships leading to difficulties with paying school fees, or children taking up employment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stigmatisation of those affected (including pregnant girls and new mothers)</li> </ul>	Reduction in utilisation of schools		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of maintenance of schools</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of teacher training during crisis</li> </ul>	Lack of quality appropriate education		

Source: Hallgarten 2020, 3.

The ACAPS' Covid-19 Project (2020c) proposes a set of key quantitative indicators to measure secondary impacts which include the numbers of affected school students by the current crisis and general school enrolment rates and also a set of key qualitative indicators such as access to education facilities, implementation of distance/remote learning programs.

In light of the information provided above sits the numbers. According to the latest data of the MoNE (2020a), the number of Syrians at school-age (5-17 years) for the years of 2019-20 is roughly equal to 1.08 million – %29.40 of the entire Syrian population. With a schooling rate of roughly 63%, 684.919 school-aged Syrian refugees were provided access to education. When disaggregated by gender, among those who had access to education,

49.18% were girls and %50.82 were boys. When disaggregated by levels of education, the schooling rate of Syrian children is as seen: 33.9% for pre-school, 95.5% for primary school, 57.6% for secondary school and 26.77% for high school. Compared with educational data obtained from Syria for the year of 2011 – 12% for preschool, 92% for primary school, %69 for secondary school, %26 for high school, the 5-year-long efforts to ensure the realization of the right to education for Syrian children in Turkey appears to be moving forward in the right direction (Erdoğan 2020). However, it is also worth noting that a great deal of school-aged refugees amounting to 397.253, roughly 37% of all school-aged Syrians, did not have access to education.

In responding to the current crisis, non-governmental organizations in Turkey acted quickly to identify problems associated with different humanitarian sectors and offered comprehensive situation analyses regarding refugee situations during the early phase of the crisis. With regards to access to education facilities and implementation of distance/remote learning program, deriving data from a representative sample of refugee students with continuing participation on the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) program in May, the Turkish Red Crescent (2020) reported that only 51% of students were able to follow the entirety of courses suitable for their levels. 13% of refugee students and families were not aware of distant learning opportunities at all.

The Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants' (SGDD/ASAM 2020) sectoral analysis of the impact of Covid-19 disease outbreak revealed that only 70% of school-aged refugees within their reach were registered in schools. Among those, only 52% were able to take advantage of distance/remote learning opportunities. The Refugee Support Center's situation analysis also showed that 53% of its beneficiaries who participated in the survey had at least one school-aged person in their households. 83% of these participants stated that they had information about distance education programs. Despite that, only 69% of the participants in this group could access to distance education services in their households.

Similarly, all three reports revealed that major reasons for low course follow-up rates through distance/remote learning includes language barriers, a lack of resources and technical inadequacies. These issues largely reside in deep inequalities that Syrians encounter in Turkey and are very unlikely to be resolved in the short or medium-term unless there is strong political will to make significant changes at the policy level. It is likely that the absence of as such may cause a setback in the success achieved so far in the realization of Syrian refugee children's right to education through aforementioned secondary impacts.



## Policy Suggestions

First and foremost, considered within the framework of human rights, the single biggest obstacle to the self-realization of Syrians of all ages in education or other fields is perhaps indisputably, their temporary status in the country. The temporary protection status should be brought to an end as the current legislation outlived its usefulness. The need for a permanent and rights-based approach to redefine the situation of Syrians in the country has become even more critical with the new situation and conditions created by the Covid-19 crisis.

Taken as a right that facilitates the enjoyment of other rights, the right to education is of paramount importance for the realization of all rights of Syrians of all ages, especially children. At the policy level, it appears that the integration of Syrian children into the Turkish education system is largely addressed as a structural issue. However, considering the challenges such as homogenizing and exclusionary practices of the Turkish education system, the absence of multicultural school environment stands out as one of the obstacles to be overcome. Accordingly, the educational response regarding the integration of Syrian children should include relational aspects of integration encompassing individual and group-level factors such as belonging, connectedness, and social cohesion, all of which appear to be neglected previously. Correspondingly, increasing the capacity of teachers and school staff in order to effectively integrate refugee children in schools distinguishes itself as a concrete policy goal that resonates widely with relevant

stakeholders. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be fair to say that the issues concerning the realization of the right to education for Syrian children were largely addressed in the relevant literature. Building upon that, the refugee education response to the pandemic should acknowledge material conditions that create the deep inequalities that Syrians experience today. Therefore, the response should include a comprehensive plan for economic assistance to support financially vulnerable families ensuring the timely and reliable delivery of learning resources. For financial support to be meaningful, there must be a complementary community engagement plan that acknowledges the social and psychological effects of the pandemic on Syrian children and their families (Charles David Tauber, email conversation with the author, December 3, 2020).

Drawing upon lessons learned from the ACAPS' (2016) Ebola outbreak analysis, the community engagement plan could essentially focus on identifying barriers that may prevent families from sending children to school and making corresponding adjustments in the response. While taking the dramatically shifting priorities of families and children under pandemic conditions into account, the plan should embody advocacy activities that reassure the value of education.

To conclude, the scope of refugee education response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Turkey cannot be limited to lost learning experienced during school closures. Rather, it should be as comprehensive as to deal with the issues of past; the pre-outbreak context and of future; secondary impacts such as loss of self-esteem, school dropouts, children being at higher risks of abuse as well as increased effects of those on girls and young women due to gender-based discrimination.

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