

Disability-Inclusive Education in Lebanon

‘I feel happy when my child goes to school...especially when he gets support from his teacher.’

– **Lebanese parent of a child with disability from Bekaa Governorate, 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 and learning difficulties. 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

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 Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) reported in 2018 that 61.4% of households in Lebanon have at least one member with a disability. According to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) (2021),⁴ the disability prevalence rate among Syrian refugees in Lebanon is 9%. However, the prevalence rate for Syrian refugees (aged two and above) estimated by Humanity & Inclusion (HI, 2018) is much higher at 22.6%.⁵

How many children with disabilities have access to education?

In general, the education system in Lebanon enrolls nearly **1.25 million students** (World Bank, 2021). The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) reported that in 2019,⁶ 191 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%). Shockingly, 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.⁷ Furthermore, according to MEHE,⁸ **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.

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.⁹ This report, however, does not include disaggregated data on out-of-school children with disabilities. Recent data from the World Bank (2020)¹⁰ 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.

According to Save the Children (2021), due to the closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, **at least 1.2 million children** across Lebanon had limited or no access to education. The World Bank (2021) predicts that Lebanon’s different crises (economic crisis, Beirut port explosion, and COVID-19 pandemic) **will likely result in decreased funding available for education –putting even more stress on the sector in the coming years.**

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

² Explicit definition of inclusive education in Lebanon is not available. The definition provided is a consolidated definition from different sources from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and other education partners such as UNICEF. One of these sources can be accessed here: [The Ministry of Education and UNICEF promote inclusive education](#).

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

⁵ More information here: [FOCUS ON – New study on the inclusion of Syrian refugees with disabilities in Jordan & Lebanon – Humanity & Inclusion | Handicap International – Blog \(hi.org\)](#).

⁶ Information collected from RACE (Reaching All Children with Education) II document: [RACE-PMU-Fact-Sheet-September-2019.pdf \(racepmulebanon.com\)](#).

⁷ Conclusion made by Humanity & Inclusion (HI) by making calculation or extrapolation from available data.

⁸ More information here: [Lebanon_race-ii_2017-2021.pdf \(unesco.org\)](#).

⁹ More information here: ["I dream of going to school" — Out of School Children in Lebanon - Lebanon | ReliefWeb](#).

¹⁰ Report can be accessed here: [World Bank Document](#).

Furthermore, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (2022)¹¹ stresses that children in Lebanon, especially Syrians, have missed much learning over the past three years. The 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 202,000 out of 715,000 Syrian school-aged refugees unlike what was promised by the government and donors in 2016.¹²

“I cannot send my daughter to school every day, the fees are very high, and I barely have the money to feed my family.”

– A Syrian father of two children with hearing impairments from the Bekaa Governorate

Which barriers restrict access to quality inclusive education for children with disabilities?

¹³

The closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the marginalization that children with disabilities already faced to access and continuing education. Humanity & Inclusion (HI, 2021) found that online and remote learning access was significantly challenging. For instance, remote lessons were not accessible or responsive to the needs of children with disabilities. According to UNESCO (2021), compared to their peers without disabilities, children with disabilities are more likely to be unable to access remote learning. Furthermore, when schools re-open, children with disabilities are more likely to drop out or not return to school at all.

The socio-economic crisis that the country is facing significantly contributes to hindering access to both remote and face-to-face learning for children with and without disabilities. Inflation has made remote learning devices less affordable for many families (Save the Children, 2021). Furthermore, power and electricity cuts due to the limited availability of fuel continue to disrupt children's access to remote learning (World Bank, 2021). While schools across Lebanon reopened and resumed face-to-face learning since September 2021, Save the Children (2022)¹⁴ stresses the need to overcome challenges such as families' reduced spending on education, unaffordable transport costs to and from schools, schools' limited capacity to provide basic learning materials (including hygiene materials for COVID-19 prevention), and the devaluation of teachers' salaries (losing over 90% of their value since 2019).¹⁵ Based on the data collected by HI from parents of children with disabilities, one consequence of the crisis is the tendency of parents to de-prioritize the education of their children due to the need to respond to competing basic needs (such as food, medications, and house rent) and priorities.

Whereas the adverse effects of the pandemic and the crisis affect both children with and without disabilities, children with disabilities are likely to be further excluded due to the already existing barriers they faced even before the pandemic (such as the limited teachers' preparation, inaccessible learning materials, stigma, and discrimination).

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, and

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.

¹¹ More information here: [Children in Lebanon Cannot Afford to Lose Another Academic year - The Centre for Lebanese Studies](#).

¹² 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>

¹³ In addition to information collected from secondary data such as analyses and reports, information here are summary of the findings of the data collection exercise HI Lebanon conducted in July 2021. The exercise aimed at collecting primary data from children with disabilities and their parents/caregivers regarding their experiences in accessing education

including remote learning. 50 children and parents/caregivers of different nationalities from multiple locations in Lebanon participated in the data collection exercise.

¹⁴ Analyses made by Disability Under Siege: [Disability-Under-Seige-Lebanon-Disability-Review-6-Dec-2020-FINAL.pdf \(disabilityundersiege.org\)](#), as well as Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/03/22/i-would-go-school/barriers-education-children-disabilities-lebanon>

¹⁵ More information here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-s-education-crisis-open-letter-24-january-2022-enar>.

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

Finally, while progress has been made to include children with disabilities in mainstream education, the provision of **education for children with disabilities is still provided mainly by specialized institutions – often, in segregation**. This practice can perpetuate stigma and discrimination towards children with disabilities, who are unable to learn alongside their peers without disabilities in mainstream settings (Humanity & Inclusion, 2022).

Recommendations

Building on the priorities set by the Five-Year General Education Plan 2021-2025 of MEHE, 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:** by enhancing 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 work) for inclusive continued learning of children with disabilities amidst the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and future shocks and disruptions.
- **At the family level:** by providing 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.
- **At the service level:** by improving 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. At the same time, it is crucial to improve connected services like WASH facilities, transportation, health and rehabilitation, and child protection.



Figure 1 © Mousawat/March 2022. A child attending occupational therapy session to improve his fine movements and coordination