# Evidence on Learning Outcomes for Refugees:
# A rapid review[1]

## Background

At the end of 2021, there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 21.3 million refugees and over 45 million internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2022a). This number is increasing, and with the war in Ukraine, drastically so, with total forced displacement now exceeding 100 million people (2022). In addition, the length of time spent in displacement has also risen (Devictor, 2019). Recognition of the changing nature of displacement has pushed a shift in the provision of education from short-term emergency responses, to the inclusion of refugees in host country national education systems.

Most refugees in the world – 83% - are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2022b). This means that often the national systems into which they are included face significant constraints and do not always have the capacity to collect and produce robust data on the education outcomes of refugees. This is particularly true for learning outcomes, with available data on refugees mainly focused on access. In addition, data on non-academic learning outcomes is practically non-existent, despite the fact that a rich body of evidence – drawn mostly from the Global North – has demonstrated that socio-emotional learning (SEL)[2] is of particular importance for many areas of child development, including learning and general well-being. In the context of refugee children and youth outcomes, recent research highlights that SEL skills are important enablers against the negative effects of instability, conflict and crisis (INEE & EASEL Laboratory, 2020).

As more governments and non-governmental organizations are prioritizing both the inclusion of refugees into national systems and the strengthening of assessment practices, it is essential to take stock of what has been done over the last ten years and what can be learned from this to ensure that refugee learners have access to quality education. The present review aims at understanding the state of the evidence regarding learning outcomes for refugees and displaced learners. This includes both academic and non-academic outcomes, with an emphasis on SEL in the latter case. The purpose of the study does not include reporting on the learning outcomes of refugee learners.

## Key Research Questions

To understand the breadth, quality and purpose of evidence currently being generated on refugees' learning outcomes, the review focused on several key research questions:

• What are the characteristics of the evidence available on the academic and non-academic learning outcomes of refugees?

> This includes:
> 1.) On what type of displaced population is the evidence focused?
> 2.) What are most common types of publications?
> 3.) What is the geographical focus of the available evidence?
> 4.) Which domains and levels of education are being covered by the current evidence?

• What is the quality of evidence being produced on refugees' learning levels?
• How is the current evidence generation aligned to national policy making?

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1 The research was undertaken by a team from MM Cambridge Education and Oxford MeasurEd. The original report was authored by Rachel Outhred and Fergal Turner, with the research brief being synthesized by Cirenia Chávez.
2 For the purpose of this review, SEL is understood as a set of social, emotional and related "non-academic" skills, attitudes, behaviors and values that help an individual direct their thoughts, feelings and actions in ways that enable them to be successful in school, work and life (INEE & EASEL Laboratory, 2020), though a variety of terms is used to refer to SEL.

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## Methodology

To balance the need for a rapid review with the need for rigor, an approach informed by the practices of systematic[3] and rapid[4] reviews was developed. The approach was based on a process of data capture and management, using a set of clear search terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria, followed by the use of an analytical matrix to summarize the main findings and characteristics of the literature, and the creation of utility-focused outputs. This workflow is shown in **Figure 1.**

**Figure 1.** Approach to evidence review
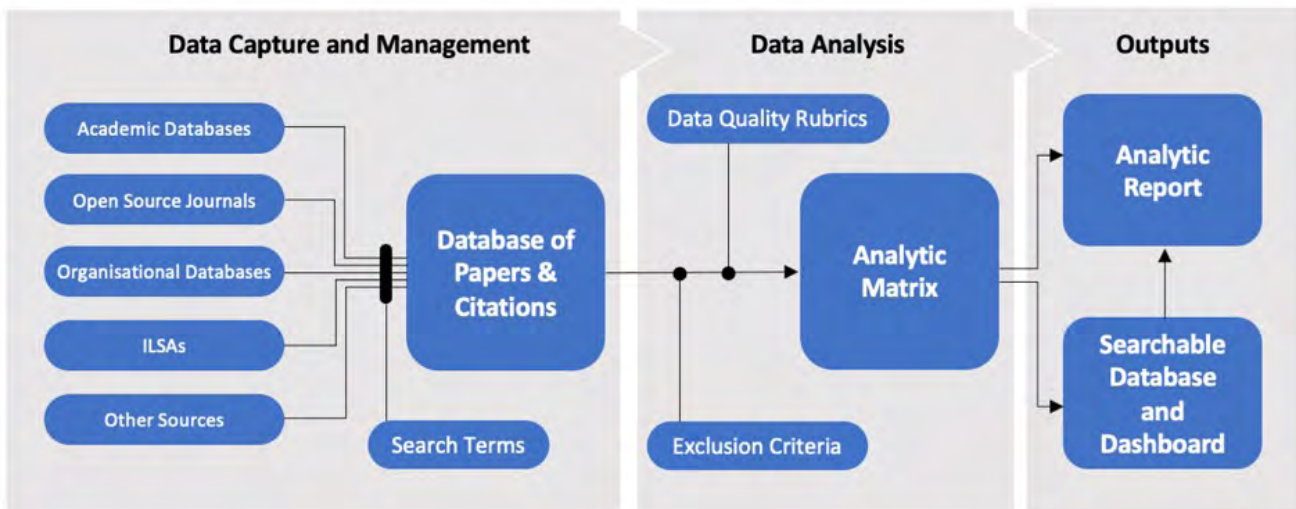


Source: Authors' elaboration

## Search approach and limitations

In order to capture the full evidence base, the study entailed a review of both academic and project-focused research, as well as national, regional and international work on learning assessments. A list of search terms was generated, and through initial searches, refined to a shorter list which returned the maximum number of useful studies (Annex 1). A list of academic databases, as well as databases and reporting of international organizations, and assessment bodies were also created (Annex 2). The screening criteria for papers were the following:

- Population: Focus on refugees, displaced or conflict-affected populations
- Outcome: Primary data on learning outcomes (academic and non-academic)
- Timeframe: Published since 2012
- Geographical focus: Focused on populations in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)
- Language: English, French and Spanish

We have excluded 12 papers that report exclusively on psychosocial well-being domains, school readiness or whose method of reporting on student outcomes hasn't been sufficiently clarified. These papers were initially short-listed for inclusion in the database, and upon closer inspection in line with the detailed criteria, were excluded for further analysis.

An analytical database was created on the basis of the review: it includes the studies featured in the review and is a standalone tool which can be used to search and filter research to find specific studies. Each study is given a row in an Excel database and described using a selection of categories (Annex 3). In addition to the descriptive information, five analytic rubrics were used to assess the evidence: i) alignment of studies to national systems; ii) reliability of data; iii) study sampling approaches; iv) ethical data collection; and v) overall quality of research (based on previous three judgments). The database was also built into a dashboard which summarizes the evidence available.

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3 **Systematic reviews** search for, appraise and synthesize research evidence, in a way that is systematic and transparent in the reporting of its methods to facilitate others to replicate the process.
4 **Rapid reviews** are an assessment of what is already known about a policy or practice issue, by using systematic review methods to search and critically appraise existing research. It is limited in the timeframe, resources available to the review team, and quantity of the reviewed evidence.

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The review had several shortcomings. The review was limited to what is publicly accessible and is also limited by the information presented in the reports and the disaggregation provided. The analysis of SEL is based on the domains listed in the reports and publications, rather than analysis of the tools used. In addition, the search was limited to documents in English, French[5] and Spanish[6] ; evidence and documentation in other languages has not been considered. Lastly, the papers for this review have come from a variety of sources. Platforms that are meant to serve as aggregators for evidence have been identified; however, there are relevant publications that are not included there. Furthermore, publications from the same authors/ lead organizations or studies are available via different sources, while platforms in general lack in search functionality. All this limits the accessibility and use of the available evidence and may have limited the exhaustiveness of this rapid review.

## Key Findings

## 1. Characteristics of the evidence on refugee learning outcomes

### *Population*

This rapid review of the available evidence has identified a **total of 59 papers, of which 56 present evidence and data on learning outcomes and 3 are mapping papers**.[7] The evidence includes studies with three groups of interest: i) refugees (33 studies); ii) Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and other displaced populations[8] (5 studies); and iii) conflict-affected populations (17 studies) (Figure 2). Those identified under the third category included studies in conflict-affected states such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Iraq and Syria, which have high levels of displacement. However, the studies did not explicitly focus on displaced groups.

**Figure 2. Proportion of studies by study population**
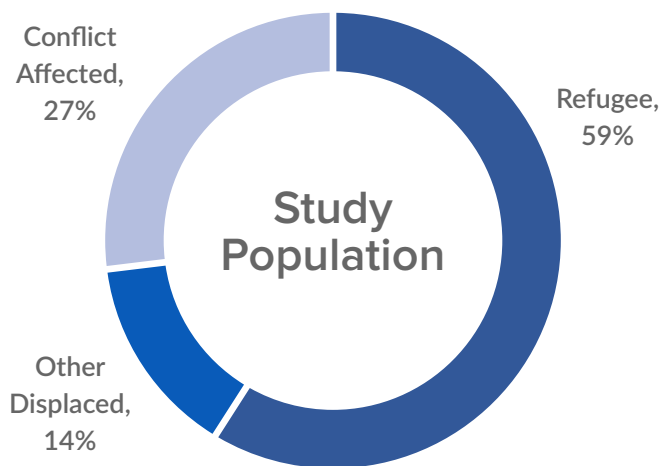


One of the areas of interest for the review is whether the evidence allows for the comparison of refugee and host population learning outcomes. Ten of the 35 papers looking at refugee populations include such comparisons between host and refugee populations based on learning outcome data collected within the reported study. One of the 10 papers comparing learning outcomes between host and refugee populations uses data provided by the Ministry of Education of Jordan, as part of an early years reading and mathematics initiative implemented by RTI (Delprato et al., 2020). Another is the baseline report on learning outcomes from the same program (Stern et al., 2019). However, none of the remaining papers used data generated by a national government assessment system or EMIS. A third paper reports on an early grade literacy assessment in Kakuma camp in Kenya, and compares refugee children's learning outcomes to the nationally representative data collected for the external evaluation of RTI's Tusome programme (Piper et al., 2019).

It is notable that different proxy variables for refugee status are used for these comparisons, including student nationality or the type of school students attend. For instance, in Jordan, national students predominantly attend regular schools, while refugees largely attend the so-called irregular schools, including camp schools, second shift and host community schools. In four of the papers that look at displaced populations, the authors provide disaggregation based on migration status, e.g. IDP, seasonal migration, migrated in the last 12 months.

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5 For example, the Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC).
6 For example, the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE).
7 "Mapping papers" denote evidence review and synthesis reports that attempt to present an overview of the available evidence on learning outcome data for refugee and displaced populations.
8 Including stateless people and returnees.

## Type of publication

The majority of the publications are **project-based assessments or external evaluations** of donor-funded initiatives as opposed to government-led assessment initiatives. There is also a significant body of evidence from academic research, as well as from pilot studies for the purpose of developing learning assessment tools. Our search returned no results of published data from government-led national assessments that match the criteria for inclusion in this evidence review.[9] A small number of studies reporting data from citizen-led assessments involving refugee populations as well as secondary analysis of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) that include refugee children were identified (Figure 3). There are several countries with significant refugee populations which take part in ILSAs, for which country level reports are not available. Similarly, there appears to be little published data from national assessment programs for countries with significant refugee populations which also have well-developed national assessment programs.[10]

**Figure 3.** **Breakdown of Assessment Purposes**



Source: Authors' elaboration

More than half of the papers present evidence on children attending government schools (n=31), with 21 papers drawing data from other types of schools (including camp schools, community schools, NGO-run schools, refugee schools and other types of schools when clearly indicated that these are not government schools). Two papers look at non-formal education programs, while 22 papers offer evidence from remedial programs. Lastly, the review **has not yielded publications on learning outcomes for refugee or other displaced populations based on national EMIS**. The review has identified papers that report on refugee enrolment rates or number of refugee children attempting and passing national school leaving exams, which is outside the scope of the review (for example, Mizunoya & West, 2016).

## Geographic spread of evidence

The available evidence is **clustered around several countries from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan and East Africa regions**, with the highest number of papers drawing from work in Lebanon (n=9), followed by Jordan (n=6) (Figure 4). There are notable geographies that are hosts to large refugee population groups, including Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, for which studies were not identified through the evidence review. This could be due to the lack of publicly available data on learning outcomes.[11] Similarly, the search criteria did not generate results from West and Central Africa, which is host to sizeable refugee populations. An additional round of country specific search terms was run, focusing on major hosting countries.

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9 The search identified examples of papers that provide figures on the number of IDPs who sat and passed national exams, though they do not present detailed data on learning outcomes.
10 For example, refugees in Jordan are allowed to sit the national end-of-secondary education exam, the Tawjihi, but available reports only mention the number of refugee students who have sat and passed/failed the exam and do not report on the results achieved.
11 Our evidence has yielded examples of reports on enrolment and other access indicators from these countries (e.g. Baluchistan), and it is likely that evidence on learning outcomes exists, but has not been made publicly available.

**Figure 4.** Geographic Spread of Studies



Number of Studies 0 — 9
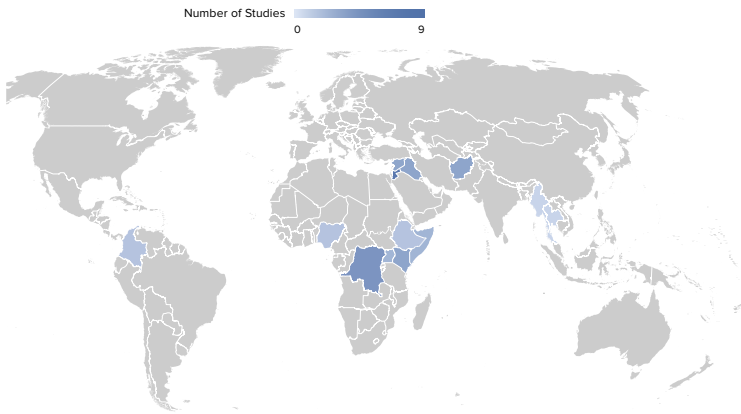
## Learning domains covered

With regard to educational stages, 70% of the papers focus on the primary level (n=42), followed by the pre-primary (n=13) and secondary level (n=9), with some papers reporting on two levels.[12] The largest proportion of studies included measures of literacy (n=49) followed by numeracy (n=39). SEL domains were assessed in 33 of the studies. Other papers include measurements of other outcomes, broadly defined as measures of psycho-social well-being.

To analyze the coverage of SEL domains, the Harvard Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) lab was used.[13] This taxonomy categorizes SEL competencies as being cognitive, emotional, social, values, perspectives and identity (Figure 5). This shows a total of 93 SEL domains measured across 29 studies, covering 12 of the 23 EASEL domain categories. What can be seen from this taxonomy of SEL competencies is that there is a strong focus on emotional and social competencies. In addition, the review found 60 constructs in addition to the 93 classified within the EASEL taxonomy.[14]

**Figure 5.** Domains mapped from reviewed studies



With regard to the tools used for the measurement of academic learning, what is immediately clear is the widespread use of EGRA and EGMA tools, with EGMA being used in half of all studies (n=28). The strengths and weaknesses of the EGRA and EGMA measures have been well documented. While they are tools that can be easily adapted and used in a range of contexts, there are trade-offs related to the conception of early grade literacy and numeracy which they measure (Piper et al., 2019). The frequency with which common tools have been used to measure academic and SEL competencies is featured in Figure 6. Note that where tools have been developed specifically for a study, they have been categorized as a project-specific tool.
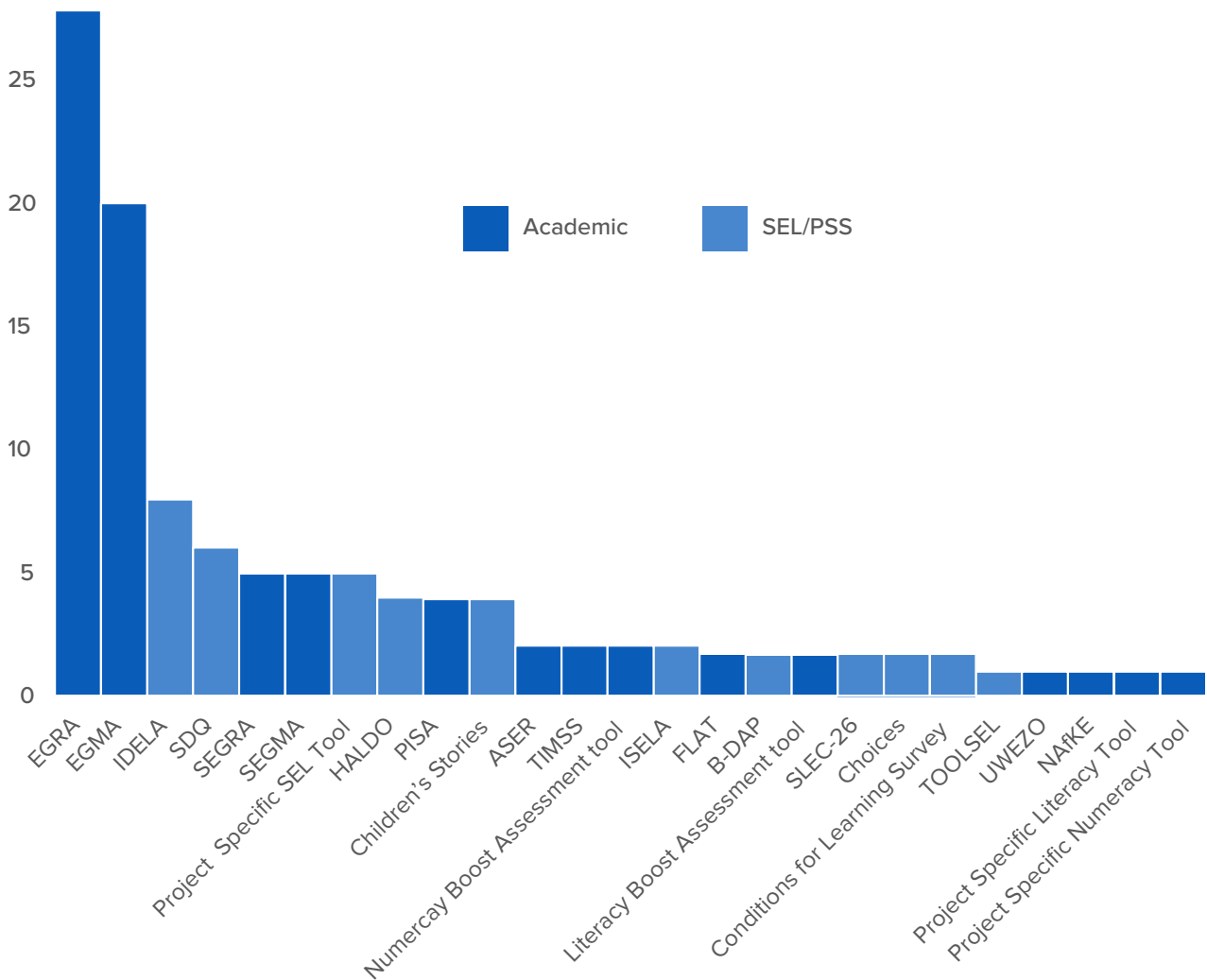
Source: Authors' elaboration

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12 Note that these are levels as reported in the papers.
13 For further information on EASEL and the Explore SEL Taxonomy project see: http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/
14 These were divided across traits of psychosocial well-being in 12 studies (e.g. hostile attribution bias, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness) as well as measures of the home/school/community environment in 10 studies (e.g. safe and supportive schools, peer victimization, learning environment safety) . One study used the Washington Group Child Functioning Module (WG-CFM) to measure child functioning. In several cases it was reported in studies that details of the sampling approach were to be found in a separate, unpublished, annex. In these cases, a rating of "N/A" or "Not Reported" was assigned. For example >.7 when using Cronbach's alpha.

**Figure 6.** Frequency of Use of Academic and SEL Measurement Tools



Source: Authors' elaboration

Regarding the tools used to measure non-academic outcomes, the most commonly used is the International Development Early Learning Assessment (IDELA), which covers psychomotor and socioemotional development alongside emergent literacy and numeracy. Beyond this, the spread of tools used for measuring SEL skills is wider than for literacy and numeracy, highlighting the range of constructs of interest, as well as the diversity of settings and the need for contextually relevant tools. A number of tools featured here, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Choices, and Children's Stories, have a strong focus on assessing psychosocial well-being, but also include some assessment of SEL competencies. The presence of traits related to psychosocial well-being in measures of academic or SEL competencies (and vice versa) highlights the intersection and overlap of these facets of holistic development.

## 2. Quality of the evidence

To assess the quality of research reporting, three quality criteria were used (Annex 1): i) *the approach taken to sampling,* specifically whether an intentional approach was taken to ensure that sampling was representative; ii) the *quality of the methods*, specifically whether the reliability of data was reported on, and, where it was reported on, whether it reached accepted standards; and iii) *ethics* - whether procedures were put in place to ensure that data was collected considering the protection and respect of rights and privacy of participants.

**Figure 7.** **Quality of sampling approach**
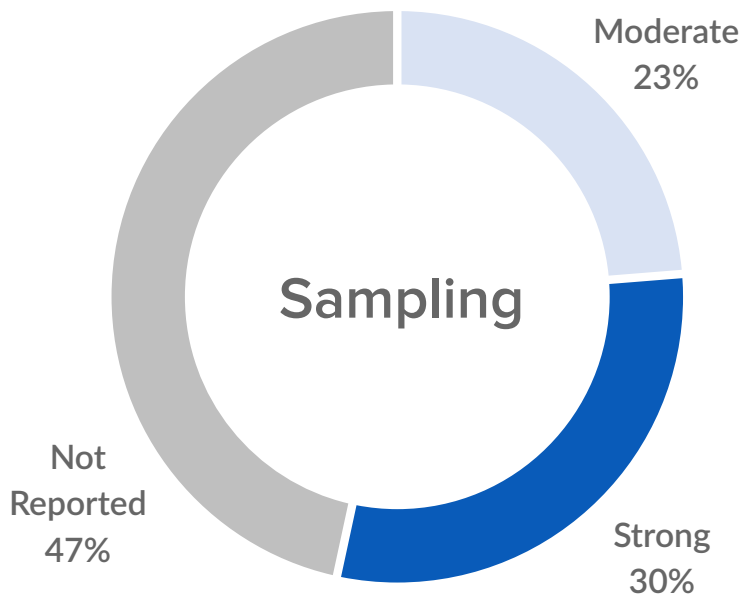


The sample sizes for studies reviewed ranged from below 50 to above 8000. Approximately half the reviewed papers did not provide any notes on the representativeness of the study sample. The remaining papers are representative of the project/ intervention population, discreet geographic areas or other discreet groups. Twelve studies, given a "strong" rating, are representative of refugee populations in a specific country context, age/ grade cohorts or nationally representative (Figure 7). [15]

Concerning the quality of the methods, the analysis found that in 59 percent of studies (n=33) there was no reporting on any measures of reliability for the scores received. It is notable that some papers briefly described the tool development and validation procedures, including piloting; however, reliability scores were not provided. For those that remained, a minority were given a rating of "moderate", meaning that they reported reliability for some tools or reported mixed results on the reliability of the results of the assessment. The remaining 28 percent were given a "strong" rating, indicating both that reliability was reported in detail, and that the reliability of the results was above a reasonable threshold.[16]

Lastly, with regard to ethics, it is important to note that the ethical standards for research with vulnerable populations should be higher, which is particularly true for displaced and conflict-affected populations. The review found that 24 percent of the studies included details on the ethical procedures followed during data collection. Of this 24 percent, 12 percent included both details of ethical practices (informed consent/assent), data collection staff training on ethics, data protection and privacy provisions (including data anonymization, adherence to programmatic guidelines and practices). Only two papers have stated that institutional ethical approval was obtained. This does not necessarily mean that other studies were not following ethical research procedures, but if so, these have not been articulated in the study reports.

## 3. Alignment to policy-making

The analysis of the alignment to government systems was undertaken using two criteria: i) use of curricular standards for designing assessments or the projects of which they were an element; and ii) linking of data outputs to government planning systems.[17] While alignment with national curricula is a priority policy at the global level, not all refugee learners are following the curriculum of their host country (UNHCR, 2019). In cases such as these - Bangladesh and Tanzania - assessments should not necessarily be aligned to the national curriculum. In practice, alignment to national frameworks and curriculum standards is more likely to be reported on than alignment to policy and planning activities. The 41 percent of studies which reported moderate levels of alignment were largely the result of using the curriculum to support the design of the assessment. The 2 percent which were noted as having strong alignment featured alignment to the national curriculum, as well evidence of intended use in government policy and planning.

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15 In several cases it was reported in studies that details of the sampling approach were to be found in a separate, unpublished, annex. In these cases, a rating of "N/A" or "Not Reported" was assigned.
16 For example >.7 when using Cronbach's alpha**.**
17 Or evidence that data has been used or intended for policy and planning purposes.

In addition to what is reported for these criteria, we can look at the usefulness of studies for policy-making. A key indicator for this is the regularity of data collection. The majority of studies were the results of either project evaluations or assessments conducted as part of donor-funded projects. **This means that, while for some projects there may have been a baseline and end-line assessment conducted, few of the assessments are likely to have been integrated within a long-term assessment strategy.** Lastly, a range of other characteristics for disaggregation are included in studies– including gender, age, grade, school type and others. What is not clear is why these categories for disaggregation were selected, and whether they aimed to inform national policy priorities.

Conclusions and key takeaways of the findings:

**While there is a body of high-quality evidence on the learning outcomes of refugee children and youth, it is still a limited field. This review is limited to what is publicly available, much is not known about what other sources could be used for tracking refugee learning outcomes.** The 56 studies reviewed present a wealth of information on the learning outcomes of more than 100,000 children, but there are important limitations:

1. **The evidence is limited in its ability to compare refugee and host populations.** A minority of the studies reviewed featured robust comparisons between refugee learning outcomes and host community learning outcomes based on data collected within the reported study.

2. **The body of evidence is largely project focused.** This means that the frame for data collection is limited by the scope of the project. None of the studies featured in this review are part of long-term, regular efforts to monitor progress in the learning outcomes of refugee learners.

3. **Evidence is available on many platforms.** This means that it is difficult to easily access the available evidence on a particular country/region or over a period of time.

4. **The evidence is geographically narrow.** Most evidence produced has been focused on a small number of countries in the Middle East and East Africa. Our review found no publicly available evidence on the learning outcomes of refugees in several of the world's most significant refugee-hosting countries.

5. A wide range of SEL domains are covered, alongside academic learning and measures of psychosocial well-being; however, **there is more to be done in the process of determining what SEL constructs should be measured.**

6. **While the quality of evidence, where reported, is moderate, many studies share very little detail on methodology or tools.** Most studies included in this review did not include detailed information on the development process, rigor, or quality of the tools which were used. This limits the ability of these tools to be reused, either in the same context or adapted for another group. The general lack of methodological transparency limits the contributions of these studies to the global public good.

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# Recommendations

**Recommendations for researchers**

**Make tools and methodological annexes publicly available and open access.**

- This review finds that approaches to measuring learning outcomes of refugees are not being fully published. Those working on the generation of this evidence should work to make their work as transparent and replicable as possible. This includes publishing tools, processes of adapting tools and construct definitions, as well as detailed methodological data.

**Conduct a follow-up study to look in more depth at what evidence is being generated.**

- Qualitative research should be conducted with major actors in the humanitarian and development sectors to identify evidence that is currently not being published, as well as to identify the barriers to generating and sharing evidence on learning outcomes of refugees.

**Recommendations for the international community**

**Provide funding and support for regular, aligned assessment activities.**

- While there are organizations funding and conducting high quality research into learning outcomes of refugee children and youth in LMICs, this review found this work to be limited to project based or one-off assessments. Future planning should take a long-term view of how data which is collected can feed into broader systems of tracking and improving refugees' learning outcomes.

**Continue to grow the global database of tools and data for prospective assessments and secondary analysis.**

- The INEE measurement library is a valuable resource which can be used to catalog tools which have been used and validated for the measurement of learning outcomes in emergency contexts. This library, and other similar resources, should be grown and strengthened to provide items and tools for future assessments.

**Recommendations for host governments**

**Streamline available data from national assessment systems and other sources to strengthen and expand the national evidence base for policy-making.**

- Governments should work with donors and other partners to coordinate, share and streamline assessments, data and tools with regard to refugees and other displaced populations, as these groups are increasingly being integrated into national education systems. Host governments and partners could then effectively coordinate data sources and priorities for measuring learning outcomes.

- When refugees are included in national assessments, data should be disaggregated by international protection status, with a view towards comparability of assessment results between nationals and refugee students.

# References

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# Annex

## 1.Search Terms

| Primary Search Term | Additional Term (with Boolean term) |
|---|---|
| Emergencies and conflict | (and) assessment |
| Refugee | (and) measurement |
| internally displaced person | (and) learning outcomes |
| IDP | (and) measuring |
| Emergency | (and) assessing |
| Emergencies | |

## 2.Sources

| Sources | Type |
|---|---|
| EBSCO | Academic |
| Education Source with the Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC) | Academic |
| internally displaced person | Academic |
| JSTOR | Academic |
| Web of Science, Science Direct | EMIS |
| OpenEMIS | ILSA |
| SACMEQ | ILSA |
| LLECE | ILSA |
| PASEC | ILSA |
| IEA - TIMSS/PIRLS | Organizational |
| INEE Journal of Education in Emergencies | Organizational |
| INEE Measurement Library | Organizational |
| ECC Network | Organizational |
| World Bank Open Knowledge Repository | Organizational |
| J-PAL/ Innovations for Poverty Action | Organizational |
| CARE International | Organizational |
| Catholic Relief Services | Organizational |
| Eldis | Organizational |
| Humanitarian Practice Network | Organizational |
| Innovations for Poverty Action | Organizational |
| International Development Research Centre | Organizational |
| International Institute for Impact Evaluation | Organizational |
| International Rescue Committee | Organizational |
| Network for Humanitarian Assistance | Organizational |
| Networking to Integrate SDG Target 4.7 and SEL Skills into Educational Materials (NISSEM) | Organizational |
| Overseas Development Institute | Organizational |
| Refugee Studies Centre | Organizational |
| Save the Children | Organizational |
| FCDO | Organizational |
| UNICEF | Organizational |
| UNESCO | Organizational |
| USAID Development Exchange Clearinghouse | Organizational |
| World Bank eLibrary | Organizational |
| RTI International | Organizational |
| UNHCR | Organizational |

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|---|---|
| Care Evaluations | Organizational |
| World Vision | Organizational |
| GPE KIX Library | Organizational |
| UNICEF Innocenti Data Must Speak | Organizational |
| EASEL Lab at Harvard University | Organizational |
| UNHCR Microdata | Organizational |
| Norwegian Refugee Council | Organizational |
| Early Grade Reading Barometer | Organizational |

## 3. Database Labels

| Key Information | |
|---|---|
| ID | Unique identifiers for studies |
| Citation | Author(s) and Year |
| Year | Year of Publication |
| Title | Full Title and link to original study |
| Type (1) | Academic or Grey Literature |
| Type (2) | Purpose for study |
| **Study Information** | |
| Country | Countries in which data was collected |
| Age Group Type | Whether defined by age or grade level |
| Age Groups | Age or Grade range covered |
| Education Level | Pre-primary/Primary/Secondary/Other |
| Schooling status | Pre-primary/Primary/Secondary/Other |
| School setting/type | School, Home, Other Centers |
| Refugee | Yes/No |
| IDPs and other displaced populations | Yes/No |
| Conflict Affected | Yes/No |
| Delivered By | Main Research organization |
| Partners | Commissioners and other partners |
| Alignment to National Systems | Using Rubric 04 |
| **Assessment Information** | |
| Literacy | Yes/No |
| Numeracy | Yes/No |
| SEL | Yes/No |
| Specific Constructs | List of constructs outside of literacy/numeracy |
| Tools Used | All tools used in study |
| Language | Language(s) of administration |
| Sample Size | Total number |
| Sample Size | Any notes on sample |
| Multiple Time Points | Whether a single or multiple incidence study |
| Host Community Comparison | Yes/No |
| Other Disaggregation | List of other traits used for disaggregation |
| **Quality of Research** | |
| Sampling Approach | Using Rubric 01 |
| Reliability | Using Rubric 02 |
| Ethical Data Collection | Using Rubric 03 |