



JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE'S INFLUENCE ON INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE POLICY

La influencia del Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados en la política de refugio internacional

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Autora

As an organization committed to working with and standing alongside those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, advocacy is a core element of Jesuit Refugee Service's work around the world. With policymakers, donor governments, and host communities, JRS advocates for, and with, those who seek safety and the opportunity to rebuild a life for themselves and their families. Through a network of staff across the globe implementing programs each and every day, JRS identifies the challenges faced in meeting the basic needs of those we serve, and which policies can improve those circumstances. In this article, we share examples of three areas where JRS has exerted influence and action on such policies. This includes access to refugee education, protecting the right to asylum, and placing a spotlight on one of the world's most forgotten crises, the conflict in Syria.



Abstract

Como organización comprometida a trabajar con y junto a quienes se han visto desplazados por la fuerza de sus hogares, la incidencia política es un elemento central del trabajo del Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados en todo el mundo. Ante los responsables políticos, los gobiernos cooperantes y las comunidades de acogida, el JRS aboga por y con quienes buscan seguridad y la oportunidad de reconstruir una vida para ellos y sus familias. A través de una red de personal en todo el mundo que implementa programas cada día, el JRS identifica los retos a los que se enfrentan para satisfacer las necesidades básicas de aquellos a quienes servimos, y qué políticas pueden mejorar esas circunstancias. En este artículo, compartimos ejemplos de tres áreas en las que el JRS ha ejercido influencia y acción sobre dichas políticas. Esto incluye el acceso a la educación de los refugiados, la protección del derecho de asilo, y poner el foco en una de las crisis más olvidadas del mundo, el conflicto en Siria.



Resumen

Refugee; advocacy; policy; education; asylum; Syria.

Refugiados; defensa; política; educación; asilo; Siria.



Key words

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Fechas

1. Introduction

Global displacement has reached record-high numbers, with more than 110 million people forced to leave their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This translates into one in every 73 people, 88 percent of them in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2023a).

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is working to address this challenge by meeting the educational, psychosocial, health and emergency needs of more than 1.5 million refugees and other forcibly displaced persons in 58 countries. Founded by Fr Pedro Arrupe, SJ in 1980, JRS works side by side with the displaced, providing assistance to refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and those held in detention centers.

The mission of JRS is to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS is inspired by the compassion of Jesus, who made it his mission to reach the most marginalized people of his time. JRS is built on a faith in God who is present in human history, even in its most tragic moments. We are inspired by this faith and by core values that inform all the work we do.

In many countries and contexts, refugees are often the most marginalized, the most disenfranchised and the most vulnerable. Although refugees have inherent human rights, those rights are often overlooked as they are denied the ability to work, to go to school or to find permanent safety and security. Given this, advocacy is a vital element of the JRS mission and provides critical support to JRS's accompaniment and service programs.

Advocacy helps address the systemic challenges faced by those who have been forcibly displaced and places a spotlight on the political and global drivers that impact the lives of refugees. As an international organization operating in some of the most complex contexts in our world today, JRS is witness to the immense injustices faced by those who have been forcibly displaced and is in the position to advocate with and alongside them for policies that will address some of the most egregious challenges.

JRS is one of a few humanitarian organizations that has a widespread field presence working directly with refugees and displaced people. JRS also has a long-standing credibility built on the accurate information that it has collected from the field and an advocacy presence in centers of power with representatives in Geneva, Rome, Brussels, and Washington, DC. A commitment to advocacy work is a fundamental part of JRS's mandate.

The focus of JRS's advocacy work is to change policies that directly affect the lives of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. As the 34th Congregation of the Society of Jesus stated: "The Jesuit Refugee Service accompanies many of these brothers and sisters of ours, serving them as companions, advocating their cause in an uncaring world" (The Jesuits, 1995).

Through a network of staff across the globe implementing programs each and every day, JRS identifies the challenges faced in meeting the basic needs of those we serve, and which policies can improve those circumstances. In this article, we will share examples of three areas where JRS has exerted influence and action on such policies. This includes access to refugee education, protecting the right to asylum, and placing a spotlight on one of the world's most forgotten crises: the conflict in Syria.

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2. Increasing access to refugee education

Today, 224 million school-aged children and adolescents have had their education directly affected by emergencies and protracted crises (Education cannot wait, 2023a). Of those identified as refugees or internally displaced persons by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 38 percent are enrolled in pre-primary, 65 percent in primary, 41 percent in secondary, and 6 percent in tertiary education (UNHCR, 2023b).

The severity of this education gap has garnered a new groundswell of support for investing in education in conflict and crisis settings. The magnitude of the need also calls for an opportunity to rethink the way that educational programs are developed and funded.

Given that the average length of displacement is five years (World Bank, 2019), it is impractical to consider emergency assistance and long-term development as separate endeavors. Rather, the longevity of these problems requires us to creatively approach new partnerships and new models of funding. Likewise, protracted conflicts are changing the long-term options for those who are displaced. They must be given the opportunity to forge a future for themselves and their families.

Since its founding, JRS has placed an emphasis on ensuring that the most vulnerable have access to an education, regardless of their circumstances. Working both in newer emergencies, like Ukraine, and in protracted displacement settings including Chad, Ethiopia, and Kenya, JRS is well-positioned to offer substantive, thoughtful insight on providing effective, quality education programs for the forcibly displaced.

Access to schools and quality education is an urgent priority for all refugee children and youth. It is a basic human right and is fundamental to a better future for their communities. For these reasons, JRS advocates for the basic right to emergency and long-term educational opportunities and urges better access to formal, informal, and skill-building and vocational training programs for refugee children, youth and adults.

To improve the quality of, and access to, education in emergencies and protracted crises, JRS recommends that the following policies be adapted by governments and practitioners:

- » Prioritization of access to education in all stages of humanitarian response and through development initiatives.
- » Adequate and sustainable funding for the education of all refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, both in emergency and protracted crisis settings.
- » Better coordination of education programs between host countries and humanitarian agencies and alignment of programs with country plans and systems.
- » Effective transition from humanitarian response programming to long-term education development, through coordinated planning between humanitarian and development actors.
- » Improved quality of education for the displaced, with a focus on special needs and equal access across genders and the prioritization of language training, long-term livelihoods development, and the use of technology.
- » Integration of refugees into host communities, as appropriate, including integration of children into local school systems, access to employment opportunities and equitable compensation for the displaced.

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- » Assurance that schools remain safe and secure places free from armed groups, forcible military conscription, sexual violence, and discrimination.
- » Academic institutions accept international certificates, diplomas and degrees and explore the possibility of mainstreaming the accreditation process across countries and school systems.
- » A diverse group of partners mobilize support for education in emergencies and protracted crises and support global efforts—including Education Cannot Wait: A Fund for Education in Emergencies—to address this critical issue.

Past investments in educational progress are in jeopardy as we face a record number of long-standing conflicts and resulting global displacement. Donors, governments, and the humanitarian and development communities must take action and seize an historic opportunity to grow, and leverage, the political will to address the lack of access to education for the forcibly displaced.

The world has been transfixed over the overwhelming images of refugees and their stories in the media today. Violent conflicts and other emergencies have motivated people to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere, exceeding all previous records for global forced displacement. As a result of the increasing movement of people worldwide, there is a greater need to provide basic necessities and services to affected communities.

The right to education is a fundamental right, and its importance has been outlined in multiple international covenants, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed in 1948. Article 26 of the Declaration states that everyone has a right to free and compulsory elementary education, and that technical training and higher education be equally accessible to all. Similarly, the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention focuses explicitly on the inherent right to primary education by stating that “elementary education is to be provided to refugees in the same manner as for nationals.”

Education is more than just a right and a response to an immediate need; education also engenders hope as it prepares refugees to meet future challenges. Education provides stability and a sense of normalcy, and acts as a form of vital psychosocial support to children whose lives have been affected by crisis. An education can also lessen a child’s vulnerability to child labor, sexual violence, recruitment into armed groups, or early marriage.

Education plays a critical role in preparing individuals and their communities to recover and rebuild after conflict or disaster. Education is an important tool to promote and ensure greater peace and rehabilitation following an emergency situation. With access to a quality education, individuals can better fulfill their own potential and fully contribute to the growth, strength and stability of their society.

Though the need for adequate and equitable education for all cannot be denied, current programming for education in crises faces many obstacles. These include lack of prioritization as part of emergency response, limited funding, and lack of coordination with development actors. Practical challenges include barriers to access, change in language or curriculum, and significant lapses in time spent in school.

Yet, while the global community faces unprecedented challenges, we are witnessing a never-before-seen opportunity. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals with Goal 4 focused on access to education; and Government ministers from more than

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100 countries adopted the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030, which contained a specific commitment to education for refugees and the internally displaced.

In July 2015, the Oslo Summit on Education for Development laid the groundwork for a new common platform for education in emergencies and protracted crises, set to be launched at the inaugural World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. This platform—Education Cannot Wait: A Fund for Education in Emergencies—aims to adequately finance efforts to meet the educational needs of millions of children and young people affected by crisis, improve processes within the humanitarian and development spheres to better provide long-term educational services, and cultivate new political will to tackle this critical issue.

Amid this renewed commitment for education in crisis settings and as the global community seeks to operationalize the delivery of quality educational programs in new and long-standing crises, Jesuit Refugee Service offers insights, lessons learned, and recommendations gleaned from over 40 years of work in this sector.

2.1. Advocating for “Education Cannot Wait”

JRS has been at the forefront of a global effort to build the necessary political will and generate critical financial resources to fulfill the mission of Education Cannot Wait (ECW), an initiative launched in 2016.

Education Cannot Wait is the first global fund dedicated to education in emergencies. It was launched by international humanitarian and development aid actors, along with public and private donors, to address the urgent education needs of children and youth in conflict and crisis settings. ECW partners directly with program implementers to foster a more collaborative approach among actors on the ground, ensuring relief and development organizations join forces to achieve education outcomes.

JRS was present at the launch of ECW where then International Director Fr Thomas H. Smolich, SJ stated: “Education Cannot Wait is an important step forward in helping to ensure that the most vulnerable and disenfranchised have access to an education. JRS feels education is always part of any emergency situation.”

Since then, JRS’s advocacy team in the United States has engaged in a variety of advocacy activities to introduce U.S. policymakers to this new entity and to encourage the U.S. Government to sustain its support. In fact, the U.S. Government has been central to the success of ECW, as its third largest donor currently (Education Cannot Wait, 2023b), and its support will help ECW meet its 2023-2026 strategic plan goals.

Towards this end, JRS/USA-led efforts included bilateral meetings with members of the U.S. Congress and Administration; events with civil society and policymakers; statements of support at key moments including during the UN General Assembly and World Bank meetings. As a result, in 2019 for the first time, the U.S. House and Senate included funding for Education Cannot Wait in its annual funding package. The initial annual contribution by the U.S. totaled \$25 million in Fiscal Year 2020 and has now increased to \$30 million in Fiscal Year 2023.

ECW-supported programs span a wide spectrum of context-specific activities designed to meet education needs for crisis-affected children and youth aged 3-18 years old. Since its inception,

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ECW has invested approximately \$226 million in education programs that have benefited 2.1 million refugees since its inception (Education Cannot Wait, 2023c).

JRS partners with ECW in countries including Chad, Uganda and the Central African Republic. With this support, JRS has built schools, provided learning materials, trained teachers, and organized parent associations for refugees living in protracted and early-onset crisis settings.

3. Protecting access to asylum

Systems to provide protection to the forcibly displaced have been severely tested since the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforced the need for a renewed commitment to building stronger asylum mechanisms that can withstand public health emergencies. Though much of the world's mobility has recovered since then, COVID-19 restrictions will have long-term ramifications for global asylum systems.

By mid-2023, there were 5.4 million (UNHCR, 2023a) recorded asylum seekers across the globe who crossed a border seeking protection but whose claims have not yet been processed or approved in their host country. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum seeker.

The inadequacies of global asylum systems have been exposed over the past several years with 167 countries closing their borders after the initial outbreak of COVID-19. This included access to protection for asylum seekers. Almost four years later, the right to asylum is still under threat in a number of countries.

From the beginning of the global response to the pandemic, UNHCR made it clear that pandemic responses should not prevent people from seeking asylum. While governments may put in place public health measures, these should not deny people the opportunity to seek asylum or result in their deportation to places where they would be subject to danger, known as “refoulement.”

Enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol, the principle of “non-refoulement” has become international customary law. Asylum seekers are granted refugee status if they can prove that they were subject to persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

The U.S. response to COVID-19 was particularly devastating for the forcibly displaced. Beginning in March 2020, the government implemented COVID-19 restrictions that prevented most asylum seekers from petitioning for protection. These restrictions violated forcibly displaced peoples' fundamental right to seek asylum and threaten to permanently alter the U.S. asylum landscape for the worse (McPherson, 2020).

However, this issue was not confined to the United States. JRS offices in countries including Australia, Colombia, Italy, Malta, and South Africa experienced disruptions in the right to seek protection from persecution and advocates for the reinstatement of these critical protections.

Even before COVID-19, in response to record levels of global displacement, the world's richest countries had established complex migration controls in what amounts to a global “deterrence paradigm” (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017). The result is an ever-growing number of refugees and asylum seekers concentrated in low- and middle- income countries—countries with fewer resources to bear the responsibility of protecting and assisting them. Those who do attempt to seek refuge in higher-income countries are often subject to exploitation and violence.

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The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these challenges, providing a convenient justification for policies that betray the spirit of international refugee law and threaten the lives and well-being of thousands. These policies were accompanied by mounting xenophobia and discrimination against asylum seekers, who are often portrayed as public health threats and carriers of disease.

Some of the first global responses to the pandemic were tight travel restrictions with devastating consequences for asylum seekers who were prevented from entering and seeking protection in other countries. Restrictions that made no exception for asylum seekers were enacted in March 2020 by countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, most of South America, and in other regions (UNHCR, n. d.).

As early as April 2020, reports emerged of illegal expulsions and pushbacks at international borders. For example, police violence against asylum seekers at the Croatian border was well-documented and appeared to have been tacitly supported by the European Union and the Croatian public (Amnesty International, 2020). Some countries, including Italy, Malta, and Malaysia, simply refused to allow those arriving by sea to disembark, sending them back into treacherous conditions with sometimes-deadly consequences.

Mobility restrictions also led to a number of secondary consequences for asylum seekers. They increased asylum seekers' reliance on human smugglers and irregular migration routes, as happened with people fleeing Venezuela and the Northern Triangle countries, exposing them to danger and exploitation (Ozy, 2020). Nicaraguan asylum seekers in Costa Rica who wanted to return home often resorted to illegal or dangerous routes, as borders are open only to those with a negative COVID-19 test, which can be difficult for migrants to secure (Dupraz-Dobias, 2020).

Additionally, already-crowded informal settlements housing asylum seekers became even more vulnerable to disease outbreaks as lockdowns impeded regular food deliveries and water supplies. Conditions in the Calais settlements in France, which housed 1,200 asylum seekers and migrants, deteriorated considerably as a result of these pressures (Louarn, 2020). One study found that the risk of COVID transmission increased by 17 percent for asylum seekers and refugees living in collective housing (OECD, 2020).

Social distancing regulations in some countries also led to a marked decrease in government and civil society's asylum capacities. The Colombian government, for example, ordered organizations working with displaced people from Venezuela to halve their capacities in March to slow the spread of the virus (Devex, 2020).

COVID-19 and related restrictions also amplified existing inequalities between displaced and host populations. In South Africa, for example, shutdowns disproportionately impacted asylum seekers and migrants, who lost their jobs, were evicted from their homes, and experienced food insecurity at higher rates than South African citizens (Mukumbang et al., 2020).

In some countries, migrants and asylum seekers became convenient scapegoats for host governments. In Italy, politicians falsely linked COVID-19 outbreaks to African asylum seekers. Far-right movements in Germany, France, and Spain exploited pandemic panic to advocate for border closures and tougher migration restrictions. Migrants, including asylum seekers, were also subjected to verbal harassment and violent attacks due to COVID-related stigma. In Cameroon, foreigners and visiting members of the diaspora were attacked after being blamed for spikes in infection rates.

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These long-term consequences include the precipitous decrease in international funding for refugee-hosting countries and widespread loss of employment for refugees and asylum seekers, which may further limit their self-reliance and trigger a vicious cycle of mutually-reinforcing vulnerabilities. The spread of xenophobic sentiments and COVID-related stigma may lead to further degradations in asylum seekers' treatment and quality of life in host communities. Perhaps most importantly, countries' decisions to prioritize public health at the expense of fundamental human rights at the outset of the pandemic undermine global asylum frameworks and may embolden governments to do the same in the future.

3.1. Protecting asylum in the United States

For decades, the United States has been a global leader in welcoming people seeking protection from violence in their home countries. Yet, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 500,000 asylum seekers (U.S. Customs & Border Protection, 2023), including unaccompanied children, were turned back at the U.S. southern border after the government implemented travel and asylum restrictions under a public health regulation known as Title 42.

Issued in March 2020 by the Centers for Disease Control along with the Department of Health and Human Services, Title 42 prohibited all non-essential travel from Canada or Mexico, including for asylum seekers. The rationale behind the implementation of this policy was "to protect the public health from an increase in the serious danger of the introduction of COVID-19" (HHS & CDC, 2020). As a result, the U.S. expelled asylum seekers rather than allowing them to present their petitions for asylum.

Public health experts repeatedly pointed out that these restrictions did little to prevent the actual spread of COVID-19 (Amon et al., 2021). Instead, the policy targeted asylum seekers while providing broad exemptions to U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and those traveling to the United States for education, trade, or commercial purposes.

The ban on asylum was one of the latest in a series of efforts by the government to limit long-held legal protections in the U.S. asylum system. In January 2019, the U.S. government announced the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the "Remain in Mexico" program, which forced asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while waiting for their court date.

MPP returned more than 70,000 people to wait in Mexico to petition for safety in the United States. The return to Mexico forced asylum seekers to live in dangerous and uncertain circumstances. There were at least 1,314 public reports of murder, torture, rape, kidnapping, and other violent attacks against asylum seekers and migrants returned to Mexico under MPP. Stranded without resources, many faced prolonged homelessness with little means to manage their asylum claims.

As a result of Title 42, court hearings for MPP cases were suspended through most of 2020. Due to distance and the lack of resources, MPP also led to lower rates of representation and asylum approval, with fewer than 8 percent of MPP cases able to secure legal representation. With few exceptions, most individuals and families expelled during the implementation of Title 42 had no opportunity to petition for asylum at all. Title 42 expulsions allowed the government to circumvent the normal asylum process and prevented asylum seekers from being screened for credible fear before being turned back at the U.S. border.

Domestic law and treaties signed by the U.S. government protect individuals fleeing violence and arriving at U.S. borders. For decades, people seeking protection from violence in their

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home countries have been able to enter the U.S. and petition for asylum. The United States signed on to the 1951 Refugee Convention,¹ which required it under international law not to send asylum seekers back to dangerous conditions. Passage of the 1980 Refugee Act also aligned U.S. asylum and refugee policy with UNHCR standards. Respecting this fundamental obligation is critical to the U.S. maintaining its position in the global community.

Through research, statements, and direct advocacy with policymakers, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and JRS Mexico made repeated calls to the U.S. Government to repeal this harmful policy. Finally, on May 11, 2023, the U.S. government ended the use of Title 42. Yet, JRS continued to raise concerns about new measures implemented by the Biden Administration that also had a negative impact on the safety and well-being of asylum seekers.

While JRS joined other immigration and refugee advocates in celebrating the end of Title 42, the Biden-Harris Administration has since put in its place an asylum rule, titled “Circumvention of Legal Pathways,” that significantly limits access to asylum. This rule requires individuals to seek asylum through “lawful pathways” that are narrow in scope, such as visas, country-specific parole programs, and appointments utilizing an online tool called the “CBP One app.”

Although the Biden-Harris Administration has focused on creating legal pathways for migrants and asylum seekers, many individuals and families have serious hurdles to overcome due to the restrictions and limited exceptions of these policies. Moreover, the current asylum rule fails to live up to the US’s legal obligations to refugees and asylum seekers and perpetuates a humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border where those seeking refuge and safety live in fear and uncertainty.

As an organization present at the border, JRS accompanies asylum seekers in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and El Paso, Texas. In Ciudad Juárez, JRS Mexico addresses the protection, legal, mental health, psychosocial, and public health concerns of asylum seekers as they await their opportunity to apply for asylum in the US. In El Paso and Las Cruces, the JRS/USA team assists asylum seekers by preparing them for the next steps of their journey, providing legal orientations to understand their rights, and providing mental health and psychosocial support as they process what they have experienced along the way to the United States.

JRS continues to call on the U.S. government to protect the right to asylum by adhering to refugee law and eliminating barriers to seeking asylum at ports of entry. This includes increasing the availability of CBP One appointments and addressing CBP One’s language barriers and technological glitches to enable equitable access for individuals requesting an appointment through the app.

JRS also supports increased funding for humanitarian and community-based organizations that provide shelter and services to asylum seekers on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Overall, the U.S. must continue to pursue comprehensive immigration reform legislation that promotes and affirms the dignity of all those migrating to and seeking refuge in the U.S. and Mexico.

The lack of effective policies to guarantee access to regular, safe, and orderly migration has seriously affected people seeking asylum on both sides of the border. Despite the lawful pathways available to seek asylum in the US, JRS continues to observe that the limitations of these pathways place asylum seekers in dangerous and difficult situations. Protection and health concerns impact asylum seekers on both sides of the border as they wait for the opportunity to

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1 In 1968, the U.S. acceded to the 1967 Protocol, thereby taking on the Convention’s obligations as well.

present their request for asylum and if they're able to enter into the US. JRS will continue to call on the U.S. Government to reform its asylum process to ensure that it upholds refugee law and treats asylum seekers with dignity.

4. Remembering Syrian refugees

The Syrian conflict began almost 13 years ago and has displaced over 12 million Syrians (UNHCR, 2024a). Although far from the headlines, Syrians continue to struggle to meet their basic needs. Inside Syria, nearly 80 percent of people live in poverty and one out of three school-age Syrian refugee children in host countries are out of school.

JRS is on the frontlines, working with displaced Syrians by providing access to education, mental health care, livelihoods, and protection programs. JRS has maintained its focus on meeting the needs of Syrians and engaging in humanitarian and diplomatic efforts to champion their cause.

Since 2017, the United Nations and donor governments have hosted a global conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region." The conference is an opportunity for state delegations to continue to work to achieve a political solution in Syria and to pledge financial support for Syria and the countries in the region hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees.

For the past several years, JRS has regularly participated in preparations for the conference and advocated for a series of recommendations that highlight the priority needs of Syrians displaced by war. These recommendations have included:

- » Increased funding for humanitarian programs that address the daily needs of Syrian refugees. This includes a review of the impact that sanctions on the Syrian government have on civilians affected by the conflict.
- » Investments in income generating opportunities and innovative partnerships to improve social cohesion and resilience.
- » Safe and voluntary returns of Syrians to Syria and opposition to any effort by host country governments to enforce forcible returns.
- » Shared responsibility among the global community through the provision of opportunities for asylum, resettlement, and complementary pathways to legal status.

The needs of displaced Syrians and vulnerable host communities have not decreased with the duration of the crisis. An estimated 15.3 million people inside Syria require humanitarian assistance and more than 2 million Syrian children are out of school. The Syrian economy has reached a point of extreme crisis with 90 percent inflation and 12.1 million people estimated to be food insecure (OCHA, 2023).

Sanctions imposed by the international community have worsened the economic situation and a massive earthquake in February 2023 created unprecedented destruction on top of the economic and political turmoil already engulfing the country. Many of those affected by the earthquake had already been displaced from their homes due to the country's long-running crisis and underwent secondary displacement living in tents, shelters, and partially destroyed buildings after the quake. Not only has it been necessary to invest in the rebuilding of infrastructure that was destroyed, but to provide mental health and psychosocial support to address the lack of safety.

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Neighboring Lebanon faces its worst socioeconomic crisis in decades yet hosts the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide, most of them from Syria. The Lebanese Government estimates that it hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 13,715 refugees of other nationalities. Ninety percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2024b).

Now more than ever, Syrian refugees are unable to meet their basic needs and humanitarian assistance must be increased. Through its programs, JRS is witness to the critical needs of Syrian refugees particularly in terms of access to mental health and psychosocial assistance, protection, and education.

Children in Syria have been forced to drop out of school due to a myriad of issues including forced displacement, attacks on schools, child labor, COVID-19, overcrowding in schools and poverty. There are an estimated 4 million out-of-school children in Syria and host countries who are losing out on education. Of the countries hosting the majority of Syrian refugees, 41 percent of school-aged children were neither enrolled in formal or non-formal education in 2022, an increase from 36 percent in 2019 (No lost generation, 2023).

Education is a human right, an essential part of any humanitarian response effort, and is intricately linked to the protection of children. Achieving inclusive and quality education for all is one of the most powerful and proven drivers for sustainable development and is vital to rebuilding communities and achieving lasting peace.

As participants in most of the global conferences on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region,” JRS has joined coalition partners in calling on conference participants to commit to funding education programs. With programs serving Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and within Syria itself, this conference is an important opportunity for JRS to give voice to the challenges we see displaced Syrians facing each day and recommend opportunities for continued and increased investment.

Through pre-Conference consultative processes, and by participating in “NGO Days of Dialogue,” JRS has been able to encourage donors to prioritize the right to education for displaced Syrians. This includes access to education, with a focus on limited opportunities for Syrians to access secondary and vocational training opportunities, and improved quality of education.

As a result, education has been prominently featured in both conference plenary sessions and side events. In advance of the Conference, JRS has also released stand alone and joint reports (JRS/USA, 2018) to draw attention to the important role education plays in healing communities affected by conflict and preparing them for their future.

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, the EU and its Member States have mobilized over €30 billion to support Syrians in Syria and in the region. In addition, international financial institutions and donors have announced €4 billion in loans, bringing a total of grants and loans to €9.6 billion (European Commission, 2023).

With the conflict in Syria clearly evolving into a protracted crisis, humanitarian response efforts must be accompanied by a longer-term approach. Syria and neighboring countries hosting Syrian refugees are currently facing multiple unprecedented crises. More funding should be provided to assist host communities through development projects that seek to build strong and innovative partnerships amongst both Syrians and nationals of host countries.

Investment in livelihoods opportunities is also a key part of resilience-building. Employment is scarce in many countries hosting refugees. Job creation for host communities will help

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maintain social cohesion and reduce tensions, and for refugees can create a life-saving source of income. It must be accompanied with an increase in access to legal documentation and permission to work, which is currently very restricted for Syrians in some states such as Jordan and Lebanon.

Despite the numerous political, social, economic and health challenges that Syrian refugees face in their host communities, many do not want to return to Syria. Amongst regional governments there have been attempts to return Syrian refugees, including the issuance of a statement by the Lebanese government in May 2019 that any Syrian entering the country irregularly from that date forward would be deported (Kheshen & Safi, 2023). JRS reiterates its support for the international principles of safe and voluntary return and to acknowledge that conditions for return to Syria are not yet met.

With economic and political turmoil engulfing the region, safe resettlement to a third country can be a vital lifeline to Syrian refugees. The international community can and must share responsibility by committing to increase refugee resettlement and complementary pathways to settlement and keep asylum processes open to Syrians.

5. Conclusion

With the needs of refugees only increasing each day, the important role that advocacy plays in calling for systemic change is more critical than ever before. As an organization committed to working with and standing alongside those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, Jesuit Refugee Service will continue to raise issues of concern at the highest levels. With policymakers, donor governments, and host communities, JRS will advocate for, and with, those who seek safety and the opportunity to rebuild a life for themselves and their families.

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