Educating our Generation of Innocents

How will they learn when they get there? If you are a refugee, it may not be clear when you leave your home where ‘there’ exactly will be. If you are a child or young person, you may not have any say in this exodus or destination. All you know is that you have to go where you are taken, or that you have to take yourself to a place where you hope there will be safety. There is little thought beyond the immediacy of removing yourself or your family from the present danger.

For decision makers and lay people in destination countries, it is crucial to consider holistically not only the logistics of how and where newcomers will be housed and fed but also how minds will be helped and years not wasted from the development of education and skills. Displaced peoples need help to survive independently in their new homes. In the UK, the Education Act of 1996 (Section 14) requires local authorities to provide full-time education to all children of compulsory school age (ages 5-16). The quality of this education, especially host language provision, varies by region and area. The UNHCR reports that refugees are “five times more likely to be out of school than the global average.” This statistic only increases with age.

As an example, in the UK, when further and higher education students are ‘in process’ as asylum-seekers, they are classed as international students – with accompanying higher costs. Unfortunately, as non-home students, they neither have access to bursaries or grants nor are they, or similarly classified family members, able to work to fund course fees. They are in an idle limbo. This is a tragic result of a government decision not to follow the 2013 European Union Reception Conditions Directive for allowing asylum seekers to seek employment within nine months of arrival and application.

Since 2008, the Student Access for Refugees (STAR) has advocated on behalf of those seeking refugee status in the UK to have equal access to education, in particular to higher education. Over 26,000 UK university students have campaigned under three primary banners: for refugees to have safe routes to European safety; to have classification as ‘home’ students for access to education funding; and to have work permission in order to both build independence and reduce dependence on public funds.

For younger children, charities like Doorstep Library in the UK allow volunteers to work with families in underprivileged housing; this mobile library brings volunteers into opportunities for positive engagement with families, particularly those with children falling outside the compulsory school provision range. Refugee Action, a UK-based charity, released research in June 2017 demonstrating how many refugee families fall into poverty while they are still being processed for permanent settlement, with many living in extremely unsafe and squalid conditions.

Regardless of your current country of residence, there may be organizations similar to STARs and Doorstep Library in your local area. Please consider getting involved either through advocacy or on a more personal level. You never know who you may help.

www.unhcr.org/uk/education.html
www.star-network.org.uk
www.doorsteplibrary.org.uk