



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by the Servas International, a non-governmental organization on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 May 2017]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.17-09977(E)



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## Refugees and the right to education

Ever since its beginning, the refugee crisis has shattered the world in its very foundation and is challenging the ideas and the values on which the United Nations (UN) is built. Those values are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the core international human rights treaties.

The escalating refugee crisis is related to conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen, that the UN has been unable to end, despite genuine efforts. According to a 2016 report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict and persecution exceeded 60 million in 2015, for the first time in the United Nations history. According to the report this constituted an increase of more than 5 million from 59.5 million a year earlier. Among those displaced were 21.3 million refugees, 3.2 million asylum seekers, and 40.8 million people internally displaced within their own countries.<sup>1</sup> Their number has continued to rise until this day.

Many of those displaced are now seeking shelter in Europe. The number of arrivals via the Mediterranean Sea rose from 216.000 in 2014 to 1.015 million in 2015 and 362.753 in 2016. Until May 2017, a total of 53.165 migrants have reached European shores, thereof 45.048 in Italy, 5.765 in Greece and 2.352 in Spain. In 2017 alone, as many as 1,344 people have been reported either dead or missing.<sup>2</sup> According to a statement by the UNHCR on 7 May 2017, since the beginning of 2017, one person out of 35 has died on the sea journey from Libya to Italy.<sup>3</sup>

In a new report from February 2017<sup>4</sup>, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, detailed the impact of the increased border restrictions introduced in 2016 on refugee and migrant movements towards and inside Europe. It shows that people continued to move but undertook more diversified and dangerous journeys, often relying on smugglers because of the lack of accessible legal ways to Europe.

A high percentage of the refugees are children. In 2015, they made up 51 per cent of the world's refugees and many of them were either unaccompanied or separated. The situation is particularly severe for those fleeing the Syrian conflict. In January 2017 over 5 million Syrians were registered by UNHCR<sup>5</sup> About three-quarters of them are women and children and a full third of them under 12 years old.<sup>6</sup> Of those arriving to Europe children comprised 16 per cent in 2017.<sup>7</sup>

The hidden crisis behind armed conflict and displacement therefore is education, depriving children of their future. Refugees are five times more likely to be out of school than the global average. Only 50 per cent of refugee children have access to primary education, compared with a global average of more than 90 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Education however is enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Depriving children of their right to education is in contravention of the Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Armed conflict is diverting public funds from education into military spending. Twenty-one developing countries are currently spending more on arms than on primary schools; if they were to cut military spending by 10%, they could put an additional 9.5 million children in school. Military spending is also diverting aid resources and accounts for just 2% of humanitarian aid. No sector has a smaller share of humanitarian appeals funded: just 38% of aid requests for education are met, which is around half the average for all sectors.<sup>9</sup> Data from a United Nations survey further paint a disturbing picture of the state of education in refugee camps. Enrolment rates averaged 69% for primary school and just 30% for secondary school. Pupil/teacher ratios were very high – nearly one-third of camps reported ratios of 50:1 or more – and many teachers were untrained.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54269#.WRd0cOafdws>

<sup>2</sup> <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

<sup>3</sup> <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/news/16081>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/58b449f54>

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2017/feb/02/keith-ellison/rep-keith-ellison-correct-demographic-overview-syr/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54269#.WRd0cOafdws>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/education.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2011-UNESDOC.pdf>

Responses to refugees must be grounded in our shared values of responsibility sharing, non-discrimination, and human rights and in international refugee law, including the principle of *non-refoulement*<sup>10</sup>. It further requires international solidarity and active involvement by all. Countries must allow refugees access to public education and basic services. Restrictions on refugee employment should be lifted, as they reinforce poverty, which in turn dampens prospects for education, yet no country can shoulder this challenge alone.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the UN GA in September 2016 reads: “Large movements of refugees and migrants have political, economic, social, developmental, humanitarian and human rights ramifications, which cross all borders. These are global phenomena that call for global approaches and global solutions. No one State can manage such movements on its own. Neighboring or transit countries, mostly developing countries, are disproportionately affected. Their capacities have been severely stretched in many cases, affecting their own social and economic cohesion and development.”

The European country that during the height of the crisis received the highest number of new asylum applications was Germany, where over a million refugees arrived since the start of the crisis. According to German law, all children residing in the country should have access to education, regardless of their legal status. But following the dramatic influx of asylum seekers, municipalities are struggling to find school spaces and teachers for the school-age refugee children that they have absorbed. Another barrier refugee children face is that many live in improvised facilities like gyms or convention halls, where conditions are not ideal for students to do homework or maintain a normal life.<sup>11</sup> These challenges are significantly higher for less developed countries such as Lebanon, where approximately half of the nearly 500,000 school-aged Syrian children registered in Lebanon are out of school and of the 82,744 registered Syrian refugees aged 15-18, less than 3 percent enrolled in public secondary schools during the 2015-2016 school year.<sup>12</sup>

The high refugee influx has also led to a raise of acts and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance against refugees and migrants, particularly in Europe. In Germany right-wing groups have blamed the policy for terror attacks carried out by migrants, including the massacre at a Christmas market in Berlin, which forced a review of national security.<sup>13</sup> Demonizing refugees or migrants however goes profoundly against the values of dignity and equality for every human being.

The answer to the refugee crisis can only be international solidarity and active engagement towards education, integration and peacebuilding. At the example of Syrian refugees and in order to overcome the challenges, the World Economic Forum offers 6 solutions:

- Increase funds for national education systems in host countries, to provide the schools and teachers necessary for all refugee children to have a quality education
- Expand vocational training, as the best option for many kids who are too old to return to school.
- Develop a specific curriculum for refugees, which would minimize the disruption caused by changing countries.
- Allow refugee teachers to teach. Among the refugee population are many teachers, who – due to their refugee status – are legally barred from employment. This leads to a surreal situation in which schools are short of teachers, while qualified teachers, familiar with the local curriculum, are prohibited from teaching.
- Facilitate travel for studies. Many governments could do more to facilitate travel procedures for the most outstandingly academically-talented refugees to access the highest-quality education, helping them become future leaders in post-conflict rebuilding.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm17864.doc.htm>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/08/16/germany-seeks-to-integrate-refugees-through-education>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/growing-without-education/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-lebanon>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-germany-asylum-seekers-numbers-drop-600000-in-2016-angela-merkel-syria-middle-east-a7521191.html>

Education is an underlying element in conflicts, which are often associated with grievances and perceived injustices linked to identity, faith, ethnicity and religion. Education can make a difference in all these areas, tipping the balance in favor of peace – or conflict.<sup>14</sup>

As the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants holds, diversity enriches every society and contributes to social cohesion. Demonizing refugees or migrants offends profoundly against the values of dignity and equality for every human being.

A human rights approach to migration must be found that places the migrant at the center of migration policies. Migrants must be included in relevant national action plans, including the provision of public housing and national strategies to combat racism and xenophobia.

Instead of further contributing to the controversy, Servas International will continue to respond to the crisis by pursuing its peace mission of facilitating the coming together of hosts and travelers of any race, creed, sexual orientation, class/caste or nationality. It will stand strongly against racism, work on integrational approaches and support humanitarian help.

The United Nations should make education and combatting racism a priority while dealing with the refugee crisis. It should further address the source of the crisis by better investing in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Bearing in mind that peace and security are mutually reinforcing, there is also an imperative to foster sustainable development and peace and development. National action plans to this end are urgently needed.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2011-UNESDOC.pdf>