

On the precipice of progress

National policy openings that increase forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in secondary education

December 2024



Acknowledgements

The Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG) is an inter-agency working group made up of partners representing international NGOs, youth-led coalitions, states, and donors. The group was established in 2020 with a vision to support all crisis-affected young people in having equitable access to quality, inclusive, and relevant secondary education that they can complete in safety.

This publication was coordinated by Emilia Sorrentino, Lucy Strickland, and Rachel Lumley of Plan International and Nina Papadopoulos and Wataru Okada of UNHCR. Christopher Henderson and Whitney Hough of Teachers College, Columbia University are the authors, whose research and work on this publication would not have been possible without the guidance and support of Pamela Escobar, Catalina Garcia Gomez, Juan Camilo Rivera Lopez, Manuel Hernandez Martinez, and Camila Gomez (Fundación Plan Colombia), Robert Sengarama (Plan International Rwanda) and Nicole Teta Nokam (UNHCR Iraq), Simon Waba, Laban Onisimus, and Hanoch Hebron (UNHCR Nigeria), and Cirenía Chavez Villegas (UNHCR), Girma Yadeta (UNHCR) and Ruth Naylor (UNHCR).

Published by:
Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG)
c/o United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees, UN City,
Marmorvej 51, 2100
Copenhagen, Denmark

Plan International
Dukes Court, Block A,
Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey, GU21 5BH,
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December 2024

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Front cover photo
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All internal photography
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Design and layout
www.forty6design.com

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Suggested citation:
Henderson, C., and Hough, W. (2025). On the precipice of progress: Policy openings that increase forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in secondary education. UNHCR, SEWG and Plan International.

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Executive summary

National-level policies are vital to the realization of forcibly displaced adolescent and youth engagement in secondary education. As multiple global-level frameworks and commitments are non-binding, **national-level laws and the policies formulated within them help provide the political, social, and material conditions that adolescents and youth need for their right to secondary education to be achieved.**

National policies can improve demand for secondary education by strengthening a system's capacity to receive and support forcibly displaced adolescents and youth, thereby making the outcomes of secondary education more meaningful and lasting (UNESCO and UNHCR, 2023). This may extend to enforcing class-size limits, building additional classrooms, or recruiting extra teachers.

By increasing self-reliance, for which secondary education plays a key role (Henderson et al., 2023), progressive refugee and migrant inclusion policies can reduce the long-term costs of refugee hosting and incentivize adolescents and youth to complete their schooling (UNESCO and UNHCR, 2023). However, **refugee and migrant regularization and inclusion within national education systems requires strong normative frameworks:** this means that broad consensus on principles, legal instruments, standards, and accountability processes is needed so that policies can be implemented through relevant legislative mechanisms.

In light of these realities, this publication draws upon four case studies from the host-country contexts of Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Rwanda. It contributes towards an emerging evidence base and **informs an action agenda to increase forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in national secondary education systems.**

Interventions that increase secondary education enrollment and retention

Unobstructed pathways into higher education and/or the formal economy motivate forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in secondary-level education. **When their experiences at secondary school allow them to imagine higher education and employment possibilities, they are likely to be more engaged.**

In Colombia, for example, Venezuelan youth connected their secondary school experiences, such as in art or advanced mathematics classes, to aspirations for higher education and careers like graphic design or engineering, which motivates them to stay at school.

Policies that **relax enrollment documentation requirements** (such as primary school diplomas from countries of origin) while providing access to accelerated education or grade-level equivalency bridging programs are also cited as increasing access to secondary education in each of the contexts studied.

Easing the burden of secondary education by **eliminating the hidden costs of schooling** also influences increased enrollment and retention rates among forcibly displaced youth and adolescents. This might include uniform subsidies, nutrition programs, and free or reduced cost textbooks. Key informants in Nigeria emphasized the positive influence of free school meals, uniforms, and fee waivers on student retention.





In Iraq, efforts that allow displaced populations to contribute to and benefit from the host-community's school support services, such as **subsidized school transport**, also eased adolescent and youth barriers to secondary schooling.

In all contexts, an array of **social cohesion programs**¹ also enable initial enrollment and ongoing attendance at secondary school; especially where instances of xenophobia and discrimination towards refugee or migrant populations are mitigated or prevented.

For example, in Iraq key informants reflected how 'adolescent clubs' foster a sense of belonging and peer support through literacy, psychosocial care, and recreational activities that bring refugee and host-communities together and are attributed to higher retention rates. Similarly, in Rwanda extracurricular sports activities facilitate improved community-level relationships among refugee students from different countries of origin and between host community students.

Policy 'openings' that improve inclusion in national education systems

TABLE 1: PROGRESSIVE POLICY CONTEXTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT

	<p>Colombia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy: Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos (ETPV) ● Population identity: Venezuelan ● Focus displacement type: Migrants and others in need of international protection
	<p>Iraq</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy: The Refugee Education Inclusion Policy (REIP) ● Population identity: Syrian, Iranian, Turkish ● Focus displacement type: Refugees
	<p>Nigeria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy: National Policy on Safety, Security, and Violence-Free Schools (SSVFS) ● Population identity: Nigerian, Cameroonian ● Focus displacement type: Internally displaced persons and refugees
	<p>Rwanda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy: Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) ● Population identity: Burundian, Congolese ● Focus displacement type: Refugees

Colombia has transitioned from treating Venezuelan migration as a short-term humanitarian crisis to adopting a long-term development approach, recognizing **investments in education system inclusion as an opportunity to reduce social tensions and promote economic growth**. This was made possible via policies such as the Permiso Especial de Permanencia (PEP) and the Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos (ETPV) which regularized the status of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia and provided access to education, health, and employment services.

¹ In refugee-hosting settings, social cohesion refers to "a sense of shared purpose, trust, and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state" (World Bank, 2022, p12).

In Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government is transitioning Syrian children, adolescents, and youth from parallel Arabic schools for refugees into the Kurdish education system.

The Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP) aims to reduce the cost and disruption of parallel refugee education systems while improving social cohesion between refugee and host communities.

A standout feature of the REIP is **the inclusion of Syrian refugee teachers**. Recognizing the key role of refugee teachers in refugee student retention, over 1,100 refugee teachers have received training in the Kurdish language and curriculum. Once reliant on irregular incentive payments, these teachers now earn salaries comparable to Kurdish national teachers, which has boosted their community status and increased their motivation to champion the Kurdish Regional Government's efforts for Syrian refugee inclusion within the Kurdish system².

The Nigerian government is reducing the out-of-school rate through the **National Policy on Safety, Security, and Violence-Free Schools (SSVS)**, which benefits internally displaced Nigerian adolescents and youth and refugee students from Cameroon. New school safety measures,

including an emphasis on school disaster management and protections against violence, abductions, and attacks, enabled the establishment of the National Safe Schools Fund. This has been used to train security personnel and invest in psychosocial support services for displaced students and survivors of attacks, thereby targeting the risk factors responsible for high attrition rates among violence-affected adolescents and youth.

Rwanda's adoption of the **Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)** means that forcibly displaced adolescents and youth also benefit from government investments in school feeding and psychosocial support, alongside numerous schooling cost-reduction incentives. This has contributed to an enrollment rate of 64 percent among refugees, which is higher than the national enrollment rate of 44 percent at the secondary level.

Across all contexts, **financial support was identified by key informants as a core factor influencing higher enrollment and retention rates**, alongside wraparound support services such as mentoring and curriculum orientation activities focused on academic development and success.



² As of 2024, only primary-aged children (grades 1 to 6) have been formally included in the national system. Adolescents at the lower secondary education level will be included in September 2025, per the REIP's planned gradual inclusion approach.

To capitalize on policy openings like these, significant system-level coordination is needed. **Agencies like UNHCR are well-placed to strengthen host government capabilities and weave innovative partnership and financing solutions between international bi-lateral donors, multilateral and philanthropic institutions and governments together** (Naylor, 2023). The World Bank, Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and UNICEF, each with much larger education portfolios than UNHCR, are then better placed to prepare and support whole-of-system capacity for ongoing forcibly displaced adolescent and youth inclusion.

Data and evidence generation should identify where the barriers to refugee inclusion in national systems exist, where capacity for inclusion needs to be bolstered, and **how cost-sharing and whole-of-system approaches can benefit host-community populations and progress the inclusion agenda**. For example, to increase capacity for the inclusion of refugee adolescents and youth in Rwanda the World Bank funded the construction of classrooms and computer labs and the government funded the recruitment of additional teachers (UNHCR, 2024).

Policy implementation realities in Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Rwanda

Venezuelan youth in Bogotá, Colombia, who participated in focus group discussions for this study viewed their access to **secondary education as a transformative opportunity for employment, personal development, and social belonging**.

Colombia's progressive inclusion policies have facilitated increasingly accessible school enrollment processes over time, particularly in urban areas like Bogotá where federal and department-level coordination is strong. Often, however, in areas outside of Bogotá where a large number of migrant adolescents and youth have successfully enrolled in secondary schools, due to inadequate system-level resourcing and guidance **school leaders and teachers have shouldered the burden of policy implementation** (INEE, 2022).

In Iraq, ongoing secondary education enrollment and retention challenges demand increased investments in wraparound services (such as language training, adolescent clubs, and safe transport options) as families struggle to support adolescent education, citing **financial, logistical, linguistic, and socio-cultural barriers as key reasons keeping adolescents and youth out of school**. Families are also concerned about the recognition of Kurdish education credentials if they decide to return to Syria.

While multiple funding and infrastructure challenges persist, according to key informants Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian Kurdish families have come to recognize similar system-level frustrations, which allowed them to join forces and advocate together for better educational investments and support.

A key policy implementation challenge in Nigeria relates to the federal governance system. **The inconsistent funding and implementation of federal-level education policies at state and local levels fragments secondary education enrollment and retention** for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth, which then creates a variable patchwork of barriers and opportunities for secondary education inclusion.

In addition to bureaucratic hurdles, state and local governments are rarely able to fully finance or implement federal inclusion policies. To the extent that 50 percent of local education budgets are federally covered, **the absence of remaining funds means that internally displaced adolescents and youth often go without accelerated education and enrollment support services** or adequately qualified teachers who enhance the likelihood of retention.

Rwanda's 12-Year Basic Education (12YbE) strategic plan provides free education through upper secondary school, creating pathways for youth to access higher education, vocational training, and better job prospects. **For displaced youth, this focus on expanded universal basic education reduces barriers to secondary education system inclusion, and conceptually, enables longer-term economic integration and self-reliance**. Here too, however, key informants speak of the funding and infrastructure challenges that progressive inclusion policies give rise to and represent.

In this regard, alongside inadequate financing, **policy coherence, communication, and coordination challenges are identified as key barriers inhibiting progress** for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in each of the contexts highlighted.

Building on the findings from this study, **an action agenda in Chapter four of this report charts the actions required to scale and sustain** forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in secondary education globally.

Introduction

This publication presents examples of policy ‘openings’ in four settings where different forcibly displaced population types are included in national education systems in different ways. For a balanced evaluation of progress in Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Rwanda, policy objectives are held in tension with the occasionally disparate outcomes of policy implementation. Via these examples, with a focus on adolescent and youth enrollment and retention key insights are brought together to inform a practical action agenda for strengthening enrollment and retention in secondary education globally.

Two overarching questions and seven sub-questions frame the development of this publication, including the methods, evidence sourced, and conversations with key actors that provide context-level perspectives on policy implementation realities. Though these questions have been addressed to some extent in education in emergencies more broadly, this publication seeks to specify the questions in direct relation to secondary education and forcibly displaced populations.

Q1 How can education in emergencies and national-level education sector actors **scale and sustain promising policies and practices** for forcibly displaced adolescent and youth populations globally? With the following sub-questions:

- At global and local levels, what is the case for supporting secondary education in crisis contexts?
- What are the critical factors for scaling successful interventions at international, national, and local levels?
- What are the barriers and enablers for forcibly displaced adolescent and youth engagement in secondary education?

Q2 What ‘policy openings’ work to enrol and retain forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in secondary education? Examples are drawn from four country contexts: Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda. The sub-questions include:

- What policies and practices exist?
- To what extent are they effective in enabling and sustaining access to secondary education?
- How does implementation of the policy support adolescents’ and youth’s continued engagement in secondary education?
- What data, policies, and coordination mechanisms specific to secondary education are needed?

TABLE 2: DEFINITIONS OF THE FOCUS POPULATIONS

Focus contexts and populations	
Contexts	Populations
Education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC) represents a broad swathe of contexts experiencing political and economic fragility, conflict, environmental hazards, or hosting populations who have been forcibly displaced from such settings.	Forcibly displaced populations refer to persons who reside in a location other than their community of origin. They may be internally displaced persons (IDP) within a country’s borders, or asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants in countries outside of their country of origin.

Each of the four contexts selected for this study have national-level migrant, refugee, and/or education sector policies that have allowed UNHCR and other key actors to advocate for the inclusion of forcibly displaced adolescent and youth in the national education system (see table 1).

The scope of this publication includes adolescents and youth who are currently enrolled in formal lower and upper secondary education programs and national system-oriented multiple and flexible pathway initiatives, such as accelerated education programs that support re-entry into the formal education system.

In Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria and Rwanda, adolescents and youth living in refugee and internal displacement camps and those residing in non-formal urban settlements (Colombia) are included in the scope of this study. Young people who are presently out-of-school, who have returned to their community of origin, or who come from host communities are out of scope, as are adolescents and youth involved in temporary, ad-hoc, or non-formal curricula. While this population is not included, the present study provides a foundation for future research and advocacy in this area.

This study was conducted between October and December 2024. Due to the brief window of time available, UNHCR and Plan International supported the determination of methods and the selection of contexts that fit the following criteria:

- Refugees and other forcibly displaced population identities are included in the national education system.
- At least three continents or regions are represented.
- Each context hosts a different forcibly displaced population identity.
- Personnel are available to support document and key informant identification and the coordination of data collection activities.

Method

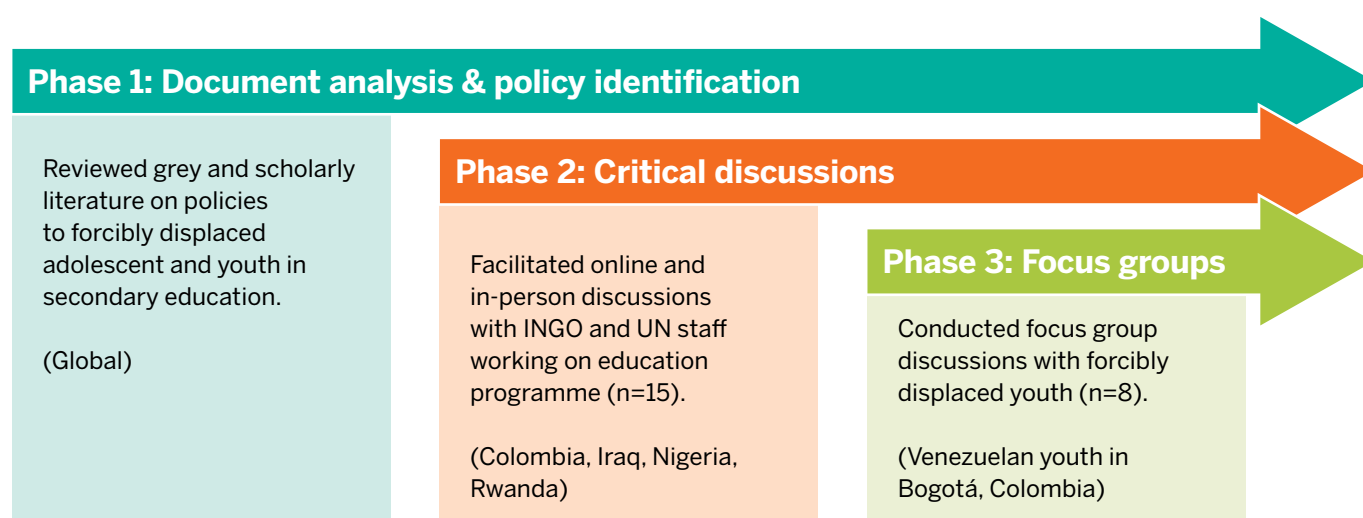
Three distinct and iterative phases of qualitative work were involved in putting this publication together.

Phase 1: Policy identification and document analysis, including grey and scholarly literature on forcibly displaced adolescent and youth inclusion in national secondary education systems; globally, and in Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Rwanda specifically. Internal and externally available documents identified and provided by UNHCR and Plan International country offices were included alongside grey and scholarly literature published from 2018 onwards and accessed through Google Scholar and Columbia University Libraries database searches. This phase informed the design of phase 2 key informant interview protocols.

Phase 2: With support from Plan International and UNHCR, online and in person interviews were facilitated with INGO and United Nations representatives working on education policy and programming in Colombia (n=3), Iraq (n=6), Nigeria (n=3) and Rwanda (n=3). Outcomes from this phase informed the development of the phase 3 focus group discussion plan.

Phase 3: With facilitation support from Fundación Plan in Bogotá, Colombia, two focus group discussions were facilitated with forcibly displaced Venezuelan youth (n=8, four females, four males, aged 17-18) in Bogotá, centered on the enablers and barriers of secondary education enrollment and retention. Participants were selected via a non-random purposive sampling approach at a youth 'safe space' facility.¹

Ethics: This study was completed in line with standard ethical procedures. All key informants were informed that participation was optional and that they could withdraw from the conversation at any time. To protect privacy, all names and identifiable details of the key informants, including their organization name, are omitted from this report. Conversations were not recorded, but verbal consent was obtained from key informants to take written notes. For the youth focus group discussions in Colombia, planning documents, data collection and data privacy processes, and vulnerable population safeguarding assessments were approved by Plan International's Ethics Review Team. Participants and caregivers in Colombia were provided with and signed participant consent and assent forms.



¹ Budget, timeframe, and security constraints limited the number of contexts and in-country activities possible for this study.

Global background

In 2024, the gross secondary enrolment rate for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth was approximately 42 percent, while 77 percent of all adolescents and youth globally are able to attend secondary education (UNHCR, 2024). This study explores how this gap can be closed by improving access to secondary education in conflict- and displacement-affected contexts more generally.

The neglect of secondary education in emergencies has become a familiar refrain. While the numbers of forcibly displaced adolescents and youth unable to access secondary education fuel urgent dialogue, **these numbers do little to improve funding and progress policies towards inclusion and better educational outcomes** (Sommers and Nasrallah, 2024).

With limited but sobering evidence at hand, donors, policymakers, and practitioners can often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of educational needs that forcibly displaced adolescents and youth present (ibid).

Secondary education for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in global instruments

Over the past decades two key policy developments are reflected in global education instruments: **the right to a quality education has been expanded to include secondary education and more recently,, there has been a concerted push for refugee inclusion in national education systems.** This publication's action agenda for the improved enrollment and retention of forcibly displaced adolescents and youth is situated at the confluence of these two developments.

Since 2015, policy advocacy has departed from costly parallel education systems – in which forcibly displaced adolescents and youth are isolated from host-communities, local education providers, and employment trajectories – and moved towards national education system inclusion (UNESCO and UNHCR, 2024). Underpinned by **principles of cost sharing and the creation of durable solutions,** numerous frameworks and instruments reflect this priority.



United Nations SDG 4 does not explicitly refer to refugee or forcibly displaced adolescents and youth, but its overarching commitment to 'leaving no one behind' ensures such populations are included in efforts to achieve educational equity. For example, target 4.5 is focused on **equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations, and target 4.5.1 refers to 'conflict-affected populations'**. Additionally, target 4.b seeks to expand scholarships for developing countries, particularly to support access to secondary and tertiary education for individuals from conflict-affected or fragile states.

In 2016, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants articulated commitments by state and international community actors to **guarantee access to secondary education for refugees soon after their arrival in a host-community** (UN General Assembly, 2016; UNESCO and UNHCR, 2024). At the subsequent 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees, 47 member states pledged to strengthen policies that enhance refugee access to education and employment, among other social service incentives (ibid).

In 2018, the United Nations Global Compact for Refugees outlined the need to make education systems more inclusive and to improve the quality of education for refugees (GCR, 2018). This priority is reflected in UNHCR's Education Strategy 2030, in which **secondary education is framed as a bridge to higher education, vocational training, and employment**. Noting the intractability of some inclusion barriers at the systems level, UNHCR advocates for the removal of legal restrictions and resourcing constraints to address a lack of secondary-level infrastructure. This includes transition bottlenecks between primary and secondary education, as well as interventions to curb discrimination towards refugees and build social cohesion (UNHCR, 2019; 2022).

More recently, the 2022 United Nations Transforming Education Summit (TES) launched a Commitment to Action on Education in Crisis Situations. Member states and partners committed to **improving learning outcomes for crisis-affected children and youth, including refugees**. And in 2023, at the second Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) pledged to improve the inclusion of secondary education in the Multi-year Resilience Programme (MYRP), thereby mobilizing funding for refugee youth to support primary to secondary school transitions. The UNHCR-hosted Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG) also submitted a multi-stakeholder pledge to **commit improved financial, technical, and material resources for refugee inclusion in national secondary education** (Global Compact on Refugees, 2023; UNHCR, 2023).

Why secondary education in emergencies is important

Secondary education is a critical intervention in forcibly displaced adolescent and youth lives (Henderson et al., 2023). It provides **social and cognitive development support and helps mitigate multiple and compounding risks**, such as recruitment into armed forces, forced marriage, and early pregnancy, that threaten the educational continuity of boys and girls (Aguilar, 2019; Anselme and Hands, 2012; Crone and Dahl, 2012; Garbern et al., 2020; King et al., 2019).

Secondary education also has a multiplier effect for those fortunate enough to attend: It enhances a **sense of belonging, propensity for civic engagement, resilience and ability to adapt to climate crises, and the ability to contribute towards community development and peacebuilding** (Henderson et al., 2023). For young women in particular, every additional year of secondary education reduces their risk of forced marriage and early pregnancy (Wodon et al., 2018). In principle, secondary education helps forcibly displaced adolescents and youth to "not only inherit a future, but create it" (Anselme and Hands, 2012. p.90; Dryden-Peterson, 2017, p.13).

Although the benefits of secondary education are compelling, **a general lack of impetus from policy makers and resource challenges compromise already fragile futures**.

Education is power, and power is knowledge. I can say the thing that kept me in school was me wanting to learn and me wanting to change myself and change the world"
Motasim, Jordan (SEWG, 2023)

The status of secondary education in the education in emergencies sector

In line with global goals for universal access to education, modest but noteworthy progress has been made for primary education (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Moreover, **primary education has historically been the EiE sector's central concern** (Sommers and Nasrallah, 2024).

The EiE sector's core interest in child protection measures, the comparative curricula simplicity and cost-efficiency of primary schooling, the availability of teachers, and a desire to align with host-nation policy priorities favoring primary education means **formal secondary education is often relegated for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth** (Henderson et al., 2023). In addition, with large numbers of 'overage' out-of-school youth and tentative trajectories between secondary education, vocational training, and employment in fragile economies, **the cost-benefits of secondary education are perceived by donors and other**

actors to be more precarious (ibid). Secondary education is also caught in the middle of a 'zero sum game' with early childhood funding (Sommers and Nasrallah, 2024). As an abundance of evidence and advocacy encourages the value of early childhood learning in emergencies, attention towards secondary education tends to suffer.

Scaling and sustaining promising policies and practices

Exact and up-to-date figures on the funding allocated to secondary-level refugee education are hard to come by. The estimated cost to provide secondary education for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth is US\$3.65 billion per year, compared to US\$1.2 billion for pre-primary and primary-level children, representing 75 percent of total education costs (World Bank, 2021).

In low-income settings, the per-student cost of secondary education is US\$244, compared with US\$114 for primary. On average, however, secondary education receives just 19 percent of education in emergencies funding (King et al., 2019; Save the Children 2019; World Bank, 2021).

To scale and sustain promising practices, innovative approaches to financing are needed. Internationally and regionally, **emerging promise comes from multi-stakeholder models**, including public-private partnerships and government responsibility sharing, mixed donor funding that spans the humanitarian-development nexus, education bonds, results-based financing, and pooled funds, all of which need to be further explored, adapted, and replicated (Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies, 2024; Naylor, 2023).

At the local-level, community-driven school financing also offers promise, and **targeted financial incentives, such as cash transfers, school fee subsidies, and school feeding programs have increased retention and completion rates**, particularly among girls and out-of-school adolescents and youth (de Hoop et al., 2019). In some cases, an "invest to divest" approach is required (Naylor, 2023). This involves frontloading investment in technical assistance and the transition costs of teacher training, materials development, medium of instruction and curriculum support, and folding teachers of refugees into government systems and payrolls (ibid).

This report presents examples of 'policy openings' that have allowed UNHCR and partners to progress the inclusion of forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in national education systems. From the enablers, barriers, and policy examples discussed below, a three step scaling process is recommended:

1. Use global evidence and locally available data to **identify 'policy openings' and interventions** appropriate to the context; design, implement, and refine pilot activities and assess for feasibility.
2. **Adapt the pilot intervention** based on feasibility findings and implement the approach in one setting; monitoring and evaluating for program strengths and weaknesses.
3. **Scale the approach to more than one setting**, using impact evaluations to compare adaptations between contexts and determine the changes needed to sustain what works (de Hoop et al., 2019).



Chapter 1

What are the enablers and barriers for forcibly displaced adolescent and youth enrollment and retention in secondary education?

Three key takeaways

- 1 National system inclusion supports pathways from secondary education into higher education and/or the formal economy for vulnerable populations, thereby motivating secondary school enrollment/retention.
 - *This is evident via the ETPV policy in Colombia and the REIP policy in Iraq.*
- 2 Easing the risk or burden of attendance by increasing security provisions at and around schools and eliminating the hidden costs of secondary schooling, such as uniforms and textbooks, to make enrollment/retention more attainable for displaced youth and adolescents.
 - *As seen with Nigeria's SSVFS policy and via the CRRF policy-oriented programs in Rwanda.*
- 3 Promoting social cohesion and belonging through secondary school clubs and activities motivates attendance and reduces discrimination toward refugee or migrant populations.
 - *UNHCR has facilitated these activities in Colombia (ETPV) and Iraq (REIP)*



TABLE 3: DEFINITIONS OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

Adolescents	Youth
Adolescents are individuals aged 10–19 years, a developmental stage marked by rapid physical, emotional, and social changes. This period involves transitioning from childhood to adulthood, developing personal identity, and gaining independence. (INEE, 2024; UNICEF, 2020)	Youth refers to individuals aged 15–24 years, representing a critical period for personal, educational, and economic development. Youth encompasses the transition to adulthood, including developing skills, engaging in civic participation, and entering the workforce (INEE, 2024)

Enrollment and retention enablers

In no order of importance or prevalence, the following enrollment and retention enablers were cited by key informants in all four contexts.

Aspirations for higher education and employment

Across all contexts the instrumental value of secondary education in opening doors to further opportunity and financial security was cited as a powerful motivator for enrollment. However, this perspective was more commonly cited in contexts with urban populations and **clearcut opportunities to participate in the formal economy**. In Colombia, for example, a focus group participant connects the art classes they access at school with their aspiration for a career in graphic design.

This factor is also most apparent where schools or NGOs support **youth civic participation and engagement**, as highlighted by a key informant in Iraq. They report that when youth have a voice and can **champion their future identities and pathways** into hopeful employment, this creates motivation and momentum.

Community-level support

Initiatives that foster belonging and community in connection with secondary education also enable enrollment and retention across the four contexts profiled. A standout example cited by key informants in Iraq was **community adolescent clubs**. Although their key function is bringing out-of-school youth back to school, they remain popular with adolescents who attend school, too (Mahmoud, 2021; Mandalawi and Henderson, 2023). Adolescent clubs facilitate peer-to-peer support, which



includes foundational literacy and numeracy skills and psychosocial support, as well as safe spaces for reading and general activities (ibid; Browne, 2013). **Key informants promote the sense of belonging that these clubs nurture and note the higher assessment outcomes and retention rates that they achieve.**

Similarly, key informants in Rwanda working with refugee adolescents and youth in Rwanda's camp settings draw links between recreational spaces in schools and retention. They note that the biggest motivations for enrollment and retention are extracurricular activities and sports. These activities foster belonging and social cohesion between students of different backgrounds.

Key informants in Colombia and Iraq also identify the positive influence of **social cohesion activities**. Facilitated by national and international NGOs to promote intercommunal understanding, the inclusion of voices and remediation of concerns, and the dissemination of policy-level information in accessible and actionable ways, social cohesion activities **reduce instances of xenophobia and discrimination towards refugee or migrant populations** and create more welcoming school environments. They also give parents, caregivers, adolescents and youth more confidence in and commitment to respective inclusion agendas.

Among Venezuelan youth participants in Colombia, **family is cited as a key factor motivating their enrollment and retention at school**. While some find school difficult

due to Colombia's more rigorous curriculum, participants acknowledge the role of families in their perseverance. As one participant states, "My family always helps me to find a solution so I can keep trying hard ... My motivation to stay in high school will always be my mom." Similarly, others identify **the influence of fellow migrants at school as a source of motivation**: "Feeling a sense of solidarity with others like me, that motivated me to study for a better future."

School-level policies and supports incentivize access

The topic of 'incentives' emerged in different ways, but all key informants agreed that **in challenging contexts – with multiple possible factors pushing vulnerable adolescents and youth away from school – enrollment and retention is dependent on the availability of basic school-level supports**. In Nigeria, for example, key informants reference the positive influence that free school meals, government fee waivers, and the provision of uniforms and learning materials have on enrollment and retention.

Similarly, in Rwanda key informants note how **school feeding programs have been a "game changer"** for student retention, as have boarding-schools financed by international NGOs where basic life and learning needs are met (Niyibizi et al., 2024; Theogene and Kamuhanda, 2021). Outside of school, in Iraq **school transport** was provided to ensure Syrian refugee students could access distant Arabic

language schools, which **eased the burden of attendance**. As Syrian refugees are now being integrated into closer Kurdish language schools, the government is supporting families with alternative transport arrangements.

Adolescents and youth attending schools with strong levels of local or international support to help eliminate the hidden barriers to schooling also fare better in terms of enrollment and retention outcomes. Two key informants in Iraq noted **the advocacy and facilitation role their organizations play** if refugee enrollments are rejected by principals. Moreover, as one key informant shares, refugee inclusive schools that their organization supports enjoy a 98 percent retention rate.

The distance students live to a secondary school is also thought to affect the likelihood of their enrollment, according to key informants and youth participants. In Nigeria, with regards to internally displaced persons camps, key informants note how **the conflict and resulting camp infrastructure has allowed many adolescents and youth to reside close to secondary school for the first time**. This has been essential in addressing safety concerns by allowing for secure transport to and from school (GCPEA, 2014). Similarly, in Iraq, Syrians living in camps have better access to secondary schools than urban dwelling refugees. However, in Colombia, Venezuelan migrants in urban areas enjoy easier access to secondary school compared to migrants in rural areas, where secondary schools are sparse.

Because all contexts studied have national system inclusion as a core policy, **numerous policies not specific to forcibly displaced adolescent and youth but pertinent to their realities as vulnerable populations have an important influence on their enrolment and retention**. In Nigeria, for instance, key informants mention national-level policies that allow females to return to school after pregnancy, divorce, or becoming widows, as one example (UNICEF, 2022).

Key informants in each context also emphasized the enabling influence that policies related to identity documentation and prior education credentials have on enrollment and retention. In contexts of forced displacement, where populations have lost or been denied access to personal records, **relaxed documentation requirements can accelerate adolescent and youth access to secondary school**. In cases where documentation requirements are strict, key informants noted the vital role played by NGOs in helping refugees or migrants access the right documents and complete the enrollment process.

Due to this project's emphasis on national system inclusion, key informants rarely referred to accelerated education or multiple pathways into secondary education; they did note, however, the role that flexible pathways play in student

retention. In Rwanda, for example, key informants spoke to the fact that a good proportion of **refugee students in secondary education are encouraged to enroll in technical or vocational secondary schools, with a view towards skill building and job market preparedness**.

While multiple context-specific policies have a bearing on adolescent and youth access to secondary education, some policies resonated across each of the contexts studied. In addition to policies around documentation as noted above, key informants reiterate the importance of **policies that prioritize mother-tongue language learning, provide access to host-community language classes, and then progress to full immersion in the host-community language** through national school inclusion. This approach is evident between Arabic and Kurdish language schools in Iraq.

Enrollment and retention barriers

In no order of importance or prevalence, the following enrollment and retention barriers were cited by key informants in all four contexts.

Documentation

Although a number of documentation challenges have been resolved in the contexts studied, key informants and youth participants still reflect on documentation as a key barrier to secondary school enrollment and retention. Documentation might relate to **students' key identity documents such as visas or UNHCR Proof of Registration cards, evidence of educational attainment, or grade equivalency assessments between countries of origin and host-countries**.

As youth participants in Colombia agreed, it is not easy to enter secondary school when there are many complexities in the way. They also reflect on the difficulties they faced when the right documents could not be procured. As a key informant shared, **they might have to sit placement exams, score at a lower grade level, and re-enter school to repeat grades with younger students**, which further disincentivizes their willingness to enroll and stay at school.

To the extent that youth can enroll in secondary school and take national exams, key informants in Colombia and Iraq note how past difficulties obtaining graduation certificates without national identification undermined retention efforts. Because of the long and opaque process involved, key informants in Iraq recalled youth saying **they would rather go out to find work if they cannot access national certificates** once they graduate.

"Once migrant youth access education, they are only at the starting line. Ahead of them they see so many barriers already in their road."
Venezuelan youth, Bogotá, Colombia



Financial risk and hidden costs

Key informants in Colombia state that a family's socioeconomic status is the main driver of youth retention. As in Rwanda and Iraq, school is nominally free but the associated and often hidden costs of books and uniforms are out of reach. As a youth participant in Colombia shared, **“The lack of money is like a trigger, it makes me want to leave school and work instead.”**

Adolescents and youth, especially once they turn 15, are seen as providers in the contexts studied. As a key informant in Iraq shares, **many families do not consider it to be child labor because the student is already 15 – the age of being legally able to contribute financially.** In the midst of conflict and/or displacement, when opportunities for secondary graduates to enter the workforce and contribute to the economy are fraught, **family pressure for shelter and immediate sustenance can fall on secondary-age youth, with gendered implications (Hunersen, et al., 2024; Krafft et al., 2024).** In Nigeria, for example, a family might continue to send boys to school but withdraw girls, or prevent them from enrolling altogether.

A key informant in Nigeria also noted how many youth work (i.e. to learn *and* earn) on farmland to provide for their families. Further entrenching this barrier, **key informants in Colombia, Iraq, and Nigeria agreed that a strong sense of pride and purpose is associated with financially supporting one's family.** In such cases, as a key informant in Colombia's comments reflected, the incentives for schooling are questionable compared to the opportunities for youth to earn income for their families.

Too often, however, **adolescents and youth get involved in dangerous or informal labour, which is gendered in its risks and consequences, such as girls' propensity to be trafficked into sex work or boys' recruitment into dangerous manual labor or armed forces.** In such cases, as a key informant in Colombia reflected, it is difficult to then trace them, support them, and bring them back into the system.

“The ambition in my head tells me to leave school to start making money young”
Venezuelan youth, Bogotá, Colombia

Socio-cultural factors

Xenophobia is the prejudice a person or community has against people from other countries or cultures, which often manifests as hostility or discrimination towards them. Key informants in Colombia and Iraq, where camp-based settings are less common, cited xenophobia as a key retention barrier.

As a Venezuelan youth participant in Colombia reflected, **the ‘harms and conflicts’ they experienced at school made it difficult to continue attending.** Another participant in the same focus group said they are ‘treated with disdain’ and yet another reflected that **they ‘can never do anything right’ and that bullying makes them want to leave school.**

When reflecting on the nearly 7 percent of Venezuelan youth who drop out of secondary school each year (GIFMM

and R4V, 2022), a key informant in Colombia believed that their stories echo the same pattern and most have refugee or migrant-related xenophobia at their core. These views are also mirrored in available data showing that 92 percent of Venezuelan students experience bullying at school (UNESCO, 2023); which is a much higher rate than the 32 percent of Colombian students who report the same in an earlier study (UNESCO, 2019).

Gender norms also determine a raft of retention issues, but from within the refugee community. A key informant in Iraq shares that 21 percent of females between the age of 15 and 19 are married, and that the child marriage rate is most pronounced in financially vulnerable refugee communities.

Although policies support the re-enrollment of young mothers, they need to attend ‘third-shift’ accelerated education programs in the evenings to do so. Due to cultural and safety concerns, many families do not let girls attend evening classes, sacrificing their ability to complete secondary education.

The allure of gangs also presents a cultural barrier, with **a pronounced effect on boys at school and those who have already dropped out; making it harder to identify them and work towards their reenrollment.** Key informants in Colombia noted how gang recruitment is more prevalent among out-of-school Venezuelan youth in urban areas, whereas in rural communities the threat of recruitment into armed forces is more pressing.

Infrastructure

Key informants in Nigeria raised infrastructural issues as a key barrier. This relates to the availability of secondary schools in communities, the capacity of classroom spaces, the extent to which these schools have a consistent supply of water and electricity, and whether they are climate or disaster risk resilient.

In some areas of Nigeria, school infrastructure has also been destroyed by attacks against schools and/or has been repurposed for military activities, decreasing its capacity for educational use (GCPEA, 2014). These factors all contribute to challenges in physically accommodating the full number of youth and adolescents looking to access secondary education.

As one key informant shared, **in some states there are over 100 primary schools, and only 20 secondary schools, meaning large numbers of primary graduates are unable to attend secondary school.** Key informants in Rwanda and Iraq noted overpopulated classrooms as a core retention barrier. In Colombia and Iraq, INGO key informants also reflect on their roles advocating with senior Ministry of Education officials for the inclusion of refugee and migrant students, especially when school leaders at the local level have denied students access due to school capacity issues.

Systemic challenges

In Nigeria, **inclusive policies for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth are compromised by the hidden costs of secondary education.** Key informants share, and the evidence confirms, that over 70 percent of Nigeria’s total education expenditure is borne by families (UNESCO, 2022).

As much as education is ‘free’, hidden costs, such as textbooks, uniforms, transportation to school, among many others, result from wholly inadequate public sector spending on secondary education, with downstream effects on the system’s capacity to support displaced adolescents and youth retention.

A key informant in Iraq believed that refugee adolescents and youth are caught at the confluence of political indecision and funding struggles. **They lament how long it has taken to agree on a refugee inclusion policy and the opportunities that refugee adolescents and youth have lost during this time.** In Colombia, key informants also noted how bureaucratic hurdles and current political unpredictability regarding government changes and shifting priorities impact migrants’ confidence in secondary education enrollment processes and outcomes.

Refugee adolescents and youth in Rwanda are motivated to progress beyond secondary education to advanced studies and employment. But key informants observed how their motivation is diminished when the system does not support the completion of their journey. As they noted, when older sisters or brothers work hard to succeed in secondary education but to little avail, younger siblings become discouraged and develop a ‘so what’ mindset.

A similar sentiment is shared by key informants in Iraq, who note how Syrian refugees do not qualify for public sector jobs and therefore rely on less secure private sector roles, where they also experience a greater degree of identity-based discrimination. **Realities like this contribute to higher attrition rates when the economic difference between dropping out early and graduating is negligible.**

A final enrollment and retention barrier raised by key informants and youth participants relates to **pedagogical, curriculum, and pastoral support issues** at the school level. Key informants in Colombia pointed to the misaligned curricula between Venezuela and Colombia as a cause of frustration, especially when older students end up in lower grades. At the same time, **some youth participants despair how difficult it is to pass exams and move up grades**, especially when they are isolated by a lack of academic mentoring and pastoral support.

Chapter 2

What ‘policy openings’ work to enrol and retain forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in secondary education?

Four contexts have been selected to assess how national-level policies can provide ‘openings’ for the progress of secondary education for forcibly displaced adolescents and youth. Each context’s policies have overlapping effects, but there are sufficient differences between them to offer practical insights and a blueprint for future strategy and advocacy for forcibly displaced adolescent and youth inclusion and secondary education in emergencies.



COLOMBIA

Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos (ETPV)

Three key takeaways

- 1 Colombia shifted from a short-term humanitarian to long-term development view of Venezuelan migrants and their inclusion in Colombia’s national system
- 2 The inclusion of migrants in the education system is viewed as an investment rather than a cost.
- 3 A new government and new policy priorities put the realization of progressive inclusion policies at risk.

Colombia hosts **2,857,528 migrants and refugees from Venezuela** (R4V, 2024). Of this population, recent figures show that 585,075 are children, adolescents, and youth who have now enrolled in Colombia’s national education system, including 149,711 at the secondary level (Lobos, 2023; Plan International, 2023). Venezuelan migrants now **represent 7 percent of Colombia’s total student population** (ibid).

In line with UNHCR’s Strategy 2030 for refugee inclusion in national education systems, this is a significant achievement. Yet challenges persist: due to limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, and a lack of flexible educational pathways back into the education system for those who have left, **only 22 percent of secondary-age Venezuelan migrants are enrolled in secondary school, with a nearly 7 percent drop out rate each year** (ECW, 2024; GIFMM and R4, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

Colombia’s perceived success and complex challenges emerge from progressive policy decisions over the past seven years. Early on, **Colombia shifted its treatment of Venezuelan migrants from a humanitarian emergency approach to an agenda focused on long-term**

development and economic growth (Rossiasco and Narvez, 2023). In other words, Colombia began to understand the influx of Venezuelan migrants as an opportunity rather than a crisis.

Associated with this view, access to **education was promoted as an investment rather than a cost**. Moreover, investing in education allowed the government to mitigate migrant vulnerabilities, exploitation, and dependency by promoting belonging, employment pathways, and self-reliance.

The government’s agenda sought to **transition away from short-term interventions** that sink significant funds into parallel education systems – which segregate forcibly displaced adolescent and youth and migrants and deliver minimal long-term benefits – towards a more sustainable and inclusive approach (ibid). As one key informant implied **in the long run, not including refugees or migrants into state systems is going to prove more costly in terms of the social tensions that arise**.

In 2017, the first indication of Colombia’s position on inclusion came through the *Permiso Especial de Permanencia* (PEP). Employing a rights-based framework, Colombia issued a temporary permit to regularize the status of Venezuelan migrants for two years and provide access to health, education, and employment services (World Bank, 2022; Lobos, 2023).

In 2018, Circular Number 16, jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and Migración Colombia, **removed visa or residency requirements that had previously kept many Venezuelan children, adolescents, and youth out of school** (MEN and Migración Colombia, 2020).

Barriers still existed, however, as enrolled Venezuelan students could not receive state issued education credentials without Colombian identification. In response, to further facilitate educational access and incentivize student retention, resolutions 624 and 675 allowed Venezuelan students to use their Secretary of Education Number and any form of official identification to take secondary-level state exams, ensuring they could **earn transferable academic qualifications within the Colombian system** (Montoya et al., 2020 cited in World Bank, 20202).



Accepting the emerging protractedness of the Venezuelan migration crisis, in 2021 the Colombian Government issued *Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos* (ETPV), or Temporary Protection Status for Venezuelan Migrants. This extended the initial two-year PEP framework to ten years, **granting Venezuelan migrants who arrived prior to 2021 full access to the same rights of Colombian citizens.** Under the ETPV, by 2023 1.63 million Venezuelans had been issued the *Permiso por Protección Temporal* (PPT) or Temporary Protection Permit (Lobos, 2023)

Key informants applauded how **Colombia's inclusiveness has driven significant change for Venezuelans in Colombia.** As indicated by the low enrollment rate of secondary-aged migrants, however, they also observe that **beyond access to education, the policies' implementation and function presents a different story.** For this reason, key informants recommended stronger cross-sectoral wrap-around services – such as peer mentoring, nutrition, and health services – to ensure adolescents and youth don't just enroll in school, but stay at school and graduate into further education or employment.

In 2022, the Government of Iván Duque Márquez, who enacted the PEP and ETPV, was voted out and replaced by Gustavo Petro Arrego. With this change, numerous key informants felt that **Venezuelan migrants have been deprioritized as Petro's government shifts its focus to Colombia's internal conflict and displacement.** Further to this, significant instability within the Ministry of Education, with three different ministers appointed in 2024 alone, has hampered the coordination of migrant enrollment and retention activities between international and Colombian organizations and the Government.



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IRAQ

The Refugee Education Inclusion Policy (REIP)

Three key takeaways

- 1 The Kurdistan Regional Government is transitioning Syrian children, adolescents, and youth from parallel Arabic schools for refugees into the national education system.
- 2 Due to language complexities, a staged approach began with grade 1-4 students and reached grade 6 in 2024. Lower and upper secondary grades will be included as students come of age from 2025 onwards.
- 3 Syrian refugee teachers have received training and are also transitioning into the national system, receiving salaries in line with host-community teachers.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) hosts approximately **253,000 Syrian refugees, constituting 98 percent of all Syrians in Iraq; 34 percent of whom are children, adolescents and youth**. About 38 percent of the population reside in camps, while 62 percent live in urban areas (UNICEF, 2024; Yassen, 2019). According to one key informant, **Federal Iraq's reluctance to receive refugees has left KRI as the sole provider of education for forcibly displaced Syrians**.

The KRI's Ministry of Education (MoE) has overseen a parallel education system for Syrian refugees, delivering the Kurdish curriculum in the Arabic language in camp and urban settings. Secondary schools in camps are primarily funded by international donors, with 95 percent of teachers being Syrians who receive incentive payments and occasional training (Yassen, 2019).



Despite significant investments, gaps remain in enrollment and retention. While **over 80 percent of primary-aged Syrian refugee children are enrolled, secondary enrollment drops to 20 percent**, (UNHCR, 2024). A contributing factor, key informants believed, is that infrastructure challenges persist, with **many classrooms in Arabic-medium schools requiring urgent renovations or replacement**. Prior to 2022, this raised concerns about the financial sustainability of Kurdistan's parallel system.

Syrian refugees in urban settings face additional educational challenges. Adolescents and youth **attend double or, in some cases, triple shift schools due to school population sizes and infrastructure constraints** (Yassen, 2019). Moreover, educational segregation and incidents of community-level xenophobia towards Syrian refugees heighten the need for social cohesion programming between refugee and host communities (UNHCR and UNDP, 2024). This reality likely informs evidence showing that, due to social cohesion push factors and financial pull factors, **a majority of Syrian refugees in Kurdistan favored third country resettlement as a durable solution over local integration** (Yassen, 2019).

In 2022, with support from UNHCR and UNICEF, the **Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP)** was introduced by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). To integrate Syrian refugee children into the Kurdish education system, REIP initially targeted grade 1 – 4 children, with a view towards grades 5 and 6 in 2024. At Geneva's Global Refugee Forum in 2023, however, **the KRG announced that Syrian adolescents and youth will be able to access Kurdish secondary education in a program of continued expansion from 2027 onwards** (UNHCR, 2022; GCR, 2023).

The phased approach of REIP ensures continuity for students currently in Arabic or Kurdish language schools. As the current primary-aged REIP cohort ages into secondary school, **the parallel Arabic-language system schools will be phased out** (UNICEF, 2023).

REIP seeks to address critical issues, including **the high cost and disruption of maintaining parallel systems, while promoting social cohesion** among refugee and host populations (UNHCR and UNDP, 2024). A standout feature of the policy is the inclusion of Syrian refugee teachers in the national system. Since its inception in 2022, **the KRG has recruited and integrated 700 Syrian refugee teachers** previously teaching the Kurdish curriculum in Arabic (UNHCR and UNDP, 2024).

Refugee teachers provide a vital cultural bridge for Syrian children, and are now receiving training in the Kurdish language and curriculum to ease their own transition into Kurdish national classrooms (Jafari and Berwary, 2023). Refugee teachers previously received incentive payments on an irregular basis but **now receive salaries similar to Kurdish national teachers**. A key informant believed that this has helped lift teachers' status in the community, their motivation to teach, and their support for Syrian refugee inclusion through REIP.

REIP was the result of extensive community consultations facilitated by UNHCR and implementing partners, but the policy was ultimately conceptualized and approved by the KRG. This decision was driven by both practical and ideological considerations: according to one key informant, **the policy aligns with the principle of solidarity, reflecting many Syrian refugees' shared Kurdish identity and experiences, and a sense of duty to protect and educate**. Additionally, the potential for sustained funding to strengthen the broader education sector in KRI incentivized the government's ownership of REIP.

A key informant involved in the process reflects that **the first task was advocacy, the second was the coordination to bring REIP to life, and the third task was information sharing and buy-in building** with refugee and host-communities. As they stated, "We needed to remember that inclusion is not free" and they had to establish "who was going to finance it, and what was the exact commitment of each stakeholder to making the policy happen?"

Reflecting on the rollout of REIP, one key informant laments how long it took for REIP to become a reality. They shared that **"having the parallel system was like 10 years of interruption**, and all these refugee teachers were paid to teach in these schools when they could have been strengthening the capacity of under-staffed national schools." But as another key informant reflects, [REIP] **offers a chance to heal... If we continue with integration, we will mitigate a lot of issues** in terms of access, and especially in terms of families and students' motivation to complete secondary education."



NIGERIA

National Policy on Safety, Security, and Violence-Free Schools (SSVFS)

Three key takeaways

- 1 The Nigerian Government has placed extensive focus on improving the out-of-school rate through policies related to school safety and security.
- 2 These policies bridge the gap between development and humanitarian approaches to education in emergencies through its efforts to reduce the effects of everyday risks, threats and disasters and to plan for education continuity after crises.
- 3 Both internally displaced and refugee adolescents and youth benefit from these policies, which support their inclusion in the national education system.

Nigeria is a country of origin, transit, and destination, with a forcibly displaced population of over 3 million, including approximately 2.8 million internally displaced people and over 165,000 asylum seekers and refugees (UNHCR, 2024). Most refugees in Nigeria originate from the Lake Chad Basin region. Climate shocks, conflict with non-state armed groups, communal violence, and other causes contribute to the large-scale forced displacement in Nigeria and the broader region (Ibid).

With 1 in every 5 of the world's out-of-school children living in Nigeria, youth face a multitude of challenges in accessing education (OCHA, 2021). The out-of-school rate among youth and adolescents of lower and upper secondary school age has increased since 2008, reaching 31 percent and 40 percent respectively by 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). World Bank data reports a 2021 secondary school enrollment rate in Nigeria of 47.24 percent, versus a 50.14 percent regional average (World Bank, 2024). Secondary enrollment rates for refugees in Nigeria are even lower, at 33 percent (UNHCR, 2022).

Poverty, low public spending on education, lack of public schools, and early marriage all contribute to secondary enrollment and retention challenges in Nigeria. **The increase in out-of-school youth is also directly connected to the impact of conflict and the role of Boko Haram, a terrorist group notorious for its kidnappings of students and attacks on schools** (OCHA, 2021). Nigeria's security forces have added to the problem by using schools as military bases, among other non-educational purposes, putting youth at further risk of attack (GCPEA, 2024).

Insecure and unsafe school environments are a major factor inhibiting youth and adolescent enrollment and retention in education in Nigeria, particularly when intersecting with the vulnerabilities associated with displacement. Insecurity affects schools in myriad ways, including: violent conflicts; natural disasters; drug addiction; gender-based violence; corporal punishment; bullying; recruitment of students into armed forces; gang violence; armed attacks on schools; abductions; among others (OCHA, 2021). In light of this context, multiple key informants pointed to the promise of protective mechanisms established by recently coordinated policies and systems around safety and security practices in schools. While these policies are directed toward education more broadly, as opposed to secondary education specifically, they represent policy openings that create systemic support for secondary education. Key informants believed that these policies will support the enrollment and retention of youth and adolescents in secondary education by holistically addressing safety, including physical, material, environmental and psychological safety.

The Nigerian National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools was established by the national government in 2019 to guide policy; to set a standard for implementing comprehensive school safety plans; and to provide prevention and response mechanisms at national, state, local, and school levels (OCHA, 2021).

In 2015, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, launched a Year of Action to End violence against children (Ibid). This commitment to end violence against children fell in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which requires schools to provide safe environments free from the threat violence in all forms, including violence based on age, sex, religion, disability, and socio-economic background.

School safety and security is defined in this policy as a set of rules and regulations guiding the prevention and mitigation of hazards occurring in formal education settings at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, and/or informal education settings. **Key informants expect the policy will build resilience and bridge the gap between development and humanitarian approaches to education**

in emergencies through its objective to reduce the effects of everyday risks, threats and disasters and to plan for education continuity after crises. The policy implementation follows a comprehensive approach built on four pillars: safe learning facilities, prevention/response to violence against students in schools; school disaster management; risk and resilience education (Ibid).

In line with the goal of maintaining schools as safe spaces, Nigeria also signed onto the Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) in 2014 and at the end of 2022, adopted a National Plan for Financing Safe Schools that provides funding for policies and initiatives to protect schools, students, teachers, and non-teaching staff from attack (GCPEA, 2014; GCPEA, 2024). **The SSI is a response to schools affected by militants in the North Eastern States of Nigeria, and entails: transferring secondary students to other states; supporting education in IDP camps; and piloting safe schools models including community mobilization** (Jacob and Samuel, 2020). The Government established a corresponding national Safe Schools Fund consisting of funds from the Federal Government, Private Sector, and grants from donors. This national fund was strengthened by the establishment of the Nigeria Safe Schools Initiative Multi-Donor Trust Fund (Nigeria SSI MDTF) which allows donors to match and co-finance activities related to the initiative (Ibid).

The National Plan for Financing Safe Schools includes a provision for assisting survivors of attacks on education, including through mental health and psychosocial support, social welfare support, and the relocation of learners to safer locations to ensure the continuity of education (GCPEA, 2024). To implement the plan, a National Schools Security and Emergency Response Centre was established with the mandate to ensure that schools across the country are secure. Four hundred security personnel were trained across Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital. The education sector also developed and deployed an online tool to monitor attacks on education in northeastern states in 2023.

These policies provide the guiding principles for protecting youth and adolescents from violence and exploitation while they pursue their educational goals; it also guarantees the safety and security of school infrastructure. Key informants noted that refugees benefit from the favorable protection environment. **Cameroonian refugees from the Northwest and Southwest Anglophone regions of Cameroon, as one example, are granted protective status upon registration in Nigeria.**

As the government encourages national refugee inclusion and access to services, including education from pre-primary to tertiary, **it allows displaced adolescents and youth to enroll in national public schools and pursue schooling under the same school safety and protection criteria as nationals.**



RWANDA

Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)

Three key takeaways

- 1 Rwandan policies that further refugees' social and economic inclusion in national education systems support enrollment and retention in secondary education.
- 2 Inclusion policies also require attention toward host community schools' absorption capacity near camps through construction of additional education infrastructure and training of teachers.
- 3 Financial support helps displaced adolescents and youth benefit from inclusion policies, including through provision of school fees, exam fees, and school materials.

Rwanda has hosted refugees for more than two decades since opening its first camp (Kiziba) in 1996 (Crawford et al., 2019). Currently, Rwanda hosts 127,000 refugees and asylum seekers, largely from Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo, 90 percent of whom live across five refugee camps: Kiziba, Nyabiheke, Kigeme, Mugombwa and Mahama (Ibid). Traditionally, **the country's policies towards refugees have been relatively progressive. They have included freedom of movement and the right to work, with refugees viewed positively as self-reliant members of Rwandan society.** This model has largely been centered within a camp based framework.

As one of the 15 original participating countries for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in 2016, Rwanda has demonstrated key achievements toward refugees' social and economic inclusion and their integration in the national system, particularly in health and education (UNHCR, 2021a). After officially signing onto

the framework in 2018, the Government committed to: (1) promote refugees' inclusion through a joint livelihoods strategy with UNHCR; (2) provide all refugees with national identity cards and Convention Travel Documents; (3) give all urban refugees access to buy national health insurance; and (4) **integrate 35,000 refugee secondary school students and 18,000 refugee primary school students into the national education system** (Ibid).

In parallel to CRRF objectives, the Government coordinates a Strategic Planning process for refugees' inclusion. Rwanda's Strategic Plan for Refugee Inclusion (2019-2024) (UNHCR, 2019a) has four priority policy actions: (1) Ensure self-reliance of refugees. (2) Provide refugees with identification. (3) Integrate refugees into the national education system. (4) Ensure urban refugees have the opportunity to buy into the national health insurance system (Crawford et al., 2019). Each objective identifies policy actions and outlines milestones for tracking progress. An annual Steering Committee, co-chaired by the Ministry in charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) and UNHCR, oversees the plan's implementation (UNHCR, 2019b). These policy actions intersect closely with the drive toward greater secondary school enrollment and retention.

Key informants in Rwanda spoke to the importance of the CRRF and connected national education inclusion plans for enabling the enrollment and retention of displaced adolescents and youth. When integrated into the national education system, refugee students receive full access to government policies relating to protection, school feeding, psychosocial support, and other services that contribute to their retention at school. This includes the country's push toward having all Rwandan students complete twelve years of basic education rather than nine, as further outlined below. According to key informants, under the umbrella of the CRRF, **implementing partner organizations support the government's efforts in secondary school enrollment and retention by providing refugees with school uniforms and basic school materials, supporting refugee students in registering and paying for national exams, and paying for boarding school fees for students who excel in national exams.** Currently one NGO operating in Rwanda pays secondary school boarding fees for 498 refugees. Refugees also receive back-to-school initiatives, including an orientation, to prepare them for the Rwandan curriculum (Ibid).

The Government indicates that **Rwanda is close to achieving their objective of integrating refugee youth into national primary and secondary schools** (an estimated 18,000 and 35,000 students respectively) (Crawford et al., 2019). Recent statistics show a **64 percent gross enrollment rate at the secondary school level for refugees, whereas national enrollment rate is at 44 percent** (UNHCR, 2024).

The additional education infrastructure required to attain full inclusion of refugees in national systems is currently projected into a World Bank project, with an additional \$9.6 million in education and health infrastructure needs outlined in the Strategic Plan (Crawford et al., 2019). Financial support will be needed to increase host community schools' absorption capacity near camps by constructing additional education facilities (UNHCR, 2021a).

Key informants also noted that, while the government is making steady progress towards an operational framework that meets the overall objectives of the CRRF, many challenges still exist. Currently there is no concrete budget associated with the Strategic Plan, and little scope for supporting the ongoing CRRF process in Rwanda. The Government has not established a broad coalition of support across development, donor and private sector partners. Additionally, the Government has opted out of a CRRF Secretariat model, instead continuing with a project-based approach managed out of MINEMA (Crawford et al., 2019).



Chapter 3

From policy to practice – Policy implementation realities in Colombia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Rwanda

The policies introduced above show how governments and international actors have been able to progress opportunities for secondary education enrollment and retention. While there is progress to champion, it is important to understand the realities that impede or enhance the implementation of the initiatives that these policies give rise to.

The following case studies introduce valuable insights and inform possible actions for donors, policy makers, and practitioners to consider. Examples include the importance of investing in refugee teachers; the critical role of cross-sector coordination; the need for policy implementation funds, the management of relationships between host- and refugee communities, and, the perspective that secondary education for refugees is an investment not a cost.



COLOMBIA

Ensuring continuity and coordination in a context of political change

Three key takeaways

- 1 Secondary education provides life changing pathways for Venezuelan youth.
- 2 Overall the policy is successful, but considerable differences exist between urban and rural areas.
- 3 A focus on coordination and communication is needed to ensure consistent policy outcomes in rural regions.

Forcibly displaced youth in Bogotá, Colombia, who participated in Fundación Plan's focus group discussions placed significant value on their access to secondary education. For many, **it provides a life changing pathway towards future employment, personal well-being, and belonging.** In the box below, youth participants share what secondary education means to them in the context of their forced displacement, lending weight to the importance of policies that further secondary enrollment and retention.

Venezuelan youth perspectives on the value of secondary education

Future employment

Given the disruptiveness and uncertainty of their education trajectories to date, **secondary education represents economic stability and new aspirations**. Many see secondary education as a stepping stone to advanced studies, allowing them to “get a good job” and “support their families”. One participant remarked, “It is important ... to achieve my dreams and goals,” and another shared plans to one day study systems engineering, underscoring secondary education’s role in the possibility of long-term planning.

Personal well-being

Other participants emphasized secondary education’s role in their personal growth and development. They described secondary school as a place where they **“learn, socialize, and develop personalities,”** fostering their self-confidence and resilience, which comes from the relationships they form with teachers and peers. As one participant shared, **“secondary school gives you a place where you can literally open up,** without a problem, to your classmates, tell them what’s right and what’s wrong, how you feel, this is what high school means to me.” Similarly, another participant reflected on the sense of direction that secondary school has provided, stating “I did not know what to do next in life, and high school is a big support”

Belonging

Peer relationships play a significant role in the psychosocial and socio-emotional wellbeing that secondary school can nurture. As participants reflected, “high school makes me feel like I am part of the society. [Back in Venezuela] I barely go out, I do not socialize much. **But here I talk a lot, I play ... I even plan outings sometimes.**” Another participant said that secondary school makes them feel like part of a family. They stated, “[at school] **I feel like I am with family, with people I love,** with people I can open up to and trust.”

Secondary education for Venezuelan migrants in Colombia is not without its challenges. Enrollment complexities and the competing financial and social pressures that threaten youth retention, as well as the comparative rigour of the Colombian curriculum and overcrowded classrooms can compromise secondary education’s potential.

As one participant reflected, **“elementary school was filled with hope, but this was something that began to fade in high school, I started to become more realistic.”**

While Colombia’s progressive policies emerged from **visionary government leadership and a strong education budget** (World Bank and UNHCR, 2022), recent political shifts towards Colombia’s internal conflict and internally displaced populations have disrupted progress. According to two key informants in Bogotá, the reform of vital government ministries and the dismantling of migration-focused leadership roles also means **there are few government figures championing migrant education**.

The policies that have secured Venezuelan migrants’ comparative ease of access to secondary education are **at risk of becoming more symbolic than substantive**, leaving international and local organizations, regional administrators, and school leaders and teachers to realize Colombia’s vision.

Key informants believe **urban areas experience strong coordination between federal and department-level institutions**. But in all interviews, they referred to disparities between urban and rural areas that they attribute to misaligned priorities and communication gaps.

As one key informant shared, federal migrant inclusion policies fail to translate to local level priorities, leaving districts and schools uncertain about the policies’ rationale or their roles implementing them. The key informant, who worked in more rural territories, continued to share that inconsistencies between information provided to schools and that provided to migrants have also **created confusion, delayed enrollment, and what they call “bureaucratic trauma” among migrant populations**, which can deter families from engaging in future enrollment processes.

These findings are in tension with youth focus group insights showing that their caregivers found the enrollment to be easy, as well as research illustrating how **80.4 percent migrants found Colombia’s enrollment process straightforward**, which likely relates to the urban locations of the samples in both studies (Plan International et al., 2023).

Outside of urban centers, **xenophobia exacerbates enrollment and retention challenges, with a constellation of local and international actors coordinating social cohesion initiatives to reverse this trend**, with important examples of success¹. As another key informant stated, the implementation of inclusion policies has relied on strong cultural buy-in at the community and school levels, but without a system-wide approach, or long-term funding earmarked for policy implementation, the results are uneven and inconsistent at best.

Where stories of successful policy coordination exist, they often involve cross-sector collaboration between education,

¹ See UNHCR’s Pedagogía y Protección para la Niñez Refugiada y Migrante con Enfoque Mixto (PPN) [Pedagogy and Protection for Refugee and Migrant Children from a Mixed Approach]

health, and child protection services. According to a key informant, these examples are a blueprint for positive practices. But in reality, they represent exceptional cases rather than the norm. Related to this, as another key informant shared and the literature affirms, the **lack of centralized and interoperable data management systems** for tracking migrant enrollment, academic progress, and dropout risk complicates plans for improved retention and graduation rates (Lobos, 2023).

Supplemental international funding has been instrumental to Colombia's vision, but the costs of inclusion strain the national education budget; even though it is among the world's highest relative to GDP (Lobos, 2023; World Bank and UNHCR, 2021). The unit cost for educating Venezuelan students at the secondary level (\$1,823) surpasses that for host population students (\$1,350) by \$472 per student. Anomalously, however, the unit cost of secondary education in Colombia (\$1350) is estimated to be marginally less than primary (\$1408) (World Bank and UNHCR, 2021). In theory, **this fact could counteract donor reluctance to invest more in securing migrant students' access to secondary education**.

Outside of Bogotá, a lack of funding attached to policy implementation means many schools struggle with the physical capacity and resources to accommodate migrant students. As seen in Cartagena, **migrant-focused plans to improve school infrastructure and hire additional teachers were impeded by a lack of federal financial support** (World Bank and UNHCR, 2022).

As an extension of variable coordination and funding from federal to local levels, teachers rarely receive training or resources to manage mixed-population classrooms, leading to stress, fatigue, mental health and well-being challenges (INEE, 2022; World Bank and UNHCR, 2022). Many **teachers report feeling unprepared to address academic grade-level gaps and the psychosocial needs that forcibly displaced adolescents and youth present** (INEE, 2022). Teachers are regularly tasked with bridging information gaps, often explaining enrollment, assessment, nutrition, and school transport processes to parents (World Bank and UNHCR, 2022). Taken together, **this reality contributes to teachers' own sense of burnout and decreased motivation to teach** (INEE, 2022).

Another key informant discussed **the adolescent and youth 'bounce factor'**, which occurs when access to education is achieved, but the environment is not conducive to learning, psychosocial safety, or a sense of belonging, causing them to 'bounce' from the system. In such cases, this is **attributable to the political and fiscal isolation of school leaders and regional level administrators**. For this reason, the key informant called for improved attention on continuity and retention through investments in knowledge sharing across the system and teacher professional development.



IRAQ

How social cohesion and human resource initiatives incentivise inclusion

Three key takeaways

- 1 Ongoing secondary education enrollment and retention challenges demand an increase in attention and wrap around services.
- 2 Social cohesion initiatives allow Syrian Kurdish and Iraqi Kurdish populations to join forces on common educational needs and priorities
- 3 The hiring of Syrian refugee teachers has wide-reaching benefits for Syrian and Kurdish children, for teachers, and for the broader inclusion agenda.

As the Syrian refugee crisis entered its second decade in 2022, the Kurdish Regional Government recognized the need to transition to a longer-term development-oriented response. In turn, **this demands sustained donor support** to include Syrian adolescents and youth into the national education system and **provide the wraparound services that ensure they stay** (ODI, 2020), especially as the secondary-level-per-refugee student cost in the parallel system is \$1,172 compared to \$868 for local students in the national system (World Bank and UNHCR, 2021).

As an INGO key informant reflected, families support children's access to primary-level schooling in urban and camp settings. However, families struggle to support enrollment and retention for adolescents and youth, meaning **their organization has increased their programming for secondary-level education to 50 percent**. They recommend that partner organizations follow suit, especially as the REIP expands to secondary-aged students.

Key supports also need to address multifaceted linguistic, logistical, and social barriers. Since the outset of the crisis, key informants acknowledge that **sectarian divides have complicated efforts towards an inclusion-oriented approach**, especially as parents worry whether their children will be accepted by host-community children, and whether their Kurdish education certificates will be recognized if they return to Syria (ODI, 2020). Key informants recognized how concerns like these further disincentivize families' engagement with secondary-level education and require a proactive approach.

Social cohesion initiatives mitigate potential issues between host and refugee communities. A key informant

shared how early on “there was a lot of anxiety about living and learning together in the same community.” To address this, another key informant commented on the positive effects of a year-long awareness campaign, delivered via focus group discussions, mainstream and social media campaigns, non-formal education projects for parents and caregivers focused on Kurdish language learning, and sports initiatives between both communities.

Through this approach, in which children’s and adolescents’ voices were at the center, the reality that Iraqi Kurdish and Syrian families face similar education challenges came to light. **Through Syrian inclusion and the consolidation of advocacy and funding, both communities could address their respective challenges together.** Two key informants agreed that preemptive efforts like these foster a sense of belonging among students and parents, thereby creating a shared and strengthened commitment to education in the region.

With a view towards self-reliance and interdependence, reduced funding or the termination of services, such as school transport, improved the perception of equity between refugee and host communities. Despite initial fears, key informants reported that **this had no effect on school enrollment and retention**, especially as Kurdish national schools were closer than the parallel-system Arabic schools and Syrian populations were able to participate in the host-communities transport arrangements.

When the announcement that REIP would be implemented was made, **UNHCR advocated for qualified Syrian teachers – who previously worked for meagre and irregular incentive payments – to be included in the**

Kurdish education system and payroll. They will teach Syrian students also making the transition, but due to the full nature of the KRG’s inclusion policies they will teach host-community students, too.

This decision resulted in over 700 teachers receiving language and curriculum training and gaining roles at national schools. As one key informant reported, when they finished the course **they were awarded certificates of recognition which the KRG and federal Iraqi Government recognize for the purposes of future formal employment.**

Unlike comparable conflict- and displacement-affected settings, the KRI does not suffer from significant teacher shortages (Henderson, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). **Student to teacher ratios at the secondary level are among the lowest in the region**, with available data suggesting a ratio of only 13.7 students per teacher (ODI, 2020; UNICEF, 2016). Nevertheless, as an example of necessary bureaucratic innovation, to circumvent local teacher recruitment regulations the KRG designated ‘lecturer status’ upon qualified Syrian teachers, provided a proper salary, and in doing so further strengthened the workforce.

This policy positively benefits teachers and students alike. As key informants promote, **teacher performance has improved and healthier learning environments have emerged.** According to the KRG Minister of Education, Hon. Alan Hama Saeed, the employment of Syrian teachers represents “a social transformation. It provides [the system with] qualified refugee teachers with the chance to contribute to the communities that embraced them” (quoted in Saeed & Beuze, 2024).





NIGERIA

Funding progressive federal policies at a state level

Three key takeaways

- 1 There is inconsistent application of federal education policies across state and local governments in Nigeria, making experiences with secondary education enrollment and retention inconsistent for displaced youth depending on their location.
- 2 Inefficient coordination, inadequate facilities and misallocation of funds have hindered the implementation of secondary education policies in Nigeria.
- 3 Poor funding of education policies further hampers their implementation at the state and local level, preventing conceptualized support structures from actually reaching displaced adolescents and youth.

The Nigerian federal government has developed rich educational policies to improve the educational standard of its citizens, extending to displaced youth and adolescents at the secondary education level, the majority of whom are internally displaced. As one example, Nigeria has committed to ensuring free quality primary and secondary education for all youth by 2030 (UNESCO, 2022). Since 2022, Nigeria has participated in an initiative led by UNESCO whereby governments indicate their own national benchmarks for progress toward that goal. **In the process, the Nigerian government committed to reducing the percentage of out-of-school children of primary school age to 17 percent by 2030 and that of youth of upper secondary school to 26 percent by 2030 (Ibid).** This, along with other educational initiatives affecting displaced youth, such as the SSVFS outlined above, will require a significant financial investment in the education system and coordination between federal, state, and local governments to ensure successful policy execution.



Underfunding, poor coordination, inadequate facilities and corruption, have hindered the implementation of education policies in Nigeria (Olibie et al., 2017). **According to key informants, the problem lies in the implementation of policies and not in the formation.** Key informants pointed to many challenges facing the implementation of educational policies in Nigeria, including: inadequate funding, a communication gap between stakeholders, inadequate infrastructural facilities, inadequate number of professional teachers, institutional mismanagement, lack of political will, insecurity challenges, lack of continuity in commitment to policy implementation, political instability, poor relationship between policy designer and policy implementer, among others.

In terms of coordination, the federal government is responsible for overall policy formation in Nigeria, while state and local governments are responsible for implementing policies and managing school education (Abdulrahman et al., 2023). Nigeria's governmental structure is a federal system with the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja and 36 states (Jacob and Samuel, 2020). Within those states, there are 744 local government area councils (Ibid). The Nigerian educational system is administered and managed across the federal, state and local governments.

The federal government, through the Ministry of Education, is responsible for policy formation and quality control, and is primarily involved with tertiary education. The federal government provides 50 percent of the financing for basic education. State governments are responsible for implementing state-controlled policies for public education, and manage the administration of secondary school education. State governments provide 30 percent of the financing for basic education. Local governments are responsible for implementing state-controlled policies for public education. Local governments provide 20 percent of the financing for basic education (Abdulrahman et al., 2023).

According to one key informant, within the federal government, the Ministry of Education (MoE), Senior Secondary School Commission, and the National Council on Education (NCE) all have mandates, and roles that may be different, similar, or complementary. The MoE upholds standards within the educational system. The NCE advises and promotes consensus in developing educational policies to support the nation's pursuit of a comprehensive and consistent education system across Nigeria. The National Secondary Education Commission (NSEC), which became operational in 2021, repositions Senior Secondary Schools graduates for global competitiveness. The Commission also addresses critical areas such as infrastructural deficit, human capacity development and instructional materials. As a newer entity, key informants noted that it is not clear where the MoE's responsibility ends and the NSEC's begins. This presents challenges for policy development and implementation at the secondary school level.

Ensuring policy relevance and implementation across such a multitude of actors is complicated. **The complex institutional framework comprising federal, state and local governments has hampered coordination** (Dalberg, 2014). **Lack of political will to implement the educational policies also threatens the enactment of support structures for displaced youth and adolescent enrollment and retention in Nigeria** (Jacob and Samuel, 2020). Nigeria's federal system limits the federal government's ability to influence state governments, complicating nationwide educational policy implementation. This results in some states signing onto policies while others refrain. As one example, twelve states in northern Nigeria are yet to pass the Child Rights Law, designed to protect and enforce the rights of all citizens and foreign nationals (Ibid).

Poor funding of education policies further hampers their implementation at the state and local level, with one key informant expressing that **it doesn't matter if there is a federal policy in place if there is no funding for it at the state level.**





RWANDA

How the national expansion of universal education benefits refugee youth

Three key takeaways

- 1 Expanded basic education offers a bridge for adolescents and youth to higher education, professional training, and job prospects.
- 2 Additional schooling offers protection and improved health outcomes for displaced youth and adolescents when countries also support policies of national inclusion.
- 3 9YbE and 12YbE initiatives are currently working in Rwanda for improving enrollment and retention for youth and adolescents in secondary school.

Over the past two decades, Rwanda has expanded its conception of universal education, extending from six years of free, compulsory primary education in 2003 (6YbE), to a nine-year basic education plan in 2006 (9YbE), to a 12-year basic education plan (12YbE) in 2012 (USAID, 2023). In the 12YbE model, compulsory education includes six years of primary school, three years of general secondary education, and three years of upper secondary education (Ibid). The basic education initiatives are planned and coordinated by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and implemented by the Rwandan Education Board (REB).

The 12YbE initiative provides free education for 12 years and aims to improve access to education by hiring new teachers and building schools at the upper secondary level (MoE, 2020). Offering twelve years of basic education had been part of president Paul Kagame's strategy dating back to the 2003 Rwandan Education Policy (Russell, 2024). The Rwandan government introduced the strategy initially to bolster enrollment and retention at the primary level as part of its emphasis on ensuring universal access to primary education. The 12YbE initiative is also part of



Rwanda's vision to transform the country into a knowledge-based economy (Ibid).

Additional years of schooling bridge to higher education and new opportunities for youth and adolescents, including vocational training, college and university, better professional training and job prospects (WEF, 2023). Without a secondary education, young people also face greater risks. According to UNESCO, if all girls in Rwanda completed primary school, child marriage would fall by 14 percent. If they all finished secondary school, it would plummet by 64 percent (UNHCR, 2024). **Denying youth and adolescents a secondary education is like removing a piece of the bridge that leads to their futures:** to better financial prospects, greater independence, and improved health outcomes. It is also the path to higher education (WEF, 2023).

Key informants emphasized the relevance of universal basic education expansion for displaced youth and adolescents. As governments and international entities push to increase refugee enrollment in higher education and build pathways into host economies for displaced youth and adolescents, secondary education is essential. In 2019, for instance, UNHCR and its partners set a goal to increase refugee enrollment in higher education to 15 percent by 2030. However, achieving parity or close-to parity with national higher education enrolment rates is not realistic by 2030 given the barriers refugee students face when it comes to higher education. The primary barrier to higher education in Rwanda is the limited number of eligible refugee secondary school graduates, based on the low numbers completing secondary school (3 percent as of 2019) (UNHCR, 2019).

In countries where refugees are included in national education systems, like Rwanda, shifts in education policy, such as the expansion of universal basic education, positively affect displaced youth and adolescents and allow them to access the additional protective services that accompany those policy shifts, such as school feeding programs and psychosocial support. Quality education is a central goal of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), wherein the United Nations General Assembly asserted the commitment of member states to provide quality primary and secondary education in safe learning environments for all refugee youth. The Global Compact on Refugees reaffirms international cooperation and solidarity toward this commitment to quality education for all refugees and their hosting communities (UNHCR, 2019).

The 9YbE and 12YbE initiatives appear to be working in supporting enrollment and retention for youth and adolescents in Rwanda (UNDP, 2019). **At the secondary school level, enrolment levels in 2017 more than doubled since 2008, from 288,036 students, of whom 137,815 (47.8 percent) were girls, to 592,501, of**

whom 316,064 (53.4 percent) were girls (Ibid).

The secondary school net enrollment rate(NER) increased from 14 percent in 2008 to 34.1 percent in 2017 (Ibid). The NER also then increased considerably from 2010, after the introduction of the 12YbE plan. Following the successive reforms of the education sector (9YbE and 12YbE), children born today in Rwanda can expect to attain 11.2 years of education, which is a considerable improvement from the 7.2 expected in 2000.

However, this strategic shift is not without its challenges. When the change of the 12YbE plan was announced there had been no planning or budget for its implementation, even though education planners were expected to begin implementation of the policy by expanding access for youth and adolescents to upper secondary school immediately (UNDP, 2019). This type of dominant decision-making within the political settlement is a pattern in the education sector in Rwanda, as also demonstrated through other reforms around school feeding and language of instruction (Williams, 2022). It points to a pattern of introducing major reforms without adequate planning (Ibid). **To sustain and implement the 12YbE initiative effectively, host communities need support to build capacity at secondary level, for example: more schools, appropriate learning materials, teacher training for specialized subjects, and separate facilities for girls.**



Chapter 4

Action agenda – What data, policies, and coordination mechanisms specific to secondary education are needed?

By analysing ‘policy openings’ that allow for the improved enrollment and retention of forcibly displaced adolescents and youth in national secondary education systems, opportunities to scale and sustain progressive approaches emerge. As the findings show, however, these **policy openings and the progressive aspirations of the governments that formulate them depend on adequate funding, a coordinated strategy for implementation, and continued inter-sectoral support** to realize their potential.

The estimated average annual cost to include all forcibly displaced populations’ secondary education is US\$3.65 billion. Compared to the US\$1.2 billion that pre-primary and primary is forecast to cost, the challenge of funding and delivering secondary education cannot be understated (World Bank and UNHCR, 2021).

Cost-efficient yet educationally effective approaches must be promoted, and this is why, as the examples in this publication highlight, policy ‘openings’ where national system inclusion is possible, and where host-community systems are strengthened, is the preferred way forward.

The inclusion of forcibly displaced populations in national education systems strengthens the efficiency and

sustainability of education investments by **ensuring that financing allocated to refugee education can benefit refugees, migrants, and host community children, and by improving the general quality of education overall** (World Bank, 2023).

Further, efficiency gains arise from reduced transactional costs to implementing partners and from financial instruments that allow funding to flow through government systems to address inclusive education costs which are recurrent and multi-year (UNHCR, 2021b).

A key informant in Colombia reflected on the amount of effort and investment required to achieve Colombia’s vision for inclusion. They recognized the work needed to support teachers and school leaders, to bring host-communities and implementing partners on board, and to progress the conversation from social cohesion and belonging to one of employment, self-reliance, better-livelihoods, and economic growth.

Building on this reflection and incorporating the findings from this study, the agenda items below chart the actions required to scale and sustain forcibly displaced adolescent and youth access to secondary education globally.



Action agenda:

PRIORITY: Strengthening, scaling, and sustaining progressive policies

- 1 Design and implement a three-pronged strategy that addresses key bottlenecks in secondary education inclusion by improving primary-to-secondary transitions, enabling flexible pathways, and building bridges to higher education and employment.
- 2 Develop scenario-based guidance and incentive models that frame inclusion policies along a humanitarian-development-peace continuum.
- 3 Invest in refugee teachers as key contributors to cultural integration and addressing teacher shortages.
- 4 Create a global blueprint with aspirational targets and timelines.
- 5 Document how inclusion strengthens host-community education outcomes to incentivize government and donor commitments.

ADVOCACY: The case for secondary education

- 1 Engage diverse stakeholders – from adolescents and parents to government and donors – by crafting voices to tailored advocacy messages on the transformative impacts of secondary education, emphasizing its contributions to peace, economic growth, health, gender equity, and climate resilience.
- 2 Create a briefing document with key messages that highlight the long-term losses when primary education investments are not followed by access to adequately resourced secondary education.
- 3 Develop community-level communication assets addressing the trade-offs of dropping out versus completing secondary education.
- 4 Ensure that secondary education is included on the agenda of high-level humanitarian and development fora, with UNHCR representatives and delegates with lived experience of displacement able to make the case for secondary education.
- 5 Prioritize advocacy for pathways to further education and employment within inclusion policies.

DATA AND EVIDENCE: Understanding what works for who, when, and where

- 1 Advance research on successful transitions for out-of-school adolescents into secondary education and improve access to actionable evidence for policymakers and practitioners.
- 2 Advocate for interoperable data systems that disaggregate forcibly displaced adolescents and youth and national populations, monitor enrollment and retention risks, track academic outcomes, and integrate health and protection indicators to ensure timely and targeted support.

FINANCING: Existing mechanisms and future opportunities

- 1 Devise responsibility-sharing frameworks with scenarios for budget allocation and strengthen private sector partnerships by demonstrating the alignment of secondary education investments with market and talent pipeline interests.
- 2 **Where forcibly displaced adolescents and youth are included in national systems:** Coordinate with country-office partners at UNHCR and local government to identify shorter-term humanitarian financing in preparation for new crises (e.g. ECW FER and MYRP and GPE AF grants), and strengthen ties with key development partners to fund and secure longer-term system capacity (e.g. IDA Refugee Sub Window).
- 3 Create financial planning and budgeting tools for governments and partners to implement secondary education inclusion policies and complete cost-benefit analyses showcasing the returns on investment in human development, peace, and economic outcomes.
- 4 **Where forcibly displaced adolescents and youth are excluded from national systems:** Find 'policy openings' or strategic moments such as joint response plans in humanitarian emergencies or education sector assessments to promote and plan towards national system inclusion.
- 5 Devise responsibility-cost-sharing frameworks with scenarios for budget allocation and strengthen private sector partnerships by demonstrating the alignment of secondary education investments with market and talent pipeline interests.

COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION: At global, national, and local levels

- 1 Engage UNHCR technical staff to support global and national frameworks for adolescent and youth inclusion by aligning accelerated education programs with national curricula, and creating guidance to scaffold forcibly displaced adolescent and youth transitions into host-community secondary schools.
- 2 Develop clear, step-by-step guidance for policy dissemination from national to local levels and, to ensure inclusive decision-making, by incorporating the voices of school leaders, teachers, refugee youth, and community leaders in policy discussions.

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**Published by:****Secondary Education
Working Group (SEWG)**

c/o United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees, UN City,
Marmorvej 51, 2100 Copenhagen,
Denmark

Plan International

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Woking, Surrey, GU21 5BH,
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December 2024**Authors**

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Front cover photo

@julesmugabo/Plan International

All internal photography

©Plan International (unless stated)

Design and layout

www.forty6design.com

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Plan International © 2025

Suggested citation:

Henderson, C., and Hough, W. (2025).
On the precipice of progress: Policy
openings that increase forcibly
displaced adolescent and youth
enrollment and retention in secondary
education. UNHCR, SEWG and Plan
International.



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