

It Is Time to Step Up and Help the Children of Syria

CARYL M. STERN
President and CEO
U.S. Fund for UNICEF

DURING MY VISIT TO THE Za'atari camp for Syrian refugees in northwest Jordan, I met so many families who had lost so much. I was particularly struck by the fact that before their country had imploded, their lifestyles had not been terribly different from my own. I met a man who had been an attorney. He had owned cars, laptops, and a house where his three children had separate bedrooms. Now, he, his wife, and their children are living in a tent with limited heating. Once comfortably middle class, they are now stuck in a place where women choose to urinate on the ground at night rather than walk alone in the dark to the communal latrine, out of fear that they will be targets of violence. This is a place where half the children have to walk barefoot in the snow because they have no shoes. The lawyer's days are no longer spent in an office with air conditioning but are instead spent looking for firewood, carrying water, and getting accustomed to a place where there are no lights at night.

305

Before Syria collapsed into civil war, it was a middle-income country capable of providing a decent living for most of its people. Today, four and a half years into one of the most vicious conflicts since World War II, unemployment rates have almost quadrupled, topping 57 percent.¹ Four out of every five Syrians are now impoverished.²

It might be easy to shrug off Syria's plight as a complicated mess afflicting a faraway place; however, that would be a mistake. We are witnessing the world's worst humanitarian crisis in decades—one that is threatening to swallow up an

CARYL M. STERN is President and CEO of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF. Since joining the U.S. Fund in 2006, Stern has made it her mission to put children first, traveling to more than 30 countries in support of UNICEF's work to save and protect the world's most vulnerable children.

Copyright © 2015 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

entire generation of young people, and that no one can afford to ignore.

We are also in the midst of the biggest displacement crisis in more than 70 years. Nonstop fighting and brutality within Syria have adversely affected more than half the country's population, leaving about 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. More than seven million Syrians remain internally displaced, while another four million are living as refugees in neighboring countries.³ They have lost their loved ones, their homes, their jobs, their schools, and their communities. Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon are all buckling under the strain. Jordan alone—a country the size of Los Angeles with a population of 6.5 million people—has taken in more than 620,000 Syrian refugees, and in no way does it have the economy or the resources to sustain them all.⁴

Meanwhile, millions of children remain at risk and in need of help. One of the most pressing problems is that so many of them—2.7 million—are out of school, and some have been in this situation for more than three years.⁵ Many Syrian families are being forced to send their children to work, sometimes for long hours and with little pay, in order to put food on the table. Nearly half of all refugee households in Jordan, for example, report that they rely partly (or entirely) on income generated by a child.⁶ Additionally, the overwhelming majority of the jobs in question—whether it is harvesting crops in a field, laboring in a workshop, or selling goods from a cart—are considered damaging to a child's physical and mental wellbeing. Some jobs involve the use of dangerous equipment or exposure to toxic chemicals. According to a recent report by UNICEF and Save the Children, approximately 75 percent of refugee children working in the Za'atari camp in Jordan suffer from health problems such as extreme fatigue; 20 percent report that they have been beaten or otherwise abused.⁷ This is not a proper childhood.

It is crucial that these children become healthy and ready to learn once more before their childhood slips away. Education is one of the best tools for breaking the cycle of poverty and devastation. It is the only way to enable these children to gain the skills they need to thrive and support themselves—their only chance at a real future. If we do not engage them, others will. When children are caught up in conflict, when a community's social fabric frays and services vanish, traffickers and hatemongers are all too willing to step in to fill the void.

There are many education assistance programs already in place to get Syria's children back on track. However, funding has fallen far short of what is required; the gap between what we must do and what we have the resources to do only keeps growing. A UNICEF appeal released in December 2014 that aimed to raise \$903 million for education and other assistance programs inside Syria and

neighboring countries has so far generated only about half that amount, severely inhibiting our ability to assist every child.⁸

Sadly, support is lagging for humanitarian assistance all across the globe. Syria may be the largest source of forcibly displaced people, but it is by no means the only origin of refugees in the world today. Some 60 million people worldwide—half of them children—have been driven out of their homes by conflict and related hardship.⁹ That is the highest number ever recorded, and it is rising quickly. There simply is not enough aid to go around.

There are a few reasons why more support has not been forthcoming. While a natural calamity, such as an earthquake, causes immediate and tangible damage, political disasters and conflicts tend to be progressive and prolonged. Refugees are the collateral damage, and the pressing issue is not where they will sleep tonight but instead how they will be living five years from now. Long-term concerns require long-term solutions. It is easy for donor fatigue to creep in. When entire communities are devastated by a typhoon, for instance, there is a naturally strong impulse to give, to help those families and allow them to start rebuilding. On the other hand, when the problems are the result of human action (or inaction) and when there appears to be no solution, potential supporters tend to go numb.

Yet the kinds of programs that are at the heart of the “No Lost Generation” initiative—a mission launched in October 2013 and backed by states, the UN, and nongovernmental organizations alike—are what help to thwart the processes that build those stereotypes in the first place. The initiative’s chief objective has been to put education and child protection at the center of the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis and keep it there. It is by championing Syria’s children—by helping them overcome the emotional and psychological traumas of conflict and de-

velop the skills they need to rebuild their lives and their society—that we help stop the cycle of violence and hatred.¹⁰ When we equip schools inside Syria or set up makeshift learning centers for Syrian refugees and get children back inside classrooms, and when our priority is to prepare a child for a better future, we are not just doing what is right and decent. We are helping to make everyone safer.

If one does not know how to read or write, one will only know what he or she is told. An education teaches you to think critically and analyze facts. Educate a child and he or she will probably not be as easily co-opted by those who promulgate hatred. In a recent article for *Foreign Policy*, former U.S. National

It is by championing Syria’s children that we help stop the cycle of violence and hatred.

Security Advisor Sandy Berger makes the broader point: “When you provide relief for an unstable community, it becomes less vulnerable to those forces that might act maliciously or destructively against the United States, our friends, and allies.”¹¹ What better way to make a friend than to save someone’s child? It is one of the best security measures the United States, or any other nation, can employ. And when humanitarian aid is a joint, international effort, broader international security is likewise enhanced.

When I was at the Za’atari camp, one particularly shy four-year-old boy quietly followed our group as we toured the emergency tents and met with refugees and aid workers. At one point, we stopped at a breastfeeding tent where high-protein biscuits were being distributed to new mothers. Workers gave each of us a sample biscuit to put in our backpacks for later. At the end of the day, we realized that our group, including the child who had been following us, had never stopped to eat. One of my colleagues pulled out a biscuit and gave it to the boy. He did not run off with it or gobble it down. Instead, he immediately broke it in two and handed half to a baby his sister was carrying. This boy had nothing, and yet his first instinct was to share. Here, in the United States, I am surrounded by people who have so much more to give. What will it take for all of us to share? It is time for the international community to fully step up.

308

These children who so desperately need our help are not just Syria’s children—they are the world’s children. They do not get to choose where they are born and they should not be defined by their borders. They all deserve a childhood, and we should not turn our backs on them. When my mother was forced to flee the Nazis in Austria for New York at the age of six, the United States did not turn its back on her. I have grown up with stories of her as an immigrant girl who had to run for her life and become an adult at six years old. They have made me very aware of what it means to lose everything and have to start over.

For Syrian refugee children living in camps and other informal refugee communities, a necessary first step toward recovery is having a safe place to go where they can just be kids. The Za’atari camp has dozens of child-friendly spaces, UNICEF-supported areas where children can play, paint pictures, sing, and dance; where they can use their imagination and express themselves, work through their traumas, and receive psychosocial support.¹² This is how you begin to restore hope. This is how a child can start to chart a new path. And UNICEF is not the only organization helping to make this happen. Amal ou Salam provides safe spaces for refugee children by Syria’s Turkish and Jordanian borders. Mercy Corps helps build playgrounds and sports fields and otherwise fosters the kinds of meaningful social interactions and activities needed for these

children to heal.

There is plenty of other encouraging news from on the ground as well. Last year, a region-wide immunization campaign targeting 25 million children helped to stem a polio outbreak that started in Syria and threatened to spread across the Turkish border.¹³ UNICEF and its partners have been able to provide more than 16 million Syrians with sustained access to clean and safe drinking water.¹⁴ Those who deliver humanitarian assistance can and do make a difference.

We must keep at it. We must ramp up our investment in the education and protection of Syria's children. Because if we do not, we risk seeing their lives derailed forever. And if that happens, we all lose. 

NOTES

1. Syrian Centre for Policy Research, *Alienation and Violence: Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014* (Syria: Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2015), 8.

2. Ibid.

3. "Syria Refugee Regional Response," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Total persons of concern are 4,088,078 as of August 29, 2015, which includes 2.1 million Syrians registered by UNHCR in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon; 1.9 million Syrians registered by the Government of Turkey; as well as more than 24,000 Syrian refugees registered in North Africa. Please also see: UNICEF, *Syria Crisis: Monthly Humanitarian Highlights & Results* (UNICEF, August 2015), 2.

4. The total number of registered Syrian refugees in Jordan as of August 23, 2015 is 629,245. Please see: "Syria Refugee Regional Response," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

5. UNICEF and Save the Children, *Small Hands Heavy Burden: How the Syria Conflict Is Driving More Children into the Workforce* (Children of Syria, July 2015), 2.

6. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, With a Focus on Early Marriage* (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2013), 35–36.

7. UNICEF and Save the Children, *Small Hands Heavy Burden*; UNICEF and Save the Children, *Baseline Assessment of Child Labour among Syrian Refugees in Za'atari Refugee Camp—Jordan* (Amman: November 2014), 6–7.

8. "The overall funding requirement for the Syria Crisis in 2015 is \$8.4 billion. Of this total requirement, UNICEF is appealing for \$903 million: \$279 million for Syria and \$624 million for the subregion, of which \$444 million (71 percent) is for refugees and \$181 million (29 percent) for resilience of host communities." Please see: UNICEF, *Addressing the needs of children affected by the Syria crisis: UNICEF's response in 2015* (UNICEF, December 2014), 10.

9. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 2015).

10. For more information about No Lost Generation, see: UNICEF, "No Lost Generation Initiative: One Year On," Children of Syria website.

11. Samuel R. Berger, "The Human Tinderbox in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2014.

12. "Syrian Regional Refugee Response, Za'atari Refugee Camp Fact Sheet—July 2015," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, August 18, 2015.

13. "Sinjar's Children Are a Long Way From Home," UNICEF, August 20, 2014; "UNICEF Responds to Huge Influx of Syrian Refugees in Turkey," UNICEF, September 23, 2014.

14. For the number of people in Syria who benefit from a sustained supply of clean and safe drinking water (thanks to UNICEF and partners), please see: UNICEF, *Syria Crisis Situation Report: Monthly Humanitarian Highlights & Results* (UNICEF, July 2015), 3.

Copyright of Brown Journal of World Affairs is the property of Brown University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.