



School for stability

Examining the role of education in fostering social stability in Lebanon

March 2017

Executive summary

This research explores education opportunities in Lebanon in light of the protracted Syria crisis and examines their potential in supporting social stability between host and refugee communities. It argues that there is a strong potential for education, both formal and non-formal, to support social stability in Lebanon. The research is produced as part of the 'Change in Exile' project implemented by International Alert in Lebanon and Roskilde University in Denmark, which seeks to generate evidence on the role of education in supporting social stability in both countries. In Lebanon, the research involved over 30 key informant interviews (KIIs) with government, United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, as well as 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) with Syrian and Lebanese children (11–17 years), parents and educators in Tripoli and in the suburbs of Beirut conducted between October 2016 and March 2017. In Denmark, the research involved a similar methodology with KIIs and in-depth interviews with unaccompanied Syrian refugee minors.

Education is a clear indicator of life outcomes, including of positive perceptions and behaviours. It can promote diversity as well as increase people's wellbeing and decrease resorting to negative coping strategies.¹ Education can contribute to social stability, not least through building knowledge and skills to address tensions without violence and discrimination, especially where schools are among the few spaces where children can mingle and experience diversity in the country. Moreover, education can build the resilience of children by reducing the risk of resorting to negative coping strategies such as early marriage or child labour, therefore increasing the likelihood of positive wellbeing. This research examines four different elements of the intersection between education and social stability, namely formal education, non-formal education, the role of parents and structural challenges, and potential for collaboration between people and institutions.

The Lebanese government's inclusive education plan and assurance of opening schools to all school-aged Syrian children in the country characterises an unparalleled commitment by a national government. This research shows that although formal education has a very strong potential to support positive social interactions, building on the government's plan, it is not currently seizing the existing opportunities. Moreover, non-formal education has a strong potential to support social stability and efforts should be made to coordinate formal and non-formal education opportunities. The role of parents is vital in ensuring children's positive educational performance and the collaboration between municipalities, schools and parents is key to further stability. Ultimately, programmes geared towards the promotion of social stability strongly point towards the prospective of reducing bullying, improving the learning environment and reducing drop-out rates. Below is a summary of the key findings of this research.

1 The wellbeing effect of education, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), July 2014, <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/the-wellbeing-effect-of-education>, accessed 8 March 2017

Formal education

Having opened its doors to Syrian children, the formal education system is struggling to meet the demand from both Syrian and Lebanese populations. Around 250,000 Syrian refugee children and young people remain out of school or have dropped out before completing any significant cycle of learning.² Retention is a concern for both Lebanese and Syrians, especially at secondary level, as attendance is affected by a number of factors, including economic vulnerability, cultural differences and language barriers.

Currently, the formal education system is not reaching its full potential in supporting positive social interactions between children, teachers and parents. Research findings demonstrate that children in single nationality classes who do not engage in mixed nationality activities, such as those offered by organisations working on social stability, have more negative perceptions of their peers of other nationalities.³ Moreover, the lack of engagement by overburdened teachers as well as violence and impunity in the classroom reinforce barriers to social stability. Organisations from the non-formal sector are filling the gap, and have shown themselves to be effective in addressing the needs of children affected by conflict and of communities experiencing social conflict, despite facing structural challenges. Improving the connections and collaboration between the formal and non-formal education sectors can help reduce social conflict by combining the skills and expertise of the non-formal sector with the capacity and scale of the formal sector.

Non-formal education

This research defines non-formal education as any educational activity that is outside the formal school system, including remedial education, extracurricular activities and social stability activities for children. Non-formal education programmes implemented by NGOs – which support refugee children to enrol in the formal education system and are targeted towards children’s different levels and heterogeneous needs – are diverse and much needed. In its diversity, non-formal education has shown its effectiveness in promoting tolerance and respect for diversity. Programmes such as homework and language support groups are critical to supporting students in keeping up with the academic curriculum and can support positive social interactions between children. Social stability activities, aimed at providing spaces for social interaction, can be effective as a first step in creating trust and positive perceptions between Syrian and Lebanese children.

Non-formal education activities supporting social stability have successfully complemented formal schooling by offering recreational activities, which are not part of the formal programme in the afternoon shift, along with rights education and opportunities for positive social interactions between Lebanese and Syrian children. In difficult times, non-formal education activities can allow children to be themselves again while supporting their personal development, learning and social skills. Other types of non-formal education activities, such as those supported by religious institutions or scouts’ groups, were not included in this research given its limited scope.

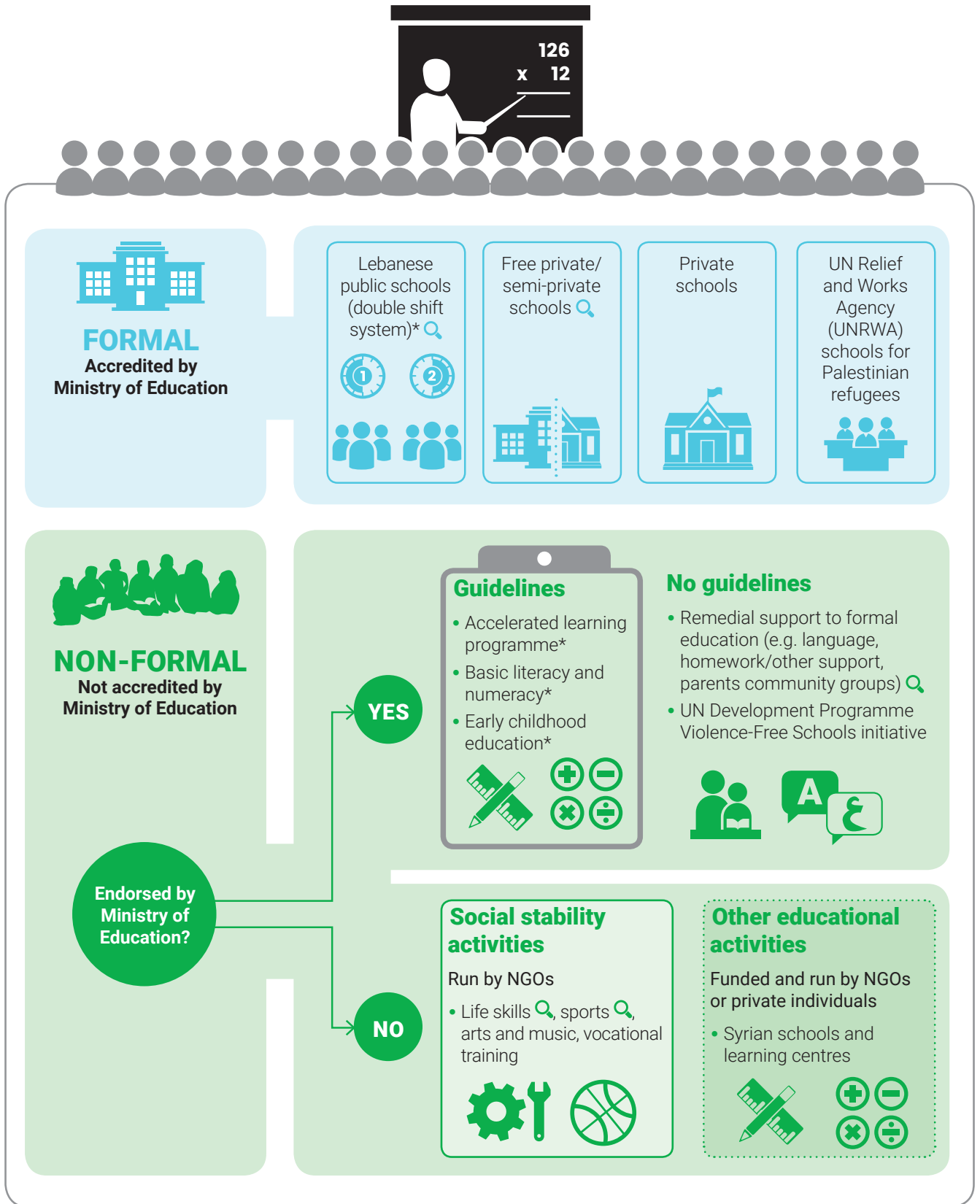
The role of parents

While parents play a vital role in children’s education performance, many Syrian and Lebanese parents are not involved in their children’s education due to limited time, capacities, opportunities and language barriers. Syrian parents whose children attend afternoon shifts at Lebanese public schools face challenges in accessing school administration or in supporting their children with homework due to the use of foreign languages in Lebanese

2 “Almost 500,000 displaced Syrian children registered in Lebanon are of school age, between 3 and 17 years old. Half of them – more than 250,000 children – remain out of school, along with 50,000 Lebanese of primary school age (6–14 years).” See Government of Lebanon and United Nations, Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017–2020, 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12698>, accessed 8 March 2017

3 For a more detailed study on the impact of the double-shift system, see Z. Alba and M. Al-Masri, Better together: The impact of the schooling system of Lebanese and Syrian displaced pupils on social stability, Background Paper, London: International Alert, 2016, <http://international-alert.org/publications/better-together>

Overview of educational activities and programmes in Lebanon



Education services examined by research / * Part of Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) strategy

curricula. Moreover, due to social norms, parents sometimes oppose sending their children to initiatives of mixed gender and mixed nationalities, which are aimed at improving their perceptions and levels of trust. Parents' support and involvement needs to be strengthened, for instance by building on the existing parent community groups (PCGs), raising awareness on the importance of education, engaging parents in their children's education, and providing awareness sessions for parents on topics such as peace education and positive communication with their children.

Structural challenges and collaboration opportunities

Enhancing the role of education in promoting social stability requires bridging the response efforts of different institutions and organisations at national and local levels. However, these kinds of collaborative interventions are still rare, and, in the case of education, need the buy-in, involvement and awareness of teachers, parents, children, municipalities and civil society. Ultimately, the ground for constructive opportunities for convergence between the education and social stability sectors at national and local levels do exist and should be seized and built upon. Increasing coordination between municipalities, schools and communities can provide such opportunities, as does strengthening child protection systems and banning the use of corporal punishment in public schools, both of which can have a positive impact on both children's wellbeing and social stability.

Recommendations

To the Lebanese government

The Lebanese government is particularly encouraged to build on the potential of the education sector to contribute to social stability through the formal education system as well as through non-formal education programmes. Ensure non-formal education initiatives aimed at strengthening social stability complement efforts made by formal public schools. Support the establishment of a school environment that sustains the personal development of children, including their social skills, self-awareness and ability to deal with differences and conflicts without violence. The below recommendations outline specific actions that can enhance the school environment and contribute to more stable communities.

- Build the capacity of teachers in schools and educators in community learning centres to apply more participatory and creative teaching methods that are focused on learner-centred pedagogy, positive approaches to discipline, psychosocial support and skills to support children with special needs. Promote good practice by publicly recognising the achievements of teachers and incentivising teachers with awards.
- Prioritise the implementation of the memorandum prohibiting corporal punishment in public schools and actively work on sanctioning educators who use violence, as part of broader efforts to improve child protection in the public education system. Increase initiatives and efforts based on the 'violence-free schools' model, which includes the participatory development of school codes of conduct by students, parents and teachers, and the organisation of community activities led by students, parents and teachers.
- Build on initiatives involving Syrian educators in strengthening stability in public schools, and continue efforts to engage them in school and community activities. As the creation of education community liaison volunteer positions in formal schools already presents a constructive step, this can be followed up with close monitoring of the impact and provision of necessary training support.

- Seek to better integrate life skills and civic awareness into children's education in formal school, such as through adapting the civic education or physical education classes in the first shift by drawing on best practice from similar programmes provided by civil society organisations. Consider integrating similar activities in afternoon shifts and in Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE)-endorsed non-formal education programmes, such as the Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP).
- Finalise the curriculum revision and teacher training package that incorporates psychosocial support and recreational activities targeted at both Syrian and Lebanese children. In the short term, facilitate access for civil society partners, which offer extracurricular activities for second shift students. To maximise the potential of such activities to support social stability, they could focus on raising awareness on children's rights, positive coping strategies, conflict resolution and tolerance.
- Maximise the potential of parents' involvement in the formal education of their children, such as through organising information sessions on relevant topics inside the school premises, talks by education experts or community events. Open the space for dialogue in the schools by making parents' committees more inclusive and representative, and ensure existing mechanisms for grievances and complaints are strengthened and used.
- Continue to develop policies and interventions that are open to all communities, to avoid tensions arising from targeting Syrians exclusively and ensure that children with special needs of all backgrounds receive sufficient support.

To implementers of non-formal education programmes

Implementers of non-formal education programmes are encouraged to increase collaboration, starting with the mapping out of programmes that evidence positive impact on furthering social stability, sharing best practices, facilitating linkages to complement each other's work, and supporting the formal system with the know-how and expertise from the non-formal education field. Specific recommendations are to:

- Target children for social stability activities by ensuring a balanced composition of gender and nationality, including Lebanese and non-Lebanese children, to support positive group dynamics and set an example for inclusion in community and social life.
- Cater for the different needs of children in diverse settings, taking into account gaps in the formal education system, such as physical education, rights awareness and the development of skills related to employability. Ensure programmes are gender sensitive and account for the gendered expectations of, and restrictions on, boys and girls.
- Scale up the involvement of parents in education activities for children through sharing lessons learned and best practices of positive parent engagement between practitioners, building on community groups and family-based approaches. This could include, for instance, increasing PCGs for afternoon shifts, and ensuring systematic, accountable and structured interaction between Syrian parents and school administration in order to improve the school environment.
- Engage local authorities and the community more directly in non-formal education programmes, to ensure buy-in, ownership and sustainability of efforts, as well as to avoid tensions arising from perceptions of targeting specific groups based on their nationality.
- Use public spaces and school premises to foster interaction between communities, encourage collaboration between schools, community groups and municipalities, and link rehabilitation of social infrastructure with follow-up activities, such as non-formal education and cultural events that bring together young people from both communities.

To donors

Donors are particularly encouraged to support programmes that integrate social stability objectives into education provision, and ensure complementarity of ongoing efforts in the formal and non-formal education sectors.

- Encourage collaboration between the MEHE, Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), and education and social stability actors in harnessing the potential for education to support social stability. For example, by supporting the promotion of human rights, diversity and tolerance in the formal school system and through supporting easier access to schools for non-formal education initiatives geared towards improving perceptions and social interactions between refugee and host communities.
- Provide financial support for multi-year programmes to ensure sustained impact on children's relationships with and perceptions of peers and educators from the other community. Prioritise programmes that have already shown they have built trust between implementers and communities, and those that facilitate enrolment and retention in the formal education system, such as homework and language support groups, while at the same time facilitating learning and exchanges between refugee and Lebanese children.
- Support a holistic response to the crisis in all sectors, including education, mainstreaming social stability objectives and involving the active participation of stakeholders, especially at the community level, such as parents, teachers, municipality representatives, and children and young people themselves.
- Encourage and support national, regional and global efforts to research, challenge and learn from programmes that use education to support social stability.

This summary is based on a research report by Lana Khattab, forthcoming April 2017. The research was carried out as part of the project 'Change in Exile: Re-invigorating principles of reform and social stability among young Syrian refugees in Denmark and Lebanon', implemented by Roskilde University and International Alert, with funding from the Danish–Arab Partnership Programme.

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