



European Policy  
DIALOGUE FORUM

# Ensuring Migrant and Refugee Children's Access to Formal Education in Europe

## Executive Summary

Accessing compulsory formal education is essential for the education of migrant and refugee children and thereby their employability and socio-economic success. It is also important for their emotional well-being, identity construction and integration into their new community. Despite education being a fundamental right, many European countries still struggle to ensure that all migrant and refugee children have access to proper schooling. Often their immigration status rather than their educational needs determines the schooling they receive.

These children face a wide range of barriers to accessing formal education. A lack of adequate funding remains a common problem, which means many schools do not have enough staff with relevant skills and experience to teach and support the children effectively. Information in the first language of migrants and refugees about the education system in general, and about local schools, is often not available. Schools also regularly require documentation that families cannot provide as it is lost or was never provided in their nations of origin. Schooling provided in reception centres is often substandard and it often takes too long before a suitable permanent school place can be found.

Considering the barriers, many different actors need to be involved to ensure that all migrant and refugee children have access to a school that suits their needs and offers them the best opportunity to fulfil their

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**The Network for Dialogue**

Empowering Interreligious and Intercultural  
Action for the Social Inclusion of Refugees  
and Migrants.



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potential. Among the most important of those involved in this process are policy-makers who can help ensure that states support access to formal education in the best possible way. Due to their resources, connections, knowledge and experience, religious organizations, congregations and leaders are also in important positions to help ensure that migrant and refugee children can go to a suitable school.

This brief will also argue that intercultural and interreligious dialogue can aid these changes because it can help stakeholders explore and understand each other's needs, interests and obstacles.

## Key Recommendations:

### **National policymakers should:**

- Ensure that all migrant and refugee children have a legal right to access compulsory formal education regardless of their personal circumstances, including being undocumented.
- Develop and implement policies that ensure migrant children are treated equitably and that they have timely access to a school place that fits their needs.
- Develop and implement policies aimed at making intercultural and interreligious education an integral part of basic staff training and continuing professional development.

### **Local policymakers should:**

- Develop and implement policies that oblige local schools to assess the needs of individual migrant and refugee children and allocate resources and support accordingly, including transport and language classes.
- Establish and implement policies and procedures that ensure that all local schools provide information in relevant languages about their school and its enrolment procedures.
- Aim to make intercultural education an integrated part of basic staff training and continuing professional development and encourage local schools to ensure diversity among their staff.

### **Religious organizations, congregations and leaders should:**

- Advocate on behalf of migrant and refugee children and highlight when schools, local, regional and national authorities and policymakers do not fulfil their obligation to provide equal access.
- Provide guidance to families concerning the local school system and the application process.
- Help families with issues such as transportation, homework and language learning.

### **All policymakers and religious organizations, congregations and leaders should:**

- Use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to facilitate conversations and mutual understanding between stakeholders.

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## Introduction

### Migrant and refugee children's access to compulsory formal education in Europe

Education is the greatest weakness in integration policies in most European countries, a situation that has been heightened by a large number of arrivals of refugee and migrant children in recent years. Worryingly, a lack of shared understanding of key definitions and a systematic approach to collecting relevant data make it impossible to determine the number of migrant and refugee children that do not have access to education across Europe, potentially concealing the scale of the problem<sup>1</sup>. Although all children have a fundamental right to education, few countries have successfully addressed the problem, often resulting in the type, duration and quality of the schooling offered to migrant and refugee children depending on their immigration status rather than their educational needs<sup>2</sup>.

*“On both the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes many children have left their countries of origin due to violence, deprivation and conflict, and most did not initially aim to travel to Europe. However, among those who eventually did undertake the journey to Europe, education was a key factor shaping their decision (to leave). Education is also a key element for refugee and migrant children's social inclusion into host communities”<sup>3</sup>.*

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Highlight from a recent UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM study on Access to Education for Refugee and Migrant Children.

1 UNHCR; UNICEF and IOM (2019): Access to Education for Refugee and Migrant Children. <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/09/Access-to-education-europe-19.pdf>

2 Ibid.

3 P. 1 in UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM (2019): Access to Education for Refugee and Migrant Children. <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/09/Access-to-education-europe-19.pdf>

### **Current challenges that migrant and refugee children face when trying to access compulsory formal education in Europe**

The challenges to securing access to compulsory formal education are context specific but it is still possible to identify some common barriers:

1. Many schools do not have adequate funding and many schools do not have trained and experienced staff able to welcome, teach and support migrant and refugee children. A common problem is a lack of qualified psycho-social professionals who can support children who have suffered trauma and upheaval<sup>4</sup>.
2. Education and migrant support systems often fail to provide sufficient language training or help in sustaining first languages. Both present problems for children trying to access formal education.
3. Many migrants and refugees find it difficult to understand and navigate the education system, especially concerning registration and documentation as well as securing transportation. This can be particularly difficult for unaccompanied children.
4. Children in reception centres or those without protected status often lack a legal right to education. In other cases, legislation does not ensure continuation of education for migrant and refugee children leading to unnecessarily long gaps before a suitable permanent school place is secured.

#### EXAMPLE OF CHALLENGES:

##### **Refugee and asylum-seeking children struggling to access compulsory formal education in Greece**

In Greece, 33 organizations supporting asylum-seeking and refugee families published an open letter<sup>5</sup> to the prime minister and members of the European Commission and Parliament stating that, “We call upon the Greek government to take immediate action to guarantee equal, substantive, and quality education to children of all ages and nationalities residing both on the islands and on the mainland”. The organizations raised grave concerns about the increase in “de-schooling”, a term used to describe no or very limited access to education for many refugee and asylum-seeking children. A lack of access to compulsory formal education is particularly a widespread phenomenon among children living in camps on the Greek Aegean Islands.

The limited or lack of access to education is due to a lack of transportation from camps to schools, understaffing and malfunctioning of reception classes, a lack of spots available at schools and kindergartens as well as resistance by school administrations and local communities against enrolling refugee and migrant children. Worryingly, the organizations also accused local and national authorities of not caring about the situation.

4 See: The Network for Dialogue (2021): Supporting teachers in the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in inclusive education for refugees and migrants. <https://network4dialogue.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/N4D-PolicyBriefs-01-Education-Final.pdf>

5 Still I Rise (2021): All children have the right to go to school. Do not take that away from them! <https://www.stillirisengo.org/en/news/open-letter-ngo-greece/>

“We go to school but the school is not a public school that will help us for our future. It’s just a group of people trying to help us. The teachers are trying their best but the boys here, they have psychological problems. They are thinking every night, they can’t sleep. They are thinking about what will happen to them. They can’t understand the lessons”. Interview with unaccompanied refugee boy staying in Moria Reception and Identification Centre on the Island of Lesbos<sup>6</sup>.

### **The importance of ensuring access to compulsory formal education for migrant and refugee children**

All children, regardless of their background or status, have a fundamental right to education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The 4th UN Sustainable Development Goal also calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for every child by 2030. Though migrant and refugee children might initially underperform academically, their performance can improve considerably if they receive the right educational opportunities<sup>7</sup>. In addition, access to compulsory formal education has a range of immediate benefits for migrant and refugee children including helping them address their emotional needs; providing a space that can help them construct their identities; and aiding their integration into host communities. In the longer term, access to compulsory formal education also benefits refugees, migrants and host societies because it is key to their employability, socio-economic success, social inclusion and reduction of inequality between them and other members of their host community. From an international perspective, educating refugee and migrant children is also important because these children might one day choose to return to their country of origin where they can then use their knowledge and skills to help improve the local situation.

**EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE:****Swedish policies and practices**

Sweden is the country that is best at providing education for migrant and refugee children in Europe, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020.

**Swedish policies and practices include:**

- Guaranteeing migrant and refugee children equal access to compulsory formal education regardless of their status.
- Aiming to allocate a place for migrant and refugee children in an appropriate school within one month of their arrival.
- Assessing the knowledge and skills in literacy and maths of all migrant and refugee children within two months of their arrival to the school, to determine which class (preparatory or mainstream) the child should be placed in.
- Obliging headteachers to assess needs, allocate resources and provide support to all new children regardless of their background or status.
- Obliging schools to assign a support person for children who are transitioning to mainstream schools.
- Validating the importance of bilingualism by providing language classes and multilingual classroom assistance that focus on helping migrant and refugee children develop their first, as well as their new second, language.

**EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICE:****Shalom Alaikum in Austria and Beth Hillel in Italy**

Since 2015, the Jewish organization Shalom Alaikum<sup>8</sup> has helped refugee families settle and integrate in Austria<sup>9</sup>. They help refugee families understand the education system and support them if they encounter any issues in applications. Once the children are in the system, volunteers support them by providing language classes for the whole family, tuition in subjects where the children might be struggling and either negotiate a reduction of, or pay for, school expenses such as class trips. In cases where the children encounter issues in a specific school (such as bullying), the organization also helps them find an alternative school.

In Rome, the Beth Hillel<sup>10</sup> congregation supports the work of the local organization Casa Africa<sup>11</sup>. According to Benjamin from Beth Hillel, members of the congregation help the Italian School of Casa Africa by pairing members of the congregation with refugees to help them learn Italian.

Both projects are financially supported by HIAS Europe<sup>12</sup>.

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8 <https://www.facebook.com/ShalomAlaikumVienna>

9 Interview with Sonja, one of the founders and managers of the organization July 2021.

10 <https://www.bethhillelroma.com/>

11 <http://www.casafrica.it/>

12 <https://www.hias.org/where/europe>

## Recommendations

Education systems vary significantly across Europe and it is also important to emphasise that migrant and refugee children’s access to compulsory formal education is linked to whether a country is seen as an “arrival”, “transit” or “final destination” for migrants and refugees. Hence it is not possible to develop any models or approaches that will ensure that all migrant and refugee children have access to education regardless of where they have settled. However, it is still possible and important to make some recommendations for policymakers, religious organizations and religious congregations and leaders.

### How policymakers at the national level can help ensure children’s access to compulsory formal education in Europe:



**Legal provision, inclusivity and monitoring:** national policymakers should ensure that all refugee children have a legal right to access compulsory formal education regardless of their personal circumstances, including being undocumented. They should also promote, develop and implement policies that ensure these children are treated equitably, provided with consistent and quick access to compulsory formal education in accordance with their needs, and regardless of their status, and ensure that all schools have enough resources to fulfil their obligations. In addition, they should use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to explore stakeholders’ needs, interests, ideas and obstacles. National policymakers should also ensure that data on children’s school attendance is collected systematically and consistently and used to inform policymaking processes.



**Improve enrolment procedures and ensure transportation:** national policymakers should develop and implement policies that compel schools to have accessible enrolment procedures that include information in migrants’ and refugees’ first languages about what the school can offer, what spaces are available, how to apply and relevant deadlines. They should also develop and implement policies that require local authorities to ensure that migrant and refugee children have access to transportation to their allocated school. In addition, they should use intercultural and interreligious dialogues to facilitate conversations and mutual understanding between stakeholders.



**Language provisions:** national policymakers should fund and require schools to provide classes where migrant and refugee children can learn the local language, and preferably, also attend classes to continue developing their first language.



**Human resources:** national policymakers should develop and implement policies obligating schools to employ staff that are trained and experienced in welcoming and teaching migrant and refugee children. The aim should be to make intercultural education an integral part of basic staff training and continuing professional development, enabling teachers to use inclusive practices and diversity to enrich their teaching. National policymakers should also encourage schools to employ staff with a migrant or refugee background and make sure that staff trained abroad are fast-tracked into the national education system. Furthermore, they should use intercultural and interreligious dialogues to facilitate conversations and mutual understanding between stakeholders.



**Monitoring and assessment:** policymakers should ensure that their processes for monitoring and evaluating schools include all stakeholders, including migrants and refugees.

### How policymakers at the local level can help ensure migrant and refugee children's access to compulsory formal education in Europe:



**Considering needs:** local policymakers should develop and implement policies that oblige local schools to assess the needs of individual children and allocate resources and support tailored to their individual needs to ensure that appropriate education is provided swiftly and continuously.



**Improve enrolment procedures and ensure transportation:** local policymakers should develop and implement policies and procedures that ensure that all local schools provide information in relevant languages about the school's learning and teaching provision, available spaces and enrolment procedures including deadlines and how to apply. Local policymakers should also require local authorities to ensure that migrant and refugee children have access to transportation to their allocated school. Furthermore, they should use intercultural and interreligious dialogues to facilitate conversations and mutual understanding between stakeholders.



**Language provisions:** local policymakers should help fund, develop and implement policies obliging local schools to provide language classes to migrant and refugee children and preferably also classes in the children's first language



**Human resources:** local policymakers should develop and implement policies requiring local schools to employ staff that are experienced and trained in supporting and interacting with migrant and refugee children. Local policymakers should aim to make intercultural education an integrated part of basic staff training and continuing professional development, aiding teachers in using diversity and inclusive practices to improve their teaching. Local policymakers should encourage local schools to ensure diversity among their staff including, when required, hiring more staff with a migrant/refugee background. Furthermore, they should use intercultural and interreligious dialogues to facilitate conversations and mutual understanding between stakeholders.

### How religious organizations, religious congregations and leaders can help ensure migrant and refugee children's access to compulsory formal education in Europe:



**Advocacy, activism and allyship:** religious organizations, religious congregations and leaders should advocate on behalf of migrant and refugee children. They should initiate awareness campaigns, when schools, local, regional and national authorities and policymakers do not fulfil their obligation to provide equal access for children. They should also promote and support migrants' and refugees' activism in this area and act as an ally.



**Guidance and support:** religious organizations, religious congregations and leaders should provide guidance and support to families including helping them to understand the local school system and the application process and how they can apply for transportation. They should use intercultural and interreligious dialogue to foster conversations and mutual understanding.



**Temporary and long-term help:** religious organizations, religious congregations and leaders should provide temporary help with issues such as transportation until official transportation is provided and long-term help with issues such as homework and local language acquisition for children and parents.

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## Also available from the Network for Dialogue:

- **Policy Brief #1:** Supporting Teachers in the Use of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Inclusive Education for Refugees and Migrants
- **Policy Brief #2:** Building Trust Through Dialogue in Local Communities: A Key Ingredient for Social Cohesion
- **Policy Brief #3:** Reshaping Narratives on Migration Through Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue
- **Policy Brief #4:** Helping Migrants and Refugees Volunteer
- **Policy Brief #5:** Engaging Migrant and Refugee-led Organizations in Policymaking in Europe
- **Overview Document #1:** Overview Document on Policy Brief #4, #5 and #6



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