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Education for displaced children

Uprooted and displaced people are at the heart of MCC's mission, highlighted as a top priority in MCC's strategic direction of supporting and equipping vulnerable people. Among the displaced, children suffer the most devastating consequences as they face traumatic experiences and are forced out of school at a critical stage of physical, cognitive and social-emotional development.

The urgency to support displaced children could not be greater, as the number of forcibly displaced people globally surpassed 100 million for the first time in 2022, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The *Global Compact on Refugees*, established in 2018, set a goal to limit the time refugee boys and girls spend out of education to a maximum of three months, but reality falls far short of this goal: while 92% of the world's children are enrolled in primary education and 84% at the secondary level, for refugee children those figures drop to 61% in primary and 23% in secondary.

In addition to simply being a basic human right, education has additional benefits. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) affirms that education for displaced children provides a safe place and normal routine that supports healing, strengthens resilience, reduces risks of forced recruitment to armed groups, child labor and sexual exploitation and equips and empowers learners as they strive to rebuild their lives.

Education should be an urgent component of any humanitarian response, but it must also be done with a long-term development view in mind. Because of the increasingly urban (rather than refugee camp) settings and protracted nature of displacement, with many displaced children likely to spend their entire schooling years in a host country or community, there is a global consensus, in the words of the INEE, that "education for refugees is a medium to long-term social service that should be embedded within national systems, rather than a parallel short-term crisis intervention dependent on unpredictable and unsustainable funding."

This consensus about how best to support education for displaced children has changed dramatically in the last decade. UNESCO describes this shift in a background paper for the *2019 Global Education Monitoring Report*: "Prior to 2012, in most settings, refugees were educated in parallel schools, separate from national students and often following the curriculum and

in the language of instruction of the country of origin. More recently, the UNHCR *Global Education Strategy 2012-2016* articulated a new approach to the education of refugees: inclusion in national education systems."

This strategy was updated and cemented in the Global Refugee Forum's 2019 *Global Framework for Refugee Education* and UNHCR's publication *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*. This strategy document includes a strikingly clear statement that "UNHCR strongly discourages" investing in informal or private education that is a parallel substitute for the local public education system, and instead encourages investments that provide a pathway into that system or help that system more effectively absorb displaced students.

Including displaced children in national systems is more sustainable, can better support integration into the host community and can improve education quality for not only displaced children but also children from the host community. This is an especially important benefit since most displaced children are hosted in low-income countries where national education systems are underfunded and weak to begin with.

Despite this shift, non-state actors such as national, international and faith-based NGOs still have an important role to play. A 2022 paper by the Brookings Institution discusses three key tensions in refugee education: the tensions between inclusion in national systems and non-state programming, between emergency and long-term response and between global and national responsibility. They emphasize that while the two parts of each of these pairings are in tension with each other, they should not be seen as mutually exclusive but rather as factors that need to work together, complement and support one another.

Non-state actors are well positioned to use more localized approaches and provide targeted support that helps fill gaps in the larger system, and they can apply pressure to education authorities (and support them) to better fulfill their role in absorbing and assisting displaced students. Working together, they can provide displaced students with life-changing aid that helps them feel safe, process loss and trauma, recover from academic learning loss, adapt to a new language, culture and education system and build a sense of community, identity and belonging.

Throughout these efforts, two fundamental principles are essential: 1) refugee voices must have a central role in planning and implementing any initiative. As stated in the *Global Framework for Refugee Education*, "Nothing about us without us." And 2) teachers play an especially important role. Any initiative should ensure that teachers have the training and support they need and should involve teachers who are displaced themselves.

The articles in this issue of *Intersections* offer a rich variety of experiences from MCC partners who work with displaced children in Africa, the Middle East and Central and North America. They share lessons learned from projects that support student inclusion in national education systems, strengthen private schools or complementary education programs and focus specifically on helping displaced students integrate or re-integrate into their new host communities and build a strong sense of identity and belonging.

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Learn more

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"This consensus about how best to support education for displaced children has changed dramatically in the last decade."

Reintegrating displaced children into local schools in DR Congo

All children have an absolute right to basic education without discrimination, yet many children worldwide are denied this right due to the impact of conflict. For refugees and internally displaced children (IDPs), education must be a fundamental component of humanitarian assistance alongside other basic needs such as food. Integrating displaced children into local schools to provide education continuity helps revive children's morale in the short term, and in the long term it reduces their vulnerability to disaster and helps them build new lives.

Throughout the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many displaced children lost at least a year's worth of schooling as attendance was disrupted by violence. As of June 2023, more than 6.2 million Congolese were internally displaced and over one million have sought refuge in neighboring countries. More than 400 schools have been attacked and used for military purposes, with militias using children to fight, kill and act as human shields. Many inhabitants abandoned their villages for the forest, making it difficult for children to return to school. This violence and migration tore apart families and harmed the physical and psychosocial welfare of children.

In Kasai province, MCC has helped students reintegrate into local schools by reconstructing classrooms, providing training for teachers and partially covering costs for schools to absorb the large number of IDP students.

For this article, the MCC team in DR Congo examined how returnee children's reintegration back to the communities' schools has progressed. To do this, we focused on four schools supported by MCC in Kasai province: Somba Ne Lutulu and Malu Mimbe (primary schools) and *Institut du Kasai* and *Institut Milambu* (secondary schools). We conducted face-to-face interviews with six IDP children, six parents, one headteacher, two local authorities, one partner staff person, three partner local committee members and three local NGOs staffs working in education. We also held focus group discussions with 13 teachers, ten students and ten parents. Results reveal that violence inflicted a devastating toll on the population and especially the children.

Reports from students: The children's narrations of their experiences were vivid, filled with many adverse events, including the long walk to safety and living in unstable environments such as the forest, lack of communication with others, the mental and emotional toll of losing a family member or one's home, going for days without food and witnessing classmates' violent deaths.

Many children were killed by the confrontation between the Congolese armed forces and the militiamen. Those who managed to escape tell horror stories of what they witnessed, like one student who said: "We heard loud sounds and people wailing when we were at school. The teachers told us to stay calm. Militiamen entered the school and started beating us. I was in 5th grade primary, and we fled into the bush with my classmates, but some were killed. They also raped female teachers and students."

"In Kasai province, MCC has helped students reintegrate into local schools by reconstructing classrooms, providing training for teachers and helping cover costs for schools to absorb the large number of IDP students."

Angele Kingenzi, 11, was displaced form the Kasai region. As a sixth-grade student in February 2023 at Malwanu Institute, she received school supplies and a uniform from the Church of the Mennonite Brethren in Congo (CEFMC) with support from MCC. (Fairpicture photo/Justin Makangara)

Success is strengthened through adaptations like tackling discrimination they face from the host community, strengthening teachers' capacity, collaborating with other institutional actors and addressing gender disparity."

During the focus group discussions, four students said they were not going to school for a period of one-to-three years when they were in Angola, due to the language barrier and a different education system. Three students said they were out of school for eight months to one year because they were hiding in the forest. Three others who were hosted in another province said they continued with classes in other schools, but they were either ahead or behind with the syllabus. In the entire school of Malu Mimpe, all the children have been out of school for extended periods of time.

Reports from teachers: Teachers notice withdrawal signs from the children at the beginning when they join school. One teacher explained the grim experiences displaced children in his classroom have undergone:

> The militiamen abducted girls from schools, purportedly to join the militia, but instead forced them to 'marry' militia members. Other girls were recruited and forced to fight. Often, they were placed on the front lines armed only with a broom or kitchen utensil, because they were believed to provide magical protection to the whole unit. They are supposed to shake their skirts to repel bullets.
>
> Programs such as peace clubs and teachers' training on peace education have formed a safe platform where these children share their stories freely. These programs have led to a change of attitudes and behaviors toward the children and helped us as teachers provide unique support to vulnerable children. This is necessary alongside the skills they receive in class because if their mental state is troubled, they don't perform well.

Reports from parents: Educational support for our children has been a great relief to us as we try to pick up the pieces together and rebuild our lives, parents report. One mother explained, ''I am grateful because I like my children to learn and make their lives better. Because of the support, I only search for food for my family because education has been taken care of."

From other local actors: Justin Ngalamulume , Inter-Action education coordinator, highlights additional barriers to education beyond violence, such as child labor and early marriage. "The children provide cheap labor at the mines and girls' education is also low as early marriage provides an alternative livelihood to the parents. In primary school there are many girls but in secondary the number is very low. We come together to sensitize the community on gender disparity and the importance of educating all children. Through the work of the monthly education cluster meetings, we see improvement in enrollment of the children."

Psychosocial support and socio-emotional learning activities help children deal with the stress, trauma, violence and discrimination they have experienced and build resilience and well-being."

Key lessons from MCC's experience in Kasai province: Integrating displaced children directly in the national education system continues to yield positive results for the children. This success is strengthened through adaptations like tackling discrimination they face from the host community, strengthening teachers' capacity, collaborating with other institutional actors and addressing gender disparity.

To provide a durable solution, education systems need to respond to students' needs related to language, discrimination and flexibility in enrolment documentation requirements. Successful integration requires feeling secure, learning in an inclusive environment and being surrounded with a supportive social network.

All 16 students we interviewed confirmed that they have experienced discrimination by others who are jealous of the support from the project. Some reported their items being stolen, such as books and pens. This is common, as some host community children will be equally struggling and cannot afford school supplies. Joseph Nkongolo, Community of Mennonites in Congo (CMCO) project coordinator, noted that to reduce conflict they have started sensitization with the whole school on the day of distribution to explain why specific children were being supported.

To create a safe return to school, MCC supports peace awareness training for teachers, which improves both teacher and student well-being. From the teachers' testimonies, the training helped them first as teachers because they were also affected during the violence. "It brought self-healing to me, and I am now able to help the children better. It was difficult at the beginning—most students would sit alone, and others would not talk freely in class even answering questions. After the training, we have learned how to identify those unique cases and we are able to talk to them separately," noted one teacher. Psychosocial support and socio-emotional learning activities help children deal with the stress, trauma, violence and discrimination they have experienced and build resilience and well-being.

Collaboration with other local actors is particularly important. While solutions should involve the government at the core, they also require meaningful participation of parents, teachers, churches and civil society. The work in Kasai has been easier because the church has helped with coordination and works directly with the schools and health clinics to meet specific needs of the most marginalized children.

To bridge the gender disparity, the project supports more girls in primary school to ensure they move up to secondary level and provides hygienic kits each term to ensure that girls receive quality education without interruption due to menstruation. The introduction of a local women-led peacebuilding initiative called Women's Situation Room has also borne positive results in terms of reconciliation and conflict resolution in the community.

Some displaced children still give up and drop out, but supporting their integration into local schools has given hope for so many to continue their studies, providing a critical path toward positive holistic growth, resilience and social cohesion.

Mildred Obiero is MCC capacity building coordinator in Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Learn more

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Refugees' struggle to receive quality schooling in Lebanon

Refugee children, already confronted with the multifaceted adversities of displacement, encounter a unique set of difficulties that threaten their fundamental right to education. Ensuring this basic right to education can result in profound social and emotional benefits that significantly affect their lives.

In Lebanon, MCC's partners Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD) and Dar el Amal (DAA) work to help Syrian refugee children successfully integrate into the Lebanese schooling system. PARD does this by providing preschool education that prepares young children to enter the public primary schools, while DAA focuses on helping older, out-of-school children catch up and re-integrate into school.

After being affected by the co-occurring adversities of COVID-19 and the economic crisis, the educational sector in Lebanon continues to struggle to deliver quality schooling services, even for Lebanese children. Public school teachers' repeated strikes, driven by their demands for fair wages, along with the escalating tuition fees in private schools, have created numerous barriers to children's access to education. According to UNICEF figures, "3 in 10 young people in Lebanon have stopped their education, while 4 in 10 reduced spending on education to buy essential items like basic food and medicine."

Within this educational landscape, Syrian refugee children, who started arriving in 2011, face additional specific challenges related to curriculum and acceptance into the Lebanese schooling system. The government has made efforts to provide children with curricula that would enable them to continue their education in Lebanon, bridging the fundamental disparities between the Syrian and Lebanese education systems.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), supported by international funds and in collaboration with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), developed and approved specific curricula for Syrian refugee children that would facilitate their enrollment in schools, like Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum and the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). ECE is a program for children of preschool age, designed specifically to assist refugee children to enroll in the Lebanese elementary schooling system. Ideally, the ECE curriculum can be completed in four months, but some organizations such as PARD have chosen to extend it to a full academic year with MCC's support. ALP is a curriculum that allows children aged nine to 17 who have been out of school for more than two years to catch up with the Lebanese educational system. This curriculum aids children in reintegrating into schools, mitigating the dropout issue. These initiatives are a response to the recognized importance of providing children with education and the alarming possibility of children being denied education to which they have a basic human right.

While these curriculum adaptations have made a significant positive impact, the current state of the education sector in Lebanon is making it increasingly challenging to maintain the continuity and effectiveness of

Learn more

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"The government has made efforts to provide children with curricula that would . . . bridge the fundamental disparities between the Syrian and Lebanese education systems."

these initiatives. The most pressing and impactful challenge is that public schools have ceased to offer afternoon shifts for Syrian refugee children, which they had previously offered free of charge. With public school teachers and MEHE employees going on strikes, the efforts to keep hosting Syrian children in schools are reduced. Even when teachers discontinued their strike and finalized the scholastic year for Lebanese children, Syrian children remained excluded. DAA particularly observed this reality as they work with elementary-aged children in refugee-dense areas in Mount Lebanon. They have observed more children now out of school in general due to the disruptions in public education, in addition to the unaffordability of private schools. On a different level, PARD witnessed this problem through the lack of cooperation of public schools that refuse to accept children graduated from ECE. As children are not receiving official certificates from MEHE due to strikes, public schools in Beirut, where PARD operates, are displaying further resistance to admitting refugee children.

Another significant barrier for refugee children is the inflation of fuel and transportation prices when the government lifted subsidies. According to PARD, even when schooling is free, families are reluctant to enroll their children if no transportation is available, considering the financial burden of covering transportation costs. DAA also reported drops in children's school attendance due to transportation issues. As schools are not accessible for children by foot due to distance or unsafe roads, unaffordable transportation hinders children's school enrollment and attendance. Although organizations can address this issue by budgeting for transportation fees in projects, this approach also necessitates discussions with donors, as transportation expenses tend to consume a significant portion of project budgets.

These are a few of the multiple challenges facing the country and subsequently hindering Syrian children's access to systemized education, denying them a basic human right and adversely impacting their future. Both PARD and DAA have observed that children's emotional and social development are at stake with the absence of peer-to-peer interaction in systemized curricula. PARD highlighted the importance of a structured school year, as they find more children participating in labor when they attend ECE in cycles of four months rather than a full scholastic year. Shockingly, children as young as six are being put to work when systemized education is absent from their lives. Families regard education more seriously when it spans the normal scholastic year. Children also display better social interactions and disciplined behaviors because of attending a systemized school. The absence of regular schooling hinders proper social and emotional development. For DAA, child marriage has also been reported as a major concern related to girls dropping out of schools. With more time out of school, girls become more prone to child marriage especially in communities that value the girl's marriage over her education.

Considering this reality, MCC continues to support projects in Beirut and Mount Lebanon with DAA and PARD to ensure children are receiving their basic right to education. These partners continue to respond to the needs as much as possible within their capacities, taking a holistic approach in attempting to improve children's lives.

Zeina Bazzi is program coordinator for MCC Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

“Even when schooling is free, families are reluctant to enroll their children if no transportation is available.”

Children in a kindergarten classroom run by MCC partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD) in Wadi Zaine, Lebanon. June 2023. (MCC photo/Mackenzie Schwarz)

A school for Sudanese refugee children in Egypt

“Sudanese refugees [in Egypt] saw advantages in having their own separate school rather than integrating their children into the local education system.”

With a unique emphasis on Sudanese education for Sudanese students, St. Raphael School offers refugee children in Cairo a safe place to learn, mature and embrace their own cultures, while also breaking down barriers that have led to generations of inter-tribal conflicts in their homelands. Sudanese refugees in Cairo have seen advantages in having their own separate school rather than integrating their children into the local education system, so in 2015 the Anglican Diocese of Egypt founded St. Raphael School in response to the expressed needs in a neighborhood where many Sudanese families were living.

Seeking refuge in Egypt: Driven to flee their countries of Sudan and South Sudan by regional and tribal conflicts and the resulting food and livelihood instability and lack of personal safety, Sudanese people have sought refuge in Egypt for decades. According to Human Rights Watch, there are between two to five million Sudanese refugees in Egypt. An ongoing, steady flow of refugees into Egypt is interspersed with major spikes in new refugee arrivals, with more than 200,000 Sudanese people fleeing to Egypt in mid-2023 following the breakout of civil war in Sudan.

Students at St. Raphael School, Cairo, Egypt. May 2022. (St. Raphael School)

With the appropriate paperwork, refugees can register with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and begin the process for resettlement in other countries. However, this process can take more than a decade, and they are never able to gain Egyptian citizenship with its attendant rights. During these years of waiting, families try to develop a new sense of “home” in Egypt, as they seek apartments to rent, jobs for the adults and educational opportunities for their children.

Educational opportunity, curriculum and identity: Many challenges stand in the way of those educational opportunities. Fleeing their own country, children have often already missed several months or even years of school as internally displaced persons before arriving in Egypt. They often do not have the necessary paperwork required to enroll in Egyptian government schools or may be too old for the expected grade level. Even if they can attend Egyptian schools, they fear racism and bullying due to cultural and language differences.

“Education means settlement, security and preparation for life in any country. Education is for the future.”

Despite these challenges, refugee communities value education highly and attribute child labor, crime, gang activity and teen pregnancy to trauma and lack of education. St. Raphael’s headmaster, Helmi Awl, says that “Families come to Egypt for protection. Education means settlement, security and preparation for life in any country. Education is for the future.” Church social service programs and refugee-led community-based organizations try to meet these educational needs with schools such as St. Raphael.

Classes at St. Raphael use the Sudanese curriculum, with the hope that graduates will eventually return to their country for further education or for work. For many years, the Egyptian government has officially recognized the Sudanese graduation/matriculation certificate and permits graduates to apply for Egyptian university degrees. Awl notes that parents prefer the Sudanese curriculum for their children. He explains that the parents

believe that studying their own history in their own language will help the children retain a sense of their own identity and culture, even as a displaced community.

Impact of trauma: The emotional impact of war and displacement is immeasurable for the entire community. Awl notes that young children coming to take placement tests for the next school year have sat frozen at their desks sobbing. A six-year-old boy talked about seeing dead people in the streets before his family fled to Egypt, just one example of the deep trauma the children carry. Having teachers from the same community and tribes, with similar experiences, contributes to students' sense of safety, understanding and belonging. However, the teachers also fled their country in times of conflict and are processing their own trauma while relating to traumatized students.

"[Sudanese refugees] believe that studying their own history in their own language will help the children retain a sense of their own identity and culture, even as a displaced community."

Awl recognizes the need for more help in this area. He hopes to refer families to Refuge Egypt, another Anglican ministry, for psychiatric counseling, while a Sudanese priest from the diocese will offer trauma healing sessions for the teachers for the coming school year.

Challenges in the community and a vision for change: Sudanese society is diverse and complex, creating challenges that don't disappear just because families relocate to a new country or because they have a "Sudanese school." At St. Raphael, members of one tribal group founded and ran the school, a typical pattern for refugee schools as extended families tend to settle in the same neighborhoods when possible. However, this also contributed to conflicts of interest and lack of administrative accountability. A major conflict arose, and the previous headmaster along with several teachers and more than 80 students left the school and tried to start another one. This was a time of great stress for the school.

When Awl and Madlaine Sostanees, the education sector director, were called to serve in 2022, they prioritized building strong and trusting relationships between the diocese, teachers and families. They have intentionally focused on diversity in the school, with teachers and students now representing five different tribes. As stated in their April 2023 annual report for MCC: "St. Raphael became a truly multi-ethnic gathering of families, and no longer had such a 'majority-minority' imbalance along ethnic group lines. Today the school has diversity among the students: Sudanese and South Sudanese, Muslims and Christians, from multiple cultures and ethnic groups. Students and staff members can find acceptance without feeling like an outsider to the main group." At the same time, parent groups acknowledge that it is still challenging for tribes to relate to each other.

"The teachers also fled their country in times of conflict and are processing their own trauma while relating to traumatized students."

Helmi explains, "Change comes when we live together and can share our culture. We become more open-minded, which is happening at the school." After some challenging times, Sostanees and Awl both see hope for the future due to the diocese's vision for the school to bring about change and the commitment to provide the best education. Awl says, "The children see that commitment. They want a better life and are willing to be the future for their families and for Sudanese society."

Sandra Shenk Lapp is MCC representative for Egypt.

Learn more

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"Initially, P4T was often perceived as a risky venture due to its refugee-led nature. Many donors harbored doubts."

Supporting refugee-led initiatives in Uganda

The best way organizations like MCC can support refugees is to assist refugees' efforts to help themselves. Planning for Tomorrow Youth Organisation, a refugee-led MCC partner providing education, health, livelihoods and protection programs at Kyangwali refugee settlement in Uganda, stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of self-help among refugees, driven by their unwavering commitment to empower their community.

The name Planning for Tomorrow (P4T) originated from a story of despair and hopelessness whereby life was on pause for more than 40,000 refugees, mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, that lived in Kyangwali refugee settlement in 2007. There was extreme poverty and suffering, yet they had to completely rely on inadequate relief support and only hoped to return to their home countries every "next year" to fix their lives. The name P4T was therefore a call for action by a group of over 30 refugees for everyone to start striving now to change the narratives of their futures.

Guided by a mission of empowering communities to become healthy and self-reliant, P4T started working in education by opening an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre in May 2015, as the refugee settlement lacked such a centre to provide children with foundational skills for future educational success. After successful implementation of the ECD program, P4T further responded to community demand by expanding into work at the primary and secondary level with a focus on bringing down high drop-out rates in the refugee settlement.

Initially, some donors perceived P4T as a risky venture due to its refugee-led nature, harboring suspicions that the founders were primarily focused on personal survival and lacked the requisite commitment to drive their visionary goals forward. Moreover, donors were skeptical of the competence of the passionate refugees employed by P4T to effectively implement donor funds. These preconceptions, however, began to shift as donors witnessed our successful partnerships, particularly with international NGOs like MCC who took the risk to place their trust in us.

P4T was given the opportunity to test our hypotheses that we could address community problems, change the way teaching and learning were happening, reverse the traumatic feelings and behaviours displayed by some children in class and begin to reduce the normalization of violence against children by both teachers and parents in the name of disciplining children.

In pursuit of these goals, P4T has provided its ECD centres with teaching and learning materials for caregivers (ECD teachers) to mix play, creativity and practical guides in their teaching sessions and supported a trauma sensitive approach, including implementation of talk therapy and peace clubs. Our dedicated caregivers undergo comprehensive training and receive ongoing support through refresher courses and follow-up sessions. These sessions equip them with the necessary skills to identify signs of trauma in the young learners, forming the foundation for implementing effective talk therapy. Subsequently, our caregivers conduct follow-up home visits and, when deemed essential, make referrals to specialized professionals.

The true effectiveness of this talk therapy becomes apparent in the transformation of the child's behaviour, which typically encompasses increased socialization with peers, enhanced attentiveness in the classroom and significantly improved attendance rates. Moreover, this holistic approach has instigated a notable shift in social norms regarding violence against children, both by teachers and parents. It has resulted in heightened awareness of child protection and more informed practices in handling toddlers, all contributing to making children safer at home, in the community and at school. However, in any diverse setting, disparities in perspectives exist and some parents may not readily cooperate, necessitating further focused intervention.

MCC's partnership also supported P4T's *organizational development and approach* in important ways that have brought so much benefit to the reputation, growth, programming and the long-term impact of P4T in Kyangwali. P4T and the Church of God established the ECD centres as *community* ECD centres, with parents playing a significant role in the operations and service delivery through centre management committees. With MCC's support, P4T engaged committee members in dialogue and reflection about the centres' work, which has improved their sense of ownership, leadership and management skills and has helped them to appreciate the teachers' experiences and become actively involved in the efforts to provide quality education to their children.

MCC has also supported capacity development for P4T staff in financial management, safeguarding and monitoring and evaluation, along with encouragement for P4T to meet important governance expectations (having a functional board) and regulatory requirements (signing an MOU with the Office of the Prime Minister).

P4T is a strong refugee-led organization today because what had been feared by donors as a weakness (its refugee-led character) is now seen as a strength. P4T's foundational vision is collaboratively steered by two refugees and one Ugandan, and most of the senior management and administrative roles are held by refugees, including key positions such as the executive director, global director, operations manager and the primary school headteacher. Within our educational projects, refugees serve as teachers, non-teaching support staff and project and field officers. Being a refugee-led initiative provides P4T with an unparalleled connection to the community, particularly to the children we serve. The management at P4T fosters a familial bond with teachers, learners and children, a connection that propels everyone towards the shared goal of academic excellence, transcending the myriad challenges they collectively face.

With MCC's accompaniment, P4T has grown to the point where major international organizations recognize its work and collaborate with it. In a recent search by War Child Holland for local partners in education, P4T outshined seven other organisations assessed for the same partnership opportunity. P4T has also earned a role in the Uganda Education in Emergency Consortium, in which we provide mental health and psychosocial support for vulnerable refugee children and teachers under a project funded by the European Union (ECHO).

This case study of P4T shows the value of taking a risk to support small, refugee-led initiatives to address refugees' needs. For so long, P4T's work

"MCC's partnership also supported P4T's *organizational development and approach* in important ways that have brought so much benefit to the reputation, growth, programming and the long-term impact of the organisation."

Kellen Karungi, caregiver of the oldest preschool class, calls on students at P4T Primary School at the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement in western Uganda. February 2022. (MCC photo/ Matthew Lester)

"P4T is a strong refugee-led organization because what had been feared by donors (its refugee-led character) as a weakness is now seen as a strength."

“Being a refugee-led initiative provides P4T with an unparalleled connection to the community, particularly to the children we serve.”

was invisible, and we struggled to get recognition. Through our partnership with MCC, P4T was able to gain recognition and win the confidence of the broader donor community, strengthen our administrative structure and transform our programming to provide quality education for refugee children as a step towards the vision of a healthier and self-reliant community.

Daniel Ameny is executive director of P4T in Uganda.

Accompanying youth displaced by rural-to-urban migration in Guatemala

In the chaotic, loud, fast-moving world of La Terminal market in Guatemala City, internally displaced migrants from Guatemalan’s rural Mayan highlands struggle to find a level of economic well-being amid a disorienting social world. Puerta de Esperanza, an MCC partner organization, supports the education and well-being of children and youth whose families live in the market through interventions that help them develop their own agency.

La Terminal market is a world unto itself. The largest market in Central America, La Terminal is a multi-acre mass of market stalls, warehouses, suppliers, wholesalers, retail shops, dark claustrophobic alleys, jam-packed streets and a dizzying array of different sections all organized under an inscrutable internal logic. It is a central hub for all sorts of economic and even political activity in Guatemala City, bordering some of the most expensive real estate in the city and the gentrifying hipster locale of Cuatro Grados del Norte. The market gets its name from being the last and first stop for the famous, brightly decorated, former U.S. school buses called “chicken buses” that hurtle up and down the roads heading out to Guatemala’s largely indigenous Mayan highlands.

“Children and families must calculate significant opportunity costs when they make decisions about school and other community activities.”

In part because it is a transportation hub, the world of La Terminal market is not just an economic or physical one, but also a social one. In the dank and dingy alleyways behind buildings and market stalls or crammed into the upper floors of blank-faced commercial buildings are hundreds of *pensiones*—tiny, cramped, often windowless rooms where internal migrants from the Mayan western highlands of Guatemala live. Whole families from Guatemala’s 21 Indigenous Mayan territories move to La Terminal in search of economic opportunity, driven there by the structure of a Guatemalan economy that, in the words of Carlos Hernandez, staffer at Puerta de Esperanza, “doesn’t have (and really never has had) opportunities for rural families to survive and thrive in their territories.” These structural inequalities are exacerbated by the increasing impacts of climate change on rural livelihoods, displacing women like Ruth Yax from their deep roots in the rural Indigenous territories, to live and work in La Terminal so that “we can survive and provide for our children.”

Earning enough income living in the *pensiones* and working in the market is challenging. Women often earn income by doing laundry for the truck drivers and others who come in and out of the market daily. Men work unloading and loading those same trucks and children contribute through odd jobs throughout La Terminal, including finding recyclable materials in the market’s small garbage dump. The *pensiones* charge for water and use of bathrooms along with rent. Everyone works, everyone is there striving for the *bienestar economica* (economic well-being) of their families.

In this context, Puerta de Esperanza supports children and youth in educational attainment through homework help and tutoring, but children and families must calculate significant opportunity costs when they make decisions about school and other community activities. The decision to attend the local public school, tutoring sessions at Puerta de Esperanza or a parents' workshop often come down to whether the family will have enough money to pay rent or use the bathrooms in their pension.

Puerta de Esperanza builds its interventions on a foundation of context-driven accompaniment, acknowledging the social world of La Terminal and resisting temptation to impose a particular vision of *bienestar social* (the good life/social welfare) on children and families. According to Hernandez, understanding that the precarious existence of life in La Terminal is preferable to the precarities of life in rural Guatemala for most of the displaced internal migrants "shifts our mindset from trying to change what we see to accompanying students and families in their struggles."

Puerta de Esperanza staffers spend significant time visiting students and families in their *pensiones*, market stalls and communal washing tanks to understand family dynamics and build relationships of trust and mutual sharing. Puerta de Esperanza staff serve as teachers, career counselors and life coaches. They also provide psychosocial support as students navigate discrimination and bullying in the local public schools where they are immediately identified as being from La Terminal.

The social world of La Terminal is disorienting, even for staffers at Puerta de Esperanza, like Charlie Welch. The culture of La Terminal is louder, faster and *mas dura* (harder) than the places where folks come from. According to Welch and Hernandez, this "hustle culture" impacts the children and youth of the market, as they must shed what they've learned growing up in rural Guatemala. They observe that this creates a kind of "independence that disconnects" children from traditional authorities, and a "forced equality" with their parents, further alienating children from community, connection and relationships.

Teachers and staff at Puerta de Esperanza struggle with the impacts of the displacement from traditional authority and the hustle culture of the market. Creating peaceful classroom spaces requires the reestablishing of authority and accountability lost in the disconnecting independence of La Terminal. A key task is helping students reestablish relationships of interdependence and mutual respect among family members and neighbors. According to Welch, "we must laugh with them, we have to be flexible, we have to change the cassette of their lives and work on their emotional intelligence. We also have to work at not being too *suave* (soft) or too *cariñoso* (gently caring), because that language doesn't land at first, without a relationship of trust built over time."

More than anything, the work of Puerta de Esperanza is about empowering students to be protagonists of their own life stories so they can build healthier relationships, self-images and communities within the world of La Terminal market. This means reserving judgement, allowing students to stumble without catastrophic consequences and supporting them through the choices they make. Hernandez notes that "if students want to run away from their home in a pension, we will encourage them to work with the ceviche sellers while they decide and not the marijuana pushers. If they

Learn more

Puerta de Esperanza facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064351732918

"Puerta de Esperanza staff serve as teachers, career counselors and life coaches."

"A key task is helping students reestablish relationships of interdependence and mutual respect among family members and neighbors."

“More than anything, the work of Puerta de Esperanza is about empowering students to be protagonists of their own life stories. . . . This means reserving judgement, allowing students to stumble without catastrophic consequences and supporting them through the choices they make.”

want to wash clothes like their mom, then we work to develop them as the best, safest and most secure washer women possible.”

When students who are poised to graduate high school through the support of Puerta de Esperanza give tours to visitors from Guatemala and beyond, they tell their story of struggle and life in La Terminal, in part because they have been liberated by the accompaniment of Puerta de Esperanza staff and teachers to write their own stories.

Jack Lesniewski is MCC representative for Guatemala and El Salvador. Keren Arevalo is MCC connecting peoples coordinator in Guatemala.

Empowering returning refugee youth through peace education in Burundi

Reintegrating young refugees back into their home communities can generate new conflicts and challenges, but also creates an opportunity for tremendous learning, growth and empowerment for both the young returnees and their host peers.

Burundi has experienced periods of debilitating violence since gaining independence in 1962. The violence of the country’s civil war (1993–2005) and the attempted coup of 2015 led hundreds of thousands of Burundians to flee the country, living as refugees in the surrounding countries of Tanzania, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. As political stability increased in recent years and President Ndayishimiye invited the refugees to return, over 200,000 refugees have come home. Most of these returnees have resettled in the border provinces of Kirundo, Ruyigi and Makamba along the Rwanda and Tanzania borders.

Returning to Burundi is a joyous occasion for many former refugees, but it is also complicated. Some returnees have been away for ten or 20 years. They often find their land and houses have been occupied by their neighbors who did not flee. Access to land is a critical need as over 90% of Burundians work as subsistence farmers. Disputes over who is the rightful owner of land is common in areas with returnees.

“The clubs inspire students to consider the differences they can make in their community.”

The transition is especially difficult for children. The education systems in Tanzania and Rwanda use English, while in Burundi the instructional language is French. Returnee students struggle because of the language and other structural differences. Many of them are moved down in grades and viewed as unintelligent, which is demoralizing to the students. But the primary issue returnees face is physical and psychological violence. Intense mistrust exists between returnees and those who had stayed (referred to as “hosts”). Families fled Burundi because they feared violence due to their ethnicity. They were being intimidated by their neighbors and their community. Then they underwent very difficult living conditions and often unspeakable atrocities in refugee camps for many years. Upon returning to Burundi, those who stayed often revert to using the same intimidating words and actions as before.

In this context, MCC’s partner Restoration Burundi (Restobu) saw an opportunity to work with returnee and host youth together, with the goal to promote social integration of returnees and to empower students to look beyond past conflict and together forge a new way forward in Burundi.

Restobu was well positioned for this opportunity. A young organization, founded in 2014, their entire staff is under 35 years old. Their passion for servant leadership is visible in everything they do. Their founder and national director, Nibigira Gratien, was himself a refugee as a child during the country's civil war, so he personally understands the plight of returnee children.

In 2021, Restobu launched an initiative to establish youth peace clubs in six high schools along the Rwanda border. The clubs are made up of 50% returnee students and 50% host students. Each peace club has between 30 and 60 members, who meet once a week after school. The clubs inspire students to consider the differences they can make in their communities. Club supervisors develop a topic each week and then open the floor to students to share experiences and learnings from the past week. The topics include trauma healing, servant leadership, peaceful conflict resolution, environmental protection and the principles of democracy. The clubs also incorporate songs and games into each session.

Both Restobu and MCC have been pleasantly surprised by the positive results of the project in only two years since its inception. At Busoni high school, student members of the peace club have set up a mediation team made up of two boys and two girls to help resolve conflicts before they escalate. The students noticed that if conflicts reached the attention of the school administration, punishments were very harsh, so they decided the best way forward would be to resolve conflicts before they reach the administration. In the past year, the administrators have reported no cases of conflict reaching their level. The headmaster of Busoni high school highlighted that "these teachings should not be limited to students, as clearly school authorities could also benefit."

At Bugabira high school, dropout rates are high. In 2021–2022, 39 students of the 351 enrollees (over 10%) did not complete the school year, but all 60 members of the peace club stayed in school, thanks to the support the students learned to give each other. One of the themes developed by the clubs is mutual aid. Host students and returnee students work together while preparing exams to strengthen one another's skills. They formed a community of empowered leaders, working through conflicts between themselves and with their classmates.

An additional goal of the peace clubs is that students learn to apply what they have learned beyond the classroom. Beatrice Niyogushimwa, an 18-year-old returnee, lost her mother in 2015 and was orphaned. She became intensely angry and refused to talk to any other children who were not orphaned themselves. Through the Restobu project, she joined the Bugabira peace club and learned strategies for dealing with her trauma. She was able to forgive, and now dedicates herself to helping other students whom she can see are traumatized themselves.

Denis Munezero, a 17-year-old host student, joined the Marembo peace club last year. He learned about compassion, community service and peaceful conflict resolution and decided to put what he learned into practice to serve a needy returnee family living near him. Gaudence Nsaguye is over 90 years old and lives with her disabled son, Etienne Ncamuruvugo, in a tiny mud and straw hut. Seven of Nsaguye's 11 children were killed during the civil war and the others left to pursue work, apart from Etienne, who was unable to do so. Munezero recognized the need of his

"The primary issue returnees face is physical and psychological violence. Intense mistrust exists between returnees and those who had stayed."

Learn more

Restobu website: https://www.restorationburundi.org/en

neighbors and committed himself each day to fetching water from the nearest source, one hour away. He also brings Nsaguye and Ncamuruvugo food when his family has extra.

Claude Ntiburumusi, a 20-year-old returnee, applied his peace club training to his own family. He used nonviolent communication to convince his father to stop drinking alcohol which had become a damaging addiction. He even formed a peace club with the adults in his community to teach them what he was learning at school. His mother was shocked. She said, "there were people fighting over family issues [in our community]. Ntiburumusi intervened and resolved the conflicts. Our neighbors marveled to see such a skillful young boy giving advice."

"Restobu is optimistic that investing in youth will lead to a future generation of empowered, transformed leaders despite a long history of violence, oppression and trauma."

After learning about environmental protection in his peace club, Jonas Uwimfura was struck by the problem of lack of toilets in his community, which led to the practice of open defecation which was contaminating the community's water source. After seeing how this problem endangered lives in his village, Uwimfura decided to build a public toilet and convinced his parents to help him find roofing sheets and cement for the project. "I have done my best to make the toilet attractive so that those who pass by or live nearby can use it freely and stop defecating in rivers and forests."

These examples show the power of peace education to have incredible impact on vulnerable students, their families and their communities. With these results, Restobu is optimistic that investing in youth will lead to a future generation of empowered, transformed leaders despite a long history of violence, oppression and trauma.

Nibigira Gratien is the national director of Restoration Burundi. Jean-Marie Bukeyenza is MCC program officer and Adam Butler is MCC program coordinator. Nibayemere Vincent is Restobu's communications officer. All live in Bujumbura, Burundi.

Crossing Borders: the power of sharing story through the arts

"The Bhutanese army deported us to Nepal and they took away our citizenship. In Nepal, they hated us too because they said we are not Nepali." [Bhutanese girl – grade 11]

"When ISIS came to Kobani, we walked across no-man's land with the black smoke from explosions behind us and ahead, barbed wire and heavily armed Turkish soldiers protecting their border." [Kurdish-Syrian girl – grade 10]

Crossing international borders is difficult. Borders define nations. They are often man-made lines, guarded with artilleries of hurt, ignorance, prejudice, propaganda, fear and apathy. Borders keep *us* in and *them* out, preventing us from knowing and understanding one another. When children cross borders as newcomers and refugees, they are statistically at risk for higher incidence of mental illness, loneliness, high school dropout, gang involvement and lower quality of life. But what if there are ways to mitigate the damage, dismantle the barriers and facilitate healing? What if border crossings can be a path to peace and to personal and global healing?

The arts have great power to hit people at the level of the heart and be a catalyst for change. At Waterloo Collegiate Institute (WCI), a secondary school in Ontario, Canada, a team of students called "Crossing Borders" uses the arts to inspire empathy and positive action and show people how to *see* each other. The team—a mix of newcomer and Canadian-born youth—tours a multi-media performance in which youth share their stories using slides, spoken word, film, drama, documentary, dance and music.

Crossing Borders (CB) grew unexpectedly out of a series of focus groups we held as a response to concerns expressed by newcomers. We pulled youth together around a table, used their problems as prompts on large pages of newsprint, had them brainstorm solutions, and before we knew it, we usually had the beginning of an amazing idea.

"We feel like we are invisible." This led to the original Crossing Borders documentary.

"I want to be a part of this place, but I don't know how." This led to full-school presentations by students who came as refugees.

"Why is it so hard to make Canadian friends?" This led to building a Crossing Borders team.

A border crossing helped lead to the creation of the namesake documentary, *Crossing Borders*. "Why have I never met those students before?" asked a grade 11 Canadian-born student, who had just finished volunteering at a community event with some newcomer youth from her school. "They are amazing. We've been in the same building all along, and I've never met them." After this interaction, with the help of some teachers to build trust and facilitate the collaboration, this student produced a documentary that featured displaced youth telling their own stories in their own words.

A proactive principal allowed the documentary to be shown in an assembly to the entire student body for Human Rights week. Here were local students being featured as the key educators of their peers for the first time in the school's history! Audience members all got to *cross borders* that day by *meeting* and *seeing* their classmates in a new light. Most Canadians do not know what refugees are going through or how they are feeling. But now, instead of talking about nameless, faceless people and issues from across the world, the school heard from real students in their midst.

The exercise resulted in a climate shift in the building. Video participants began to walk a little taller. They were approached by friends and strangers alike:

"Great job – I could never have gone through what you did."

"I haven't ever spoken in front of the school, and English is my first language!"

The power of this experience inspired us to keep going. Schools often bring in guest speakers at high cost. Why go looking outside when the resources are already there? Why not feature displaced youth as experts to teach their peers and teachers? Given a few tools to promote confidence and guarantee success—tools like making a professional slide presentation and public-

Learn more

Pitman, Teresa. "Crossing Borders: Waterloo Collegiate's Performance Tour Group Breaks Down Barriers between Canadian-Born and Newcomer Students." EdCan Network, September 2017. Available at https://www.edcan.ca/articles/crossing-borders/

EdCan Network video about Crossing Borders: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMK7C8ITxPY

Remembrance Day video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx2RicuzJY8

Peace Wall project video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGGOKs_0wZc

speaking coaching—displaced youth can present their stories together with their Canadian-born student-allies, and share the power in a school, church, village or organization.

"I'm from the Congo, and I lived in a refugee camp almost all my life. I saw lots of kids die from malnutrition." [Congolese boy – grade 10]

"Actually, my father was lucky, he was just arrested and wasn't killed." [Iranian boy – grade 11]

"Nobody chooses to be a refugee. I sure didn't! In fact, isn't it only by genetic lottery that those lucky enough to be born in Canada are not themselves refugees?" [Colombian girl, at risk of deportation – grade 11]

"In 1994, my country had one of the most horrific genocides ever, when the Hutus' hatred for the Tutsis became so intense that they tried to kill all the Tutsis in the country. But the only differences between these groups are some basic physical features and how they make a living. It would be as silly as everyone in Canada with blue eyes killing everyone with brown eyes. The thing is, in my country it wasn't silly because it really happened." [Rwandan girl]

Crossing Borders creates a climate where friendship across differences is made possible through 'accidental-intentional' connections – opportunities that are designed to bring people together for collaborative work on projects with common goals. What matters most is the interaction and the sharing of power—'I am seen, and I matter.'

Many of the students in CB are not who you would typically see on a stage. Crossing Borders shines a light on what newcomers *can* do and helps them gain access to sources of power thus *leveling the playing field*. It also leads to them taking bigger risks.

"Without Crossing Borders, I never would have imagined making a speech in front of the whole school. I never would have realized I had a lot to offer. I certainly would not have run for student government. Not only did I make the speech, I got elected!" [Syrian boy, here on his own – age 16]

"After presenting, I realized that I am actually proud to be a refugee and I want others to see why. Without Crossing Borders I don't know where I'd be. Seriously. I would not be in university as I would not have finished high school. Crossing Borders was the one thing I could hang onto during my struggle to adapt to Canada. It gave me a forum where my opinions mattered. It helped me develop to my potential. Through Crossing Borders, I got connected to important organizations and was able to prove my skills. [Iraqi girl – age 18]

Story can take many forms and becomes even more powerful when taken outside the school into the real world of the community and beyond. In one project, we helped make a video for Remembrance Day featuring youth impacted by war, accompanied by a live performance by our senior orchestra. In another, the team presented stories and spoken word at a teachers'

college, and then sat as panelists for a Q & A with the teachers in training who were moved by their raw accounts of the challenges of being newcomers in a Canadian school. One said, "We have had a lot of presentations this year by so-called professionals in the field, and this, by far, has been the most valuable and powerful presentation we have seen."

Another impactful format was an interactive photo installation project called *Peace Wall*. To start, youth leaders got training on camera skills, but more importantly, role-played how to approach and greet students and teachers, share vulnerability and invite others to join their initiative. The project generated a host of powerful one-to-one dialogues that helped people meet and start to *see* each other. Even the work of cutting and pasting photos and assembling the installation provided a space for sharing and healing.

With a little imagination, a good project will lead to spin-offs. The team turned the *Peace Wall* exhibit into an interactive travelling installation and recently took it to a national youth conference where kids from Saskatchewan got to interact with a dozen successful refugees, some for the first time, as they had their photos taken and added their own statements about peace to the wall.

And why stop there? Imagine the shift in ideology and the change that is possible when displaced youth get to influence *decision makers*. Not to mention the shift in these youth that happens when they recognize that such decision makers want to listen to them.

Two Crossing Borders youth sat on a small panel to present to a group of principals and superintendents of education, sharing their reality of being newcomer students, including very hard experiences like invisibility and lack of opportunity. The team has been advisors for the Local Health Integration Network and for the Centre for Community Based Research's study on the adaptation of Syrian newcomers. They have been keynote presenters at a conference of principals and trustees in Toronto and equity trainers of their own student council.

Crossing Borders has evolved beyond anything we dreamed when it started. It's a testament to the power of the arts and the power of listening to young people and letting them lead. We don't know what the future will look like, but the possibilities are as big as our imagination.

In the words of a grade 11 girl from Colombia: "By the way, I'm pretty sure a lot of this stuff works. A refugee myself, with very little English and lots of issues, I got involved, increased my confidence, and graduated in only two years. I feel pretty good about myself right now. The work you do *will* have an impact."

Lynn Schulze has been a Canadian-born ally and the facilitator of Crossing Borders since its inception. She lives in Ontario, Canada.

Sidra Ismail, left, from Kurdish Syria, and Ester Mukarurema, from Democratic Republic of Congo, perform a "spoken word" presentation for World Refugee Day Event, Waterloo Region, Ontario, 2020. (Ahmet Yildirim)

During recess in February 2023, Angele Kingenzi, 13, left, plays a favorite game, Zango, with, left to right, Berenice Leta, Mama Bilo and Malaku Mazenga at Malwanu Institute in Kwilu province, central DR Congo. (Fairpicture photo/Justin Makangara).

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