

The Global Refugee “Crisis”: Learning Is the Key to Solving It

Matthew Reynolds



Tajik and Afghan refugee children enjoy a puppet show at a school in Vakhdat, 10 kilometers east of the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. © UNHCR/Didor Sadulloev

What is a refugee? Are the terms “migrant” and “refugee” interchangeable? Are we required to help refugees? Or is it a matter of choice?

These are a few of the questions at the heart of the “global refugee crisis” that we all hear about frequently today. And the wide spectrum of common answers to them vividly underscores the central importance of *teaching* and *learning* about refugees in any serious effort to understand their plight and, more importantly, make a meaningful contribution to our collective effort to respond to it.

It was with the pressing need to organize this collective effort in the immediate aftermath of World War II that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency) was established in 1950 with an act of the UN General Assembly. With a headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, the new UN Refugee Agency was placed, literally and figuratively, at the center of the postwar world’s most consequential forced displacement drama and given the mandate to lead and coordinate international action to protect and assist refugees. UNHCR remains at the heart of the global refugee drama today.

Where We’ve Been

UNHCR began with a staff totaling 34 people charged with supporting governments in their work to help millions of people forcibly uprooted by the war. Those 34 individuals were given three years to complete the job before UNHCR was to be dissolved.

In 1954, UNHCR won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work in Europe. Two years later, however, the agency was called upon to help with a new crisis, a revolution in Hungary that forced 200,000 people to flee the violence and seek safety in neighboring Austria. In the decades that followed, war, violence and persecution generated fresh, large-scale displacement crises in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. UNHCR was there to try to help ensure that refugees fleeing those crises were able to reach safe ground and humane, efficient receptions. In 1981, UNHCR was awarded a second Nobel Peace Prize for its continued work assisting refugees around the world.

Today, 69 years later, levels of forced displacement around the world are the highest ever recorded. The scope, duration and nature of the conflict and persecution that drive forced displacement continue to grow and morph, and refugee stories feature prominently and routinely in news reports and public discourse around the world. With a presence in 134 countries and over 16,800 staff (80% of them working on the “front lines” of the world’s main refugee situations), UNHCR works closely with governments, corporations, civil society, multilateral institutions and many others. As always, the agency’s goal remains delivering solutions for refugees at home and abroad that are humane, innovative, efficient, and practical and that animate both the common human instincts to aid vulnerable people fleeing danger and to stay as safe as possible in the process.

Where We Are

With more than 70 million people today forcibly displaced or stateless, the scale of humanitarian need is enormous and the life-saving work of UNHCR and our partners remains urgent and as relevant as it has ever been. The staff of our organization is working flat-out, around the clock and around the world to provide the life-saving help that refugees need. While UNHCR works to expand and diversify our sources of support, the organization still depends very much on voluntary contributions from governments around the world. In this respect, the United States continues to play a leading role in delivering the political and financial support that UNHCR requires to respond to and operate in refugee situations. The longstanding and continuing commitment of the U.S. government and the American people to UNHCR is well known and UNHCR is very grateful for it.

Yet despite sustained support of the United States and many other countries for the work that UNHCR does overseas, it’s no secret that the debate around some aspects of refugee policy is today more rancorous than it has been for some time. As factors (armed conflict chief among them) that force people to flee from their homes multiply and endure in many parts of the world, the numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons continue to climb. And where refugees were once perceived as a phenomenon confined mainly to remote corners of the developing world, it is increasingly clear that all countries and all peoples are, in one way or another, involved in addressing



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the challenge that forced displacement presents to humanity today. The issues at hand can no longer be shrugged off by peoples of the world’s richest nations as academic abstractions or niche charitable causes. It is clear today to all that they are real, they are immediate and they are part of our everyday conversation in the workplace, in classrooms and at kitchen tables around the country and around the world. We are today at a crossroads. And the choices we make now about principles and policies—about who we are and about what kind of world we want—will resonate for many generations to come. In this respect, education about refugees and about organizations like UNHCR that work to help them could not be more timely and pertinent.

Where We’re Going

The good news is that there are solutions, both near- and long-term. The “global refugee crisis” as it is often called, sprawling and disquieting as it may feel, is less about the numbers of people who have been forced to flee their homes in various

parts of the world than it is about summoning the collective determination to make sure those people are identified and helped in their moment of vulnerability and need. The total number of refugees among the more than 70 million people who have been displaced or are stateless is currently around 26 million, but UNHCR is confident that even this worldwide refugee total is not beyond the ability of the world's 7.5 billion people to manage in the short term in ways that are just and safe and that respond to the interests of all of us.

Beyond responding effectively to the brutal realities of large-scale displacement once it has already occurred, however, it is more important than ever today to remember that the underlying drivers—armed conflict, for instance, or state violence against ethnic minorities—are situations created by people that can be resolved and averted by people through political processes. The overwhelming majority of people who have been forced to run for their lives to escape violence stay as close as they safely can to their own homes. They want nothing more than to go home as soon as it is safe to do so. Resolving the crises already in progress around the world that are forcing

people to flee and *learning* from them to take the steps needed to prevent similar crises in the future *is the real solution to the world's refugee crisis*. In addition to the work UNHCR is doing to bring new solutions to existing refugee situations, the organization also continues to advocate with governments and many others for stronger action to address the “root causes” of forced displacement.

The world today faces stark choices that are illuminated in part by the global refugee situation and the way humanity will decide to address it going forward. The social studies classroom is the right place today for tomorrow's citizens to begin coming to terms with these choices. UNHCR deeply appreciates the work of the National Council for the Social Studies in delivering the education about refugees to U.S. students today that will help them make wise and compassionate decisions tomorrow. 🌍

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Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies

Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant. Foreword by Walter Parker.
C3 Inquiry Series, co-published by NCSS and C3 Teachers, 167 pp.

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The authors of this book are the lead authors of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

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