

Private Participation in the Education of Syrian Refugees: “Investing in the Crisis”

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Concept Note

Rationale for Research and Goals

As public education systems in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey struggle to accommodate Syrian refugee populations, the private sector has presented itself as offering solutions. For instance, in January 2016, the Global Business Coalition for Education pledged \$75 million to support the education of Syrian refugee children. During a White House Summit on Refugees in September 2016, President Obama presented a challenge for “the US private sector to draw on its unique expertise, resources and entrepreneurial spirit to help refugees...,” with education as one of three impact areas. Such commitments and proclamations are indicative of a growing perception that private entities are key players in the support of education for Syrian refugees.

Yet critics have argued that private educational participation in contexts of fragility and crisis contributes to the weakening of public systems, exacerbating inequities, and impacting the legitimacy of the state. Private engagement moreover undermines a key element to education as a human right: the responsibility of government. Finally, questions have been raised if private engagement promotes “disaster capitalism,” with powerful corporate actors exploiting fragility for profit gains.

This research explores the complex interrelationship between conflict and privatization through a case study of the education of Syrian refugees. The analysis aims to better understand which private entities are engaging in the sector; the rationales and motivations that drive their involvement; and the activities through which private companies and foundations support education. We derive our findings from a range of data sources, including a systematic internet search to determine non-state actors participating in the sector; analyses of documents, webpages, and social media from private companies and foundations; and key informant interviews with the private sector and those who partner with the private sector including businesses, foundations, UN agencies, NGOs, bilateral donor agencies.

Preliminary Descriptive Findings

Based on data collected, 144 total non-state organizations are found to be engaged in Syrian refugee education, including NGOs, religious organizations, businesses, and private foundations. These include 44 private businesses, such as Accenture, Bridge International Academies, Goldman Sachs, Hewlett Packard, IBM, McKinsey & Co, Microsoft, and Pearson Education. Private foundations also account for a large number of actors, with 22 philanthropies engaged in the sector, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, IKEA Foundation, Open Society Foundation, and Vitol Foundation. 77% of private businesses and foundations have headquarters in the Global North, and 62% of private businesses and foundations do not hold education as part of their primary mandate.

Private corporate actors are engaged in a range of educational operations. The most common types of engagement are: funding to the education sector (generally via NGOs or UN agencies); provision of vocational training; and development and distribution of technological education innovations. Most initiatives are partnership-based, between businesses, foundations, non-governmental organizations, and UN agencies. For example, Pearson Education has funded Save the Children UK to establish pilot education centers in Jordan. McKinsey & Company has partnered with Vitol Foundation and Bridge International Academies to support a local NGO in opening non-formal learning centers in Lebanon. IKEA Foundation is working alongside War Child to supply tablets to refugee children with math and literacy curriculum taught through gaming in Jordan and Lebanon. And the Global Business Coalition for Education includes several large corporations as partners and has worked to garner and coordinate investment, policy-making, and advocacy on Syrian refugee education, including the establishment of the Education Cannot Wait Fund. Many partnerships do not include local government agencies, public school administration, teachers, and teachers' organizations.

Preliminary Analysis

Mass Proliferation, Yet Lack of Coordination

A surge in private participation in the education of Syrian refugees is very recent, with most actors first engaging since 2015, described as a mass proliferation of private involvement: "From things like consulting companies, to small start-ups, to large multi-nationals, everyone seems to be involved" (Interview, Business, July 5 2016). This surge in engagement is seen by some as problematic, as there is a lack of coordination and knowledge-sharing between actors: "It's a little crazy to be honest... In the Syria response there are so many people doing so many things and it's not coordinated. Sometimes I really wonder if because of this lack of coordination, if this is actually doing a disservice to the sector" (Interview, NGO, July 6 2016).

Decontextualized Interventions: The Dominance of Education Technological Interventions

A dominant form of engagement is through education-related technology. Our mapping found a wide variety of technologies being introduced to refugees by private actors, including: online digital learning platforms and online courses, tablet and handset distribution including online curriculum, vocational training in technology, the development of operating systems, and portable wifi hubs for use in schools. Some actors view technology as an apt form of intervention because of the need for a "solution that can reach as many people as possible for the cost that is as low as possible, that involves as little teachers as possible. Because we do see that there's a huge lack of teachers" (Interview, Foundation, Sept 5 2016).

Yet this focus on technology is being critiqued by many as de-contextualized from the local context and not valuable for many refugees. As a UN agency representative states: "A lot of these solutions focus on hardware without really the understanding of peoples' development that's needed to ensure buy in, sustainability, and efficacy more generally... somehow you see them trying to apply the same solutions to these incredibly varied contexts in ways that sometimes aren't appropriate" (Interview, UN agency, July 26 2016). Similarly, an NGO actor argues that "There's a disconnect between what is technically and logistically appropriate and

what looks good from a branding and marketing perspective... I think there's a lot of good intention, but a lack of awareness about what the practicalities of operating in these environments are" (Interview, NGO, July 12 2016). Put plainly: "If you don't have the resources to build latrines or to pay teachers, I mean ... investing in technology isn't well placed" (Interview, UN agency, Oct 6 2016).

Support to Private, Non-Formal Education

Although many business actors work collaboratively with governments and ministries of education, others are bypassing the public sector and establishing privately-run schools, or what is often termed "non-formal" education environments. Separate from the public schooling system, these schools are financed via the private sector and managed by local actors. For example, a partnership of McKinsey & Co, Vitol Foundation, and Bridge International Academies is supporting a non-formal schooling initiative, currently at the planning stages with programs piloted, in order to "to jointly develop a low-cost, high-quality education model for Syrian refugees at scale" (World at School, 2016).

Business actors justify the support to privately-provided schooling due to the challenges of the public sector absorbing the burgeoning refugee population: "You have a situation where the public sector could only absorb a fraction of those children... yes, the public sector wants to be in control, which is absolutely to be appreciated and respected. But it will take its natural course of expansion. And in that natural course of expansion, we need to give the kids an opportunity to pursue an accredited education outside of the public sector" (Interview, Business, July 28 2016). As RAND describes in a report on Syrian refugee education, "Private schools opened by the private sector" is presented as one approach to addressing the crisis (RAND, 2015, p.25).

Yet this private model is critiqued by many actors working in the region, in particular the involvement of Bridge International Academies, which is supplying the educational content for a program and viewed as particularly controversial. On the one hand, Bridge is argued to fill a gap in supplying "tech-enabled, low-cost, directly structured, scripted teaching based on a good curriculum. There are few organizations who have done that so successfully at scale as Bridge" (Interview, Business, July 28 2016). Yet others view Bridge in light of its past role privatizing other public systems of education as worrisome: "With Bridge International... what's the actual impact of these for profit private school models? We don't know if they really are having positive learning outcomes for children and are increasing access to school to the most vulnerable" (Interview, NGO, July 6 2016). Others voiced the need "to be very cautious around low-cost private education. There's been a lot of controversy recently around Bridge in Liberia, that's quite well known" (Interview, Business, July 5 2016).

The Syrian refugee context is fertile ground for the establishment of private education models "at scale," given that the public sector is assumed to lack a capacity to absorb the refugee populations. Although in this context most are at early stages, business-supported private school models in settings of conflict and fragility are widely viewed as problematic, due to a lack

of accountability, the hiring of non-unionized, poorly-trained teachers, and possible exploitative, profit-based motivations.

Humanitarian or Profit Motivations?

Private actors have a range of motivations for engaging in the education of Syrian refugees. Some are *humanitarian-related*. Media coverage of the scale and magnitude of the crisis has made business actors sit up and take notice: “The level of displacement is so big. I think that has really profound impacts on people, in terms of really wanting to better understand what’s going on but also invest resources and put in resources to help. Specially, knowing that education can really be this life saving lever for a lot of children” (Interview, NGO, July 6 2016). As another respondent puts it: “I think there’s the obvious pulling at the heart strings of CEOs” (Interview, Business, June 30 2016).

Yet concurrently, private actors have clear *profit-oriented* motivations for participating in the sector. High-profile activities within a crisis are deemed good for a business’ brand image: “It’s something where they can have a photo op... it’s a visibility piece” (Interview, NGO, July 17 2016). A business actor explains that “companies want to be affiliated with good causes, or they see some sort of strategic alignment between what their brand means and what the cause is about” (Interview, Business, June 21 2016). Businesses “are looking to elevate their brand and to create markets” (Interview, NGO, July 12 2016).

The creation of markets for business products is a particularly salient motivation in the region, which is viewed as a large and growing market for products: “In the Middle East there are a lot of diverse types of markets and this is also something that is in the interest of a private organization purview” (Interview, NGO, July 6 2016); “There’s definitely a huge interest by some companies to create markets” (Interview, UN agency, July 26 2016). A context of crisis may be considered an apt setting to test new innovations: “When they’re innovating new things, sometimes an area in conflict might be the right environment to test out a product or service” (Interview, Business, June 21 2016).

However, representatives from UN agencies and NGOs voice reticence concerning partnering with private actors who hold profit motivations in the Syrian refugee crisis: “Some of the private technology companies that we engage with are working on profit models, and so there has been some skepticism around partnership and engagement” (Interview, UN agency, July 26 2016). Referencing the participation of Pearson Education in contexts of crisis: “That’s always the case with the big publishers. It is about the bottom line” (Interview, NGO, July 12 2016).

As a business actor explains, the private sector is “driven by making money. I think we have to accept that” (Interview, Business, June 21 2016).

Preliminary Conclusions

Private actors are raising awareness of the Syrian refugee crisis globally, and many are supporting refugee students within public sector schools through important and needed

activities, such as food services, psycho-social support, and classroom materials. Yet the participation of the private sector raises several concerns.

First, the surge in private participation has been characterized by a lack of coordination, contributing to a disordered environment that may be undermining the Syrian refugee educational response. Second, private actors have widely supported technological innovations in education, an emphasis critiqued as promoting de-contextualized interventions that often ignore the needs of refugees. Third, the Syrian refugee educational environment is fertile ground for the growth of private schooling. Many private interventions are established though bypassing governments and several private actors who are now initiating programs with Syrian refugees have in the past contributed to privatization of public systems in similarly fragile contexts. Given historical precedent and that many initiatives are at nascent stages, there is now an opportunity for opponents of privatization of education to voice their concerns.

Finally, the claim to dual humanitarian and profit-oriented goals appears contradictory. To profit from any humanitarian crisis is arguably exploitative. A business entering a fragile context in order to create markets, envisioning it as an environment to test out new innovations, and thereby increase profits, can be defined as exploitation and a form of disaster capitalism. This research prompts educational actors to question the ethics of “investing in the crisis” (Interview, Business, June 30 2016).