

Missing Persons:

Refugees Left Out and Left Behind in the Sustainable Development Goals



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In 2015, the world came together to agree to a shared agenda for peace and prosperity, to end poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequalities, and spur economic growth. This agenda was centered on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by all countries by 2030, coupled with a commitment to Leave No One Behind. Now—10 years out from the agenda’s deadline—UN Member States will make their first comprehensive assessment towards achieving the goals. The headline findings will be that countries are far off track to meeting the goals and immediate action is needed to course-correct.

In 2018, in a report titled “SDG Progress: Fragility, Crisis and Leaving No One Behind”, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Overseas Development Institute sounded the alarm about how far fragile states were falling behind. The results were staggering: Four out of five fragile and conflict-affected states are off track to meet the SDGs. Other sources confirm this. The SDG Index shows that the four countries lagging the furthest behind—Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria—are reeling from conflict and overlapping crises, including displacement crises. Collectively, they are estimated to represent nearly one-quarter of global poverty in 2030, based on current trends.¹ Those caught in crisis within these countries—some 8.8 million people²—are most likely to be left behind.

Meeting the SDGs will require a plan and concrete solutions to improving the well-being of these populations. That is why, this year, the IRC took a closer look at how refugees in particular—given their concentration in fragile contexts and their unique vulnerabilities—are faring in relation to national populations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Refugees are being left out and left behind in the Sustainable Development Goals. They are excluded from SDG-related data collection, monitoring frameworks, national reporting, and national development plans.
- There is no shared strategy for ensuring refugees—one of the world’s most marginalized populations—achieve the SDGs, despite UN Member States’ commitment to Leave No One Behind.
- To meet the SDGs by their 2030 deadline, we must make refugees count, make refugees a part of the plan, and accelerate progress for refugee well-being.

Refugees left behind

There are 25.9 million refugees around the world and the vast majority of them have found refuge in poor and unstable countries.³ Twelve out of the 15 countries hosting the highest share of refugees are fragile.⁴ Global statistics show that refugees are worse off than their peers. Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers,⁵ and just 23 percent of refugee adolescents attend secondary school compared with 84 percent globally.⁶ Displacement can be a driver of poorer outcomes. Whereas 15 percent of all Syrian marriages in Jordan included a child bride in 2014, that number soared to 36 percent in 2018.⁷ Being a refugee can also mean facing increased barriers to self-reliance. The five economies with the most restrictions on women seeking employment include four of the top refugee hosting countries.⁸

Beyond these global headlines, there is little data routinely available to measure refugee well-being. Even in contexts where data on refugees is available, it is often not comparable to data collected to measure progress towards the SDGs. There have been some ad-hoc studies in places like Lebanon and Ethiopia, however, where we can start to piece together a picture of refugee progress. Our in-depth analysis of this available data is deeply concerning: In Lebanon, nearly 70 percent of Syrian refugees live below the national poverty line, compared to 26 percent of their Lebanese peers.⁹ And in Ethiopia, just six per-

¹ Samman, E. et al. 2018. *SDG progress: Fragility, crisis, and leaving no one behind*. Overseas Development Institute and International Rescue Committee. <https://www.rescue.org/report/sdg-progress-fragility-crisis-and-leaving-no-one-behind>

² UNHCR. 2019. *Mid-Year Trends – 2018*. <https://www.unhcr.org/5c52ea084.pdf>. Data includes all populations of concern.

³ UNHCR. 2019. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018*. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

⁴ Samman, E. et al. 2018. *SDG progress: Fragility, crisis, and leaving no one behind*. Overseas Development Institute and International Rescue Committee. <https://www.rescue.org/report/sdg-progress-fragility-crisis-and-leaving-no-one-behind>

⁵ UNESCO and UNHCR. 2016. *No More Excuses: Provide education to all forcibly displaced people*. <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/no-more-excuses>

⁶ UNHCR. 2017. *Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis*. <https://www.unhcr.org/left-behind/>

⁷ Al Jazeera. 2018. *Child Marriage on the Rise among Syrian Refugee Girls in Jordan*. April 18. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/child-marriage-rise-syrian-refugee-girls-180418084029464.html>

⁸ World Bank Group. 2017. *Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/25016/9781464809385.pdf?sequence=11&isAllowed=y>

cent of Eritrean children have reached reading fluency by grade 4, compared to 15 percent of Ethiopian children.¹⁰ In Lebanon, nearly three times as many Syrian refugee households as Lebanese households are not able to meet their nutrition needs.¹¹

Refugees left out

But you will not find these statistics in any official SDG progress reports, where refugees are all but invisible. Of 42 countries that submitted 2019 Voluntary National Reviews—an optional self-assessment of national progress toward the goals—just 13 mentioned refugees as meriting specific attention. Not one single VNR includes data on refugees to measure their progress towards the SDGs.

Refugees' exclusion from VNRs is illustrative of what we call the “SDG refugee gap”. This gap is represented by a lack of data on refugee well-being, the exclusion of refugees from SDG monitoring frameworks and national reporting, and the failure to include refugees in national medium- and long-term development planning. This gap is why the SDGs are in crisis.

But, it is not too late

Two key events could make 2019 a watershed year for closing the SDG refugee gap. Heads of State will come together at an SDG Summit during the high-level segment of the UN General Assembly in New York in September. Their Declaration—a roadmap for the next decade of progress towards the SDGs—should define a clear path for how countries can include refugees in their SDG plans and progress measures. This Declaration must be followed immediately by action if the next decade is to be one of progress. One opportunity to do so is in December when global leaders assemble in Geneva for the inaugural Global Refugee Forum; there, they should make concrete pledges toward refugee inclusion.

We need a plan

There are three core areas where immediate action is required to fully realize Agenda 2030 for refugees:

1. Make refugees count

Poor development outcomes among refugees cannot be addressed when the magnitude of needs remains unknown. Well-being measures such as poverty levels, learning outcomes and nutrition levels, are not regularly or systematically collected for refugees. Most refugee-hosting countries do not collect data or produce statistics on refugees. Refugees, particularly those living in camps, are generally not included in national household surveys.¹² Instead, the UN system—specifically UNHCR—leads on the data collection and publication. However, UNHCR collects data with the primary purpose of targeting aid; regional and country situation reports therefore emphasize the number of people reached with programs and the needs of refugees. Data on levels of income, consumption, employment, health, and education are rarely reported. Even when these outcome-level data are collected, the indicators do not always align with measures used in household surveys, making them incomparable with SDG indicators.

To ensure refugees are included in national, regional and global efforts towards the SDGs, it is essential to collect and publish data and analyses that allow their comparison to host populations. This will require:

Aligning indicators and coordinating data collection.

Humanitarian donors and implementers should align their outcome indicators with the SDG indicators (see Table 1). Indicators for the Global Compact on Refugees should align with the SDGs to the extent possible. With small changes to data collection, humanitarian sector data could be aligned with SDG indicators and used to support disaggregation by vulnerable populations. The UNHCR-World Bank Joint Data Centre should support this effort.

Investing in national statistical capacity. National statistics offices (NSOs) should include refugees in household surveys and work with humanitarian actors to fill data gaps on refugees. Donors and international financial institutions must provide adequate funding and technical support to governments to build the capacity of NSOs to include refugees in national statistics.


⁹ UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP. 2018. *Vulnerability Analysis for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR-2018)*. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67380>

¹⁰ The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. 2015. *Education Sector Development Programme V: Programme Action Plan*. https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2016-06-ethiopia-education-sector-plan-vi_0.pdf

¹¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2018. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018*. FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/i9553en/i9553en.pdf> and UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP. 2018. *Vulnerability Analysis for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR-2018)*. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67380>

¹² Samman, E. et al. 2018. *SDG progress: Fragility, crisis, and leaving no one behind*. Overseas Development Institute and International Rescue Committee. <https://www.rescue.org/report/sdg-progress-fragility-crisis-and-leaving-no-one-behind>

¹³ UNHCR. 2019. *Ethiopia Country Regional Response Plan January 2019 – December 2020*. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/21971>

Sustainable Development Goal	SDG target (by 2030)	SDG indicators	Proposed outcome for refugees	Proposed target for refugees	Proposed indicators for refugees
	Achieve full, productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	Average hourly earnings of female and male employees, by occupation, age, persons with disabilities; unemployment rate, by sex, age, persons with disabilities	Refugee women, men and youth can access local labor markets and obtain safe and decent work (equal pay for work of equal value)	Increase in available jobs; increase in employment, including self-employment	% of refugees with legal right to work and able to realize it; unemployment rate by sex, age, status, disability; average hourly earnings by job, sex, age, status, disability

2. Include refugees in the plan

There is increasing recognition of the duration of refugee crises and the need for actors to meet their longer term needs, but this rhetoric has not yet been turned into meaningful action. Setting targets for refugees that align with the SDGs and tracking progress can have an impact on achieving outcomes. In Ethiopia, for example, where the country set a target of enrolling 75 percent of primary-aged refugee children, enrollment rates jumped from 54 percent to 72 percent over the course of one year.¹³ To achieve the SDGs, donors, humanitarian and development partners, and host governments must commit to including refugees in SDG planning and monitoring. This will require:

Prioritizing refugee inclusion in VNRs. Countries that publish a VNR in 2020 and beyond should include data on refugee well-being in their report. At the Global Refugee Forum and in the next HLPF resolution at ECOSOC in 2020, UN Member States should commit to include refugees in VNRs. The UN Secretary-General and senior UN leadership should make this a priority and encourage Member States to make this commitment. Future HLPF sessions must focus on the needs of refugees and official UN reporting should include data on VNRs and refugee well-being.

Including refugees in national development plans.

UN Member States should include refugees in their action plans for achieving the SDGs, including national and sector-specific development plans. International financial institutions that provide technical assistance to low- and middle-income countries and support on the development these plans should encourage the inclusion of refugees, and collaborate with humanitarian actors to do so.

3. Accelerate progress for refugee well-being

As outlined in this report, it is imperative to remove barriers, and scale-up approaches, to improve refugee well-being alongside national populations. This will require:

Policy reforms. UN Member States must institute policies that will enable refugees to become self-reliant and strengthen policies to protect refugees' rights and well-being. Refugee-hosting governments must uphold refugees' freedom of movement and their rights to education and to work. Donors and international financial institutions should support these policies through adequate multiyear financing and economic incentives (e.g. trade concessions), including through compact agreements. Refugee-hosting countries must also put policies in place that seek to improve gender equality, including those that will reduce violence and abuse against women and girls and that will support women's economic empowerment. UN agencies, governments, donors and the private sector must work together to alleviate policy barriers to more effective and efficient approaches, particularly in protracted crises, and ensure they support solutions and reporting frameworks that align with the SDGs.

Evidence-based interventions. There is a scarce but growing body of evidence of what works to improve refugee well-being. The UN, government and humanitarian and development organizations must work together to continue to build a robust evidence base for the types of solutions that will create sustainable outcomes for refugees. Donors must invest in generating this type of evidence and direct resources to partners who can implement interventions known to generate improved outcomes.