

HI - MIDDLE EAST - BRIEFING PAPER - SEPTEMBER 2023

Disability-Inclusive Education in Lebanon

I was hesitant to send my child to school at first because I worried that no one would understand her situation and accept her as she is. Today, after I sent her off, I have the impression that she gets the support she needs in school.'

– Syrian parent of a child with disability living in Mount Lebanon.

What is inclusive education?

UNESCO defines inclusive education as a **transformative process** that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people, and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education.¹ Inclusive education

ensures **quality education for all learners**, including children with disabilities. To achieve inclusive education, schools should provide every learner with a fair chance to learn and extend **appropriate support and accommodations** in the learning process.²



©HI/2023. Engaging drawing activity for children at Mouhammara public garden.

¹ Definition is adopted from the Cali Commitment, Outcome Document of the 2019 UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education.

² Definition is adopted from the 2023 National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Lebanon.

Situation in Lebanon

How many children with disabilities live in Lebanon?

An estimated **10-15% of the Lebanese population may have disabilities** - either physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental.³ The UK Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) reported in 2018 that 61.4% of households in Lebanon have at least one member with a disability. In the Disability Inclusion Survey conducted on 1,981 households by the World Food Program (WFP) (2023),⁴ 50% of adults have difficulty walking and 35% have difficulty in doing self-care. For children, 62% feel worried, nervous, and panicked, while 44% have difficulty learning.

According to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) (2021),⁵ the disability prevalence rate among Syrian refugees in Lebanon is 9%. However, the prevalence rate for Syrian refugees (aged 2 and above) estimated by Humanity & Inclusion (HI, 2018) is much higher at 22.6%.⁶

How many children with disabilities have access to education?

The Lebanese education system enrolls nearly 1.25 million students, of which almost

60% attend private schools (World Bank, 2021).⁷ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023)⁸ reports that Lebanon hosts around 500,000 registered school-aged Syrian refugee children and youth between 3 and 24 years old.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) reported that in 2019,⁹ 191 schools in Lebanon had enrolled and supported 6,000 learners with disabilities. Some of these learners have cognitive disabilities (32%), while others have visual impairments (25%), emotional, behavioral disabilities (22%), or intellectual disabilities (2%). In 2022/2023, MEHE has provided education to around 3,000 children with disabilities in the public inclusive education schools and is working to implement the newly-launched Inclusive Education Policy, as a critical initiative on equity and inclusion in education in the country.¹⁰ Shockingly, however, children with disabilities comprise less than 0.5% of the total student population within Lebanon, which is disproportionately low when looking at the total number of children with disabilities.¹¹ Furthermore, according to MEHE,¹² 100 specialized institutions across the country registered 5,800 children with disabilities in 2016. These children received a range of services, including education, from these institutions – thus learning in separate settings.

³ This specific figure is from 2016, specifically cited by Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) and UNICEF. More information here (page 12): [Disability in Lebanon.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#). Generally, based on the information gathered from different sources, disability prevalence rates in Lebanon can be limited, dated, and contested.

⁴ More information here: [Disability Inclusion Survey Results, May 2023 - Lebanon | ReliefWeb](#).

⁵ More information here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2021-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon>.

⁶ More information here: [FOCUS ON – New study on the inclusion of Syrian refugees with disabilities in Jordan & Lebanon – Humanity & Inclusion | Handicap International – Blog \(hi.org\)](#).

⁷ More information here: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033>

[308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf](#).

⁸ More information here: [Education – UNHCR Lebanon](#).

⁹ Information collected from RACE (Reaching All Children with Education) II document: [RACE-PMU-Fact-Sheet-September-2019.pdf \(racepmulebanon.com\)](#)

¹⁰ UNICEF, 2022 The Ministry of Education launches the Transition Resilience Education Fund, to support Lebanon's Education Sector [EN/AR]

National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Lebanon (June 2023)

¹¹ Conclusion made by Humanity & Inclusion (HI) by making calculation or extrapolation from available data.

¹² More information here: [Lebanon_race-ii_2017-2021.pdf \(unesco.org\)](#).

At the end of 2015, approximately **255,400 children** from all nationalities were out of school in Lebanon, according to the report from Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon.¹³ This report, however, does not include disaggregated data on out-of-school children with disabilities. Recent data from the World Bank (2020)¹⁴ highlight that the out-of-school rate for primary and secondary-age children is extremely high at 21%. A significant number of these out-of-school children are Syrian refugees: 40% of primary age and 90% of secondary age. However, these data do not include disability-disaggregated information.

Furthermore, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (2022)¹⁵ stresses that children in Lebanon, especially Syrians, have missed much learning over the past three years. The overlapping of different crises have lowered children's academic performance and overall psychological well-being, with 10% dropping out and 15% repeating their grade level. The past year showed an enrollment of only 202,000 out of 715,000 Syrian school-aged refugees, despite what was promised by the government and the international donors in 2016.¹⁶

Disability-inclusive education policies in Lebanon

As signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Lebanon commits to promoting disability-inclusive education (Article 24). Furthermore, the government commits to align with the targets set in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The government's commitment towards CRPD and SDG has been translated through the:

Disability Law (220/2000), which mandates schools to accept persons with disabilities by ensuring disability-friendly facilities and infrastructure.

Lebanon Five-Year General Education Plan 2021-2025, which advocates to improve school inclusion and remove barriers to learning and participation by ensuring that all children, regardless of disabilities or special needs, receive support to attend school.

National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Lebanon 2023, which aims to transform public and private schools into inclusive education schools by 2030, in line with the MEHE's commitment to SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) 4.

"The teacher who taught my child lack the capabilities to teach him. They ended up neglecting him while being in school."

-Lebanese parent of a child with disability

What barriers restrict children with disabilities' access to quality education?

The absence of inclusive services leads to increased vulnerability and marginalization of Lebanese and non-Lebanese children with disabilities. Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, particularly towards children with

¹³ More information here: ["I dream of going to school" — Out of School Children in Lebanon - Lebanon | ReliefWeb](#).

¹⁴ Report can be accessed here: [World Bank Document](#)

¹⁵ More information here: [Children in Lebanon Cannot Afford to Lose Another Academic year - The Centre for Lebanese Studies](#).

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon: Credible Plans Needed on Education Crisis." (May 6, 2022) Electronic publication retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/06/lebanon-credible-plans-needed-education-crisis>.

intellectual disabilities, remain prevalent which then further impede inclusion.

HI, in early 2023, released the report 'I want to go to school and learn' A needs assessment report on access to education of children with disabilities in Lebanon'. The report identifies three major barriers that children with disabilities in accessing education, as follows.

The financial barriers perpetuated by the socio-economic crisis that the country is facing significantly contribute to hindering access to both remote and face-to-face learning, for children with and without disabilities. Parents expressed how the economic crisis significantly reduces their ability to provide for the basic needs (such as food, medicines, house rent). One consequence of the crisis is the tendency to de-prioritize the education of children with disabilities, due to the need to respond to competing basic needs (such as food, medications, and house rent). It is critical to stress that the socio-economic crisis and the devaluation of teachers' salaries (losing over 90% of their value since 2019)¹⁷ has triggered teachers' strikes across Lebanon the past year (causing prolonged school closures).

Whereas the adverse effects of the crisis affect both children with and without disabilities, children with disabilities are likely to be further excluded due to the already existing barriers (such as the limited

teachers' preparation, inaccessible learning materials, stigma, and discrimination).

Stigma, discrimination, and bullying remain critical barriers to the education of children with disabilities. The beliefs that children with disabilities should not be in school because they cannot learn (and that if they are in school, they should be in separate or segregated classrooms or schools) still prevail in Lebanon. Furthermore, the stigma and discrimination children with disabilities face is perpetuated and intersects with gender norms. For example, a boy child with disability is not in school because he is expected to work to help his parents. The child's nationality and migratory status are factors that exacerbate exclusion. For instance, Syrian children have a much higher rate of being out of school compared to Lebanese children.

Mainstream schools remain inaccessible for children with disabilities. A significant number of children with disabilities learn in segregated settings (instead of in mainstream education). The HI report highlights that children with disabilities are systematically referred (using the referral mechanism facilitated by the Ministry of Social Affairs) to learn in specialized centers after assessment or after being rejected by mainstream schools. Mainstream schools rejecting these children often stress their very limited capacity to accommodate children with disabilities as a main reason for rejection.



© HI/2023. A child with visual impairment participating in an Arabic language class.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Building on the priorities set by MEHE's Five-Year General Education Plan 2021-2025, National Policy on Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Lebanon 2023, and learning from the above considerations, HI calls on international cooperation donors, relevant governmental branches, and other educational stakeholders in Lebanon to prioritize disability-inclusive education.

At the policy level

- Enhance the capacity of MEHE and other education stakeholders to develop, review, and implement education policies, strategies, and curriculum that respond to the needs of children with disabilities. This includes a focus on designing and implementing disability-inclusive response and action plans with a defined budget (e.g. budget for human resources and accessibility measures) for inclusive continued learning of children with disabilities, amidst the socio-economic crisis, and other shocks and disruptions.

At the family & community level

- Provide direct assistance to families such as cash for education, food packages, assistive technologies, education kits, and psychosocial support to ensure continued learning, as well as enrolment and return of children with disabilities to face-to-face learning after prolonged school closures.
- Organize continuous awareness raising activities, with the active engagement of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), on disability inclusion and inclusive education to address stigma and discrimination, and to promote inclusion.

At the service-provision level:

- Improve the capacity of mainstream kindergarten and primary schools to fully include and support children with disabilities through teacher training and coaching on inclusive education, development of flexible curricula, and improvement of infrastructure.