



UNESCO-UNHCR High-level roundtable on “Continuing learning and schooling for refugees: Ensuring refugee students are able to learn at home and return to school after COVID-19”.

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Statement by UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie

Good morning

Children in all countries are struggling with the effects of COVID-19.

An entire generation of children have had their education severely disrupted – over a billion young people worldwide.

We are meeting today to discuss how prevent this disruption from becoming permanent for millions of refugee children.

If you were a refugee child before the pandemic, you were already twice as likely to be out of school than other children.

UNHCR has worked with the Malala Fund to model the possible impact of the virus.

The study found that there is a significant risk that half of girls who are currently enrolled will never go back to school at all.

There is one particular refugee child who epitomises the risk for me. Her name is Hala.

She was 9 years old, and playing in her garden in Syria, when their house was bombed: killing her mother and forcing her and her siblings to flee to Lebanon.

By the time she was 11, when I first met her, her days were spent fetching water and searching for fuel, and cooking for the whole family.

She stopped going to school, and while she was still in her teens, she was married and already had her first child.

Millions of refugee children around the world will face these kinds of life-altering pressures as a result of the pandemic and the economic crisis.

Covid-19 is proving to be an incredible catalyst for science and discovery and innovation.

If we could do the same for education - harnessing new technology with the power of government and private sector funding and the energy and drive of millions of talented young people – it would be the one of the greatest single inoculations imaginable against poverty and the denial of rights worldwide.

Of course, there isn't one solution that will fit all settings.

On the one hand, there are amazing new technologies available to support distance learning.

Yet on the other hand, many children don't have access to even TV or radio, let alone a laptop or wifi.

80% of students in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have no internet access.

There is a very real digital divide within as well as between countries.

We have to consider what technologies work best in individual settings, from text message services to radio, TV and internet;

The needs of children with disabilities;

The part that hunger plays in damaging children's ability to learn;

The role of teachers, and the support they need to keep education going, and many, many other issues.

I hope this coalition can be the start of identifying solutions and models that work, and that can be scaled up on a global scale, urgently.

To my mind the fundamental question is this: do we regard refugees as a burden, or as individuals with huge potential, who if given the right tools, can develop their minds, contribute to society and help stabilize their home countries?

For me there is only one answer:

There is no smarter investment that we can make.

Thank you very much