

# **ACCELERATING THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN INTO NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS: A NEW PARADIGM FOR EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

## **AUTHOR(S)**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Notwithstanding the landmark commitments established under the 2017 Djibouti Declaration, the provision of education for refugees and migrants across the Horn of Africa (HOA) remains in a state of protracted crisis. By 2026, the region hosts a displaced population exceeding 4.6 million refugees and several million internally displaced persons (IDPs). While Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti have demonstrated significant political will by formally pledging to integrate these learners into national frameworks, the translation of policy into tangible outcomes is hampered by entrenched systemic vulnerabilities.

In 2026, the global landscape of human mobility has shifted. Displacement is no longer a temporary "crisis", but a protracted reality driven by regional instability, climate change, and economic necessity. For the millions of refugee and migrant children globally, the right to education remains the most significant predictor of long-term self-reliance and social cohesion.

This policy brief therefore argues for a fundamental transition from parallel, NGO-led schooling to full inclusion within National Education Systems (NES). While parallel systems provide immediate relief, they often lead to "educational dead-ends" where certificates are unrecognized, and children remain marginalized.

However, the core challenge is that national systems are often sclerotic—stymied by rigid documentation requirements, language barriers, and a lack of trauma-informed resources. Our organization proposes a holistic framework that addresses these barriers through:

1. Legislative Reform: Removing administrative hurdles in enrollment.
2. Capacity Building: Equipping teachers with the tools for diverse classrooms.
3. Integrated Services: Linking education with health and legal support.

By investing in the inclusion of migrant children, the state secures a "triple dividend": it upholds international human rights obligations, prevents the social costs of a "lost generation," and builds a future-ready workforce that contributes to the national GDP.

## **POLICY PRIORITIES**

Through the years, we have seen the Horn of Africa move away from a legacy of encampment-based exclusion toward a policy of integrated protection. Where historical mandates once restricted refugee mobility and access to public infrastructure, current regional commitments are driving a transition toward inclusive governance, ensuring that displaced persons are no longer managed in silos but are instead absorbed into national development agendas.

Fast forward to the current Policy Landscape, which is defined by Member States' commitment to the (Inter Governmental Authority on Development) IGAD Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF), which aim to:

- Harmonize standards for teacher training.
- Recognize certificates across borders (e.g., Sudan to Ethiopia).
- Include (as the case in Kenya) refugee data into the National Education Management Information Systems (NEMIS).

Following these policy priorities that have been put in place, it is important to note that across the Horn of Africa, IGAD member states have achieved significant policy alignment by establishing legal frameworks that guarantee refugees and returnees equitable access to national education, vocational training, and the formal labor market. This shift is characterized by a transition from traditional "encampment" models toward integrated settlements, supported by robust national action plans and reforms in legal identity management that provide displaced persons with the documentation necessary to access essential services, from school registration to financial inclusion.

However, while these states continue to strengthen their institutional capacities for inclusion, the implementation of these costed action plans remains vulnerable to regional inflationary pressures, necessitating a dynamic and refined approach to sustainable funding and resource allocation. It is observed that "on-the-ground" implementation is stalled by a lack of teacher capacity and localized resistance in host communities.

## BACKGROUND / CONTEXT

The Horn of Africa currently serves as a primary host for one of the world's largest concentrations of forcibly displaced persons, managing a complex landscape of millions of refugees and asylum seekers. In recent years, regional governance has undergone a decisive paradigm shift, moving away from isolationist models toward progressive integration frameworks. This evolution, catalyzed by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Djibouti Declaration, aims to move beyond temporary humanitarian assistance toward the structural inclusion of displaced learners within national education systems. By prioritizing educational equity, member states seek to bolster refugee self-reliance while simultaneously mitigating the socio-economic pressures exerted on host communities. However, despite this robust policy momentum, the transition from legislative intent to classroom-level reality is frequently obstructed by acute resource constraints, infrastructural deficits, and systemic barriers to access.

As per one of our organizational core values, we look at the education of refugees and migrants in an inclusive and integrational aspect:

***“An education system that includes all students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements. This means making sure that teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport, and toilets are appropriate for all children at all levels. Inclusive education means all children learn together in the same schools. No one should be excluded. Every child has a right to inclusive education, including children with disabilities.”<sup>1</sup>***

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE\\_summary\\_accessible\\_220917\\_brief.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_brief.pdf)

The following critical bottlenecks have been identified as the primary inhibitors to achieving the policy objectives.

### **1. The "Secondary Drop-off" and Infrastructural Attrition**

Current enrollment metrics across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda illustrate a pronounced "scissors effect." While primary-level enrollment remains relatively resilient at approximately 70%, secondary-level participation undergoes a precipitous collapse. This attrition is primarily driven by an acute infrastructure deficit in remote border regions and "Arid and Semi-Arid Lands" (ASAL), where the physical absence of secondary facilities effectively terminates the educational trajectory of displaced youth.

### **2. Regulatory Hurdle & Certification Inconsistency**

A pervasive state of "Legal Limbo" prevents students from translating prior academic achievements into host-country systems. The absence of recognized Legal Identity documentation often precludes migrant students from sitting for national examinations. Furthermore, the lack of standardized Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) frameworks frequently results in students being "downgraded" by multiple grade levels. This systemic misalignment acts as a primary catalyst for academic frustration and subsequent premature withdrawal from the school system.

### **3. Fiscal Volatility and the 2025–2026 Resource Deficit**

The regional education sector is currently navigating a severe 25% funding contraction within the Sudan and Somalia Regional Refugee Response Plans. This shift in the global humanitarian funding landscape has jeopardized essential non-academic drivers of attendance, specifically school feeding programs. In the context of the Horn of Africa, where food security is a major variable in school retention, these fiscal shortfalls directly correlate with plummeting enrollment rates and diminished institutional capacity.

## **POLICY OPTIONS**

Regionally, and in line with the international standards, the policy commitments have moved towards inclusion as seen in:

- The Djibouti Declaration: Most Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states, including those in the Horn of Africa, have adopted this

declaration, which provides a framework to remove legal and policy barriers to education and integrate refugees into national systems.

- National Legal Reforms: Countries like Kenya have enacted legislation, such as the Refugees Act of 2021, to provide a robust legal basis for refugee access to services, including education, on par with host citizens.
- Integrated Settlements: Initiatives like Kenya's Shirika Plan aim to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements, fostering socioeconomic inclusion and joint development for both refugee and host communities.

These have informed our organizational aspects as:

- Implementation of "Portable" Digital Records

Migration Pulse Hub advocates for the adoption of Blockchain-verified academic records. This involves the development of a regional digital repository where students can store digital copies of transcripts and birth records, bypassing physical documentation requirements during transit.

- Integration of Data Systems

Merging UNHCR/NGO data with National Education Management Information Systems (NEMIS) which will enable targeted funding based on real-time student demographics.

- Incentive-Based Teacher Integration

Addressing the shortage of qualified staff by fast-tracking the certification of refugee teachers. This entails the creation of "Joint-Training Hubs" where host-country and refugee teachers undergo the same pedagogical training, fostering social cohesion and classroom quality.

- Focusing on the "Transition Years"

This targets the interventions needed for the transition from Primary to Secondary and Secondary to TVET (Technical and Vocational Education). Including the allocation of 40% of new infrastructure grants specifically to multi-purpose learning centers in border areas that serve both refugees and local host communities.

- Climate-Resilient Education

With 7% of regional displacement now climate-driven (drought/floods), education must be mobile. This calls for the expansion of Radio and Offline Digital Learning platforms to ensure continuity for pastoralist migrant communities.

- Administrative Amnesty

Removing the requirement for birth certificates or prior school transcripts for initial enrollment. This allows for immediate access; prevents "lost years" of schooling.

- Hybrid Transitional Models

Utilizing Community Learning Centers (CLCs) as "bridge" spaces that follow the national curriculum but offer intensive language and psychosocial support. This eases the shock of transition into overcrowded public schools.

- Bilingual National Curricular

Integrating "Translanguaging" where the home language is used alongside the host language in early grades. This action prevents academic lag while the child is still learning the host language.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

These recommendations are in line with MPH's diverse expertise in capacity building, litigation, research, and advocacy.

### 1. Legal & Advocacy (Litigation Strategy)

- Strategic Litigation on Documentation: File "test cases" in national courts to establish that the *right to education* (per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) supersedes local administrative laws regarding immigration status.
- Policy Monitoring: Create a "Legal Help Desk" to support migrant families who are illegally turned away by local school administrators.

### 2. Education & Capacity Building

- Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Train national teachers not just in "teaching" but in recognizing signs of displacement-related trauma.
- Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs): Implement condensed curricula for older children who have missed multiple years of school, allowing them to "catch up" to their age-appropriate grade level.

### 3. Health & Psychosocial Support

- School-Based Health Hubs: Integrate mental health screenings and nutritional support directly within school grounds to reduce the "stigmatization" of seeking help.

- The "Whole-Family" Approach: Offer language classes and legal clinics for parents at the school. When parents feel integrated, student attendance rates rise.
4. Research & Evidence-Building
- Impact Evaluation: Conduct longitudinal studies on the economic benefits of integration versus the long-term costs of exclusion (unemployment, social friction).
  - Vulnerability Mapping: Identify "education deserts" where high concentrations of migrant children coincide with under-resourced public schools.

## **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS**

The brief is pegged on the Guiding principle for 2026 - "Inclusion Pays", which emphasizes that including migrant children is not just a humanitarian duty but a national investment. Educated migrant children contribute to the host country's GDP and foster social cohesion, whereas exclusion creates a permanent underclass and increases future social costs.

***Key Message: "A child's right to learn is not defined by the borders they crossed, but by the community that welcomes them."***

Moving from a signed policy to a functioning classroom requires careful navigation of logistics, social dynamics, and funding. Below are the critical pillars for successful implementation. The following are factors to consider for the implementation – "From Policy to Classroom"

1. Sustainable Financing & Resource Allocation
  - Flexible Funding Streams: Advocate for "Education in Emergencies" (EiE) funding to be channeled directly into the national budget rather than separate NGO projects.
  - Per-Pupil Adjustments: Implement a "weighted" funding formula where schools receive additional resources for every refugee or migrant child enrolled to cover language support and counseling.

2. Teacher Empowerment and Support
  - Incentivizing Inclusive Instruction: Teachers in high-density migrant areas should receive professional development credits and, where possible, "inclusion bonuses" or additional classroom assistants.
  - Peer-to-Peer Support Networks: Establish "Professional Learning Communities" where teachers can share best practices for managing multilingual classrooms and de-escalating conflict.
3. Managing Social Cohesion (The "Host Community" Factor)
  - Avoiding the "Zero-Sum" Perception: Implementation must ensure that the arrival of migrant children leads to improvements for *all* students (e.g., better facilities or lower teacher-student ratios). This prevents resentment from the host community.
  - Intercultural Dialogues: Launch school-based community programs that celebrate the diverse backgrounds of the student body, involving local parents in the integration process.
4. Digital Integration and Data Privacy
  - Portable Digital Records: Utilize blockchain or secure cloud-based systems for student records so that if a child moves again, their academic history follows them without the need for physical paperwork.
  - Privacy Guardrails: Ensure that school enrollment data is firewalled from immigration enforcement to build trust with undocumented families.
5. The "Health-Education" Nexus
  - Screening and Referral: Implementation should include a mandatory but non-punitive health screening at the point of entry, identifying vision, hearing, or psychological needs that might hinder learning.

## MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

To ensure that integration is not just a policy on paper but a lived reality, MPH advocates for a Results-Based Management (RBM) framework. Monitoring should move beyond "simple enrollment" to measure the quality of inclusion and social-emotional well-being.

### Key Performance Indicators

Indicator Category	Specific KPI	Purpose
Systemic Access	% of migrant children enrolled without standard	Measures the effectiveness of legal

	documentation (amnesty success rate).	advocacy and administrative reform.
Academic Progress	Transition rate from Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs) to mainstream grades.	Measures the effectiveness of "bridge" education models.
Social Cohesion	"Perspective-Taking" Index: Frequency of inter-ethnic social ties and peer support incidents.	Measures the reduction of social friction and bullying in the classroom.
Holistic Health	12% of newly enrolled students receive a mental health "well-being check" within 3 months.	Tracks the integration of health services into the education system.
Systemic Quality	Teacher Retention & Confidence: % of teachers reporting they feel "fully equipped" to manage diverse classrooms.	Monitors the impact of capacity-building and professional support.

Migration Pulse Hub (MPH) will employ the following innovative evaluation methods:

- The "Most Significant Change" Technique: Use qualitative storytelling to capture how integration has changed the lives of individual families, which is powerful for advocacy and donor reporting.
- Firewalled Data Dashboards: Support the government in developing real-time, anonymized data systems that track migrant student outcomes without compromising their legal safety.

**Moving from Mapping to Action: The Advocacy Roadmap**

1. Phase 1 (Months 1-3): Evidence Gathering. Use your research wing to produce a "Cost of Inaction" report.
2. Phase 2 (Months 4-6): High-Level Briefings. Host "Closed-Door Roundtables" with the Ministries of Education and Finance to present the policy options.

3. Phase 3 (Months 7-12): Pilot & Litigate. Launch a pilot program in a high-density district while simultaneously using strategic litigation to challenge documentation barriers.

## CONCLUSION

### The "Inclusion Dividend"

The integration of refugee and migrant children into national education systems is the most consequential investment a host country can make in its own future. In 2026, we must recognize that exclusion is a luxury we cannot afford. Every year that a child spends outside of a classroom is a year of lost potential, increased vulnerability to exploitation, and a future cost to the state's social and health systems.

This approach will ensure that we move from a "crisis response" to a "systemic integration" model, in which we will do more than just uphold international law; we will foster a more resilient, diverse, and economically vibrant society. The success of this transition depends on a multi-sectoral alliance where legal rights facilitate enrollment; health services ensure readiness, and high-quality pedagogy delivers results.

Our organization remains committed to bridging these sectors through evidence-based research, strategic litigation, and hands-on capacity building. Together, we can ensure that every child—regardless of their origin—has the opportunity to learn, belong, and contribute.

***Final Call to Action: "Inclusive education is not a gift we give refugees; it is a strategic investment in regional stability and a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development."***

## ANNEX

### Stakeholder Engagement Map: Power & Interest Matrix

This map categorizes stakeholders based on their influence over the policy and their interest in its outcome.

Stakeholder Group	Primary Role	Engagement Objective
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Ministry of Education	Policy design, curriculum and certification	<b>Partner:</b> Secure commitment to include migrant data in national EMIS.
Ministry of Finance	Budget allocation and fiscal sustainability	<b>Advocate:</b> Prove the "Inclusion Dividend" (long-term GDP growth vs. short-term cost).
Ministry of Interior/ Home Affairs	Documentation, legal status and borders.	<b>Negotiate:</b> Establish "Firewalls" between schools and immigration enforcement.
Teachers Unions	Classroom Implementation and labor rights	<b>Consult:</b> Address concerns regarding workload and provide specialized training.
UN Agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF)	Technical expertise and international funding.	<b>Collaborate:</b> Align local policy with the Global Compact on Refugees.
Municipal/Local Authorities	Managing local infrastructure and social services.	<b>Empower:</b> Provide grants for "Intercultural Neighborhoods" to reduce local friction.
Migrant and Host Community Leaders	Building trust and ensuring student enrolment	<b>Involve:</b> Use as "Cultural Mediators" to bridge the gap between families and schools.