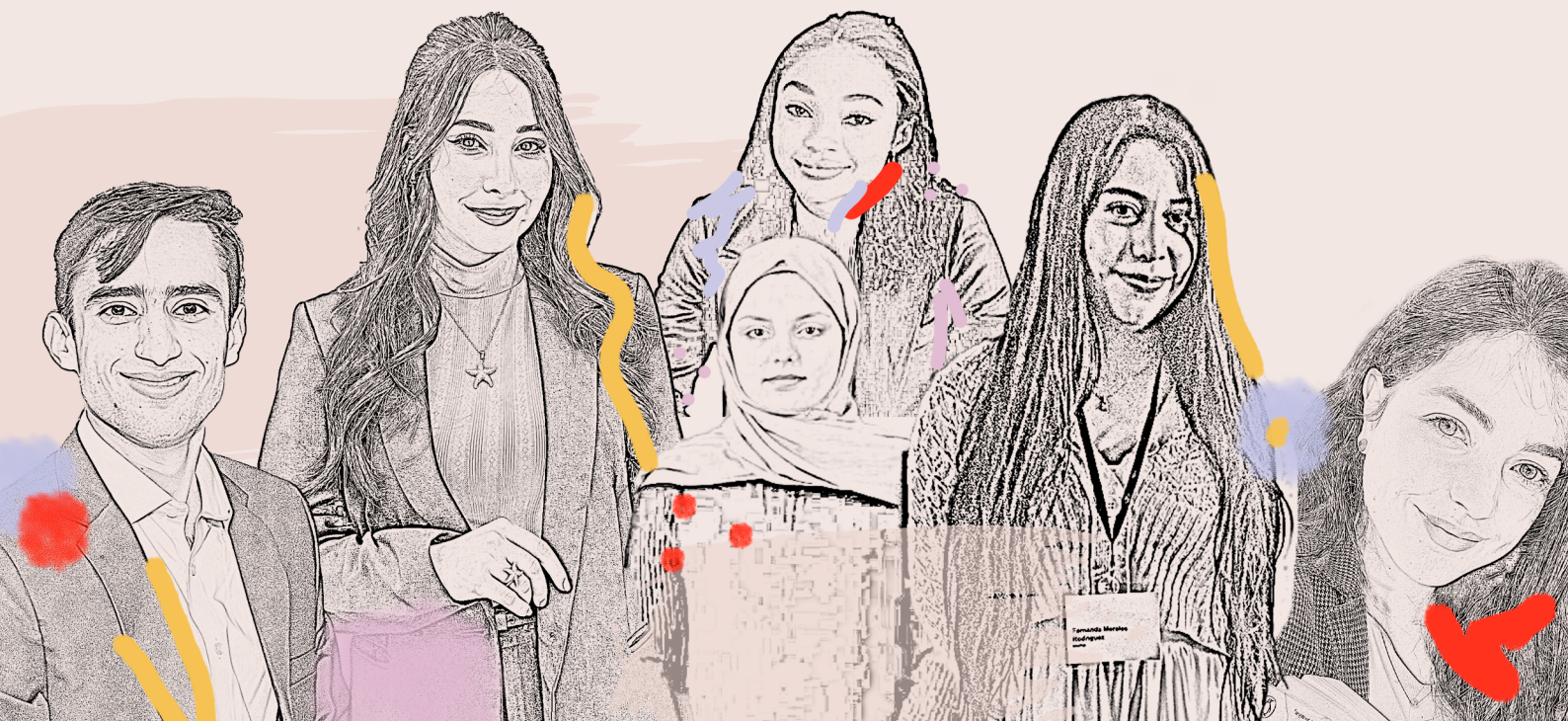




Learning in Crisis, Leading for Peace:

# A REFUGEE EDUCATION CALL FOR ACTION





## Learning in Crisis, Leading for Peace: A Refugee Education Call for Action

We grew up amidst the chaos of conflict, displacement, and uncertainty, often moving from one place to another just to stay safe. Our homes and communities were torn apart by war, violence, or disaster, and accessing basic rights like education felt like an impossible dream. **We missed years of schooling not for lack of dream or will, but because systems forgot us.** We faced immense struggles to learn, often studying in crowded places, tents, and rooms without electricity, grappling with constant financial burdens that made school fees a struggle. We lacked essential resources, including assistive devices for people with disabilities, basic facilities, and trained teachers. Discrimination, lack of legal status, and systemic barriers made our path incredibly difficult. **Conflict did not just destroy our homes; it dismantled our path to opportunity and peace.**

Despite the pain and walls before us, we chose not to let our struggles define us. For many of us, education has been our sanctuary, our weapon against oppression, and our foundation for healing and hope. Learning offered us structure when the world around us collapsed. It gave us a way to heal, to imagine, and rebuild more peaceful societies. It was not just about reading and writing; it was about reclaiming agency, identity, and hope. We transformed our challenges into action. We have taught ourselves languages, led community classes, and used our voices and stories to demand more. **Through storytelling and play, we helped others process trauma. Education helped us transform pain into purpose and gave us the courage to lead.**

Now, we support other young people who face the same barriers we once did. We mentor, advocate, and amplify voices. We show that those who have been displaced are not passive victims; **we are builders of peace, teachers of resilience, and defenders of the right to learn.**

We are more than our suffering. We carry resilience, courage, and purpose within us. For us, education is not charity; it is liberation. It protects lives and futures. It fosters understanding, dialogue, and healing. And it lays the foundation for peaceful societies. When we learn, we rise. And when we rise, we do not rise alone; we lift others with us. **Invest in our boundless potential. Protect education during emergencies; it is life-saving, it protects futures and it protects hope.**

**PEACEBUILDING STARTS WITH EDUCATION - NOT AFTER IT.**



Global Affairs  
Canada

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## What We Heard from Youth

Between April and May 2025, the REC launched a global youth survey to hear directly from young people on education in emergencies, displacement, and peacebuilding. The online survey was shared directly with **youth, civil society organizations**, and promoted at global platforms like the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 69/Beijing+30) and the 2025 Global Disability Summit in Germany. The survey received over 385 responses from young people across continents in more than 55 countries, with 94 percent identifying as refugees and displaced youth.

Young people's message was clear: **education must be inclusive, accessible, and responsive to their realities. The barriers they identified include, inaccessible schools, the absence of mental health support, discrimination, and systems that overlook their voices, echoing the lived experiences and insights of the REC members.** As youth with firsthand knowledge of these challenges, REC members recognize these findings not as distant data, but as a reflection of their communities and advocacy. Importantly, youth did not only identify problems but they proposed solutions grounded in practical experience and resilience. They called for inclusive teaching practices, assistive technologies, trained educators, community-driven support systems, flexible learning options, and spaces where youth can lead as peacebuilders and changemakers. These insights directly inform the Calls to Action in this document and guide REC's recommendations and advocacy priorities for 2025.

This Call for Action presents a focused set of insights and calls to action from refugee and displaced youth. It draws on the voices and priorities shared through the REC's 2025 global youth survey and community engagement. The document highlights key education challenges in emergency settings and offers concrete, youth-informed policy recommendations to governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society actors. It is both a call and a commitment, to partner with refugee youth in transforming education systems that foster inclusion, dignity, and lasting peace.

We hope this Call for Action amplifies the voices of Canada's Refugee Education Council members and strengthens global commitments to addressing the growing displacement crisis, rising conflicts, and increasing insecurity around the world.

## About the REC

The **Refugee Education Council (REC)** was first established in February 2021 by the Government of Canada as part of its **Together for Learning campaign**, which aims to improve access to education for refugee and displaced youth. The REC is an advisory body composed of displaced learners, educators, and community leaders from around the world. Funded by the Government of Canada and hosted by World Vision Canada in collaboration with the Canadian International Education Policy Working Group (CIEPWG), the REC works closely with Global Affairs Canada, multilateral partners, civil society, and other refugee and youth networks to advocate for quality, inclusive, and gender-transformative education.

**Phase II of the REC was launched in June 2024, and it runs from 2024-2027.** This second phase aims to institutionalize meaningful collaboration and consultation between global education decision-makers and advocates with lived experience of displacement and disrupted education.

# Call for Action

Education is a powerful tool for preventing conflict, promoting healing, and strengthening social cohesion, yet **234 million children** in crisis contexts worldwide require support to access quality education<sup>1</sup>. We believe in a world where all refugee and displaced youth, particularly girls and those with disabilities, have **access to quality, inclusive education that fosters not only learning, but also peace, dignity, and resilience**. Our vision is advanced in **six core lenses** of inclusion and accessibility, gender equality, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), climate change, early childhood development, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET). These are not standalone issues. They are essential interlocking components of education systems that empower young people to build more just, compassionate and peaceful communities.

## Education, Peace and Security

In regions affected by crisis, conflict, and displacement, education is not only a fundamental right but a critical lever for peacebuilding and long-term security. While schools are often the first to close and the last to reopen during emergencies, they can also be safe spaces where children and youth begin to heal, rebuild trust, and learn the skills needed to navigate differences and resolve conflict nonviolently. As recognized in Canada's G7 Charlevoix legacy and echoed in CIEPWG's 2025 G7 Education, Peace, and Security proposal, investing in education is one of the most effective ways to prevent violence, reduce recruitment into armed groups, and promote civic engagement grounded in empathy, critical thinking,

and mutual respect. Being a refugee is not only global, but also local in countries of conflict.

**Studies show that education can reduce the likelihood of civil war by up to 50 percent and increasing secondary school enrollment for boys from 30 percent to 80 percent could reduce conflict risk by nearly two-thirds<sup>2</sup>.** Conversely, when educational inequality doubles, the risk of violent conflict more than doubles as well. Education systems that are inclusive and well-resourced reduce grievances, strengthen civic identity, and promote the kind of resilience needed in increasingly fragile societies.

*"I remember one activity where we had to work in mixed groups to write a play about peace. It was the first time I truly spoke with a boy from a group I was taught to fear. We ended up becoming friends and I saw how much fear disappears when you understand someone. A strong education system doesn't just teach math or reading it teaches us how to live together. It gives us hope, purpose, and the tools to rebuild our communities. If you want peace, you have to start with education."*

- Survey respondent and young Congolese refugee living in Uganda

*"In my experience, education is not just about knowledge, it's about teaching people how to live together harmoniously, how to solve problems without violence, and how to build a better future. It is the cornerstone of peace."* - Survey respondent and young South Sudanese refugee

*"I saw students from different backgrounds come together in a school that promoted open dialogue and teamwork. Over time, they built friendships that crossed ethnic and social lines something rare in a tense, post-conflict area. That school became a safe space where trust was rebuilt, showing how education can heal divisions and foster unity in both local and broader communities."*

- Survey respondent and young Congolese refugee living in Kenya

*"I have seen how schools bring together children from different backgrounds—tribes, languages, and beliefs—who might otherwise see each other as enemies. In the classroom, they sit side by side, learn the same lessons, and slowly begin to see each other not as threats, but as friends.*

*That's where peace begins."*  
- Survey respondent and young Congolese refugee living in Kenya

## Inclusion and Accessibility

Inclusion and accessibility are non-negotiable foundations for education in emergencies and are essential for building peace and security. Inclusive education is a right and a cornerstone of stability, empowering communities and fostering long-term resilience. According to UNICEF, nearly **240 million children live with disabilities**, and they are disproportionately affected by crises. Among the 14.8 million school-age refugee children, 49 percent remain out of school, and disaggregated data show that **only 50 percent** of refugee children with disabilities access primary education, dropping to 22 percent

at secondary level and **just 1 percent at tertiary level**<sup>3</sup>. The exclusion of learners with disabilities or those marginalized due to their identity, including sexual orientation, fuels inequality, undermines social cohesion, and perpetuates instability. When prioritized, inclusive education becomes a powerful tool for empowerment, dignity, and the reduction of conflict risks, supporting the development of stable and equitable societies. Lasting peace depends on education systems that truly include every learner and how these educational systems adapt to territorial realities, such as the rural or peripheral sector.

*"I am a teacher with visual impairment. I have struggled to access basic accessible teaching materials, to move safely around the classroom, and to be seen as capable. I have watched my students with disabilities face even greater barriers. Some cannot hear and have no access to sign language. Others use wheelchairs but cannot enter classrooms. Many are left out simply because no one believes they can learn. These are not just challenges in education. They are injustices that deny children their rights. But when we truly include every learner, education becomes more than teaching. It becomes a foundation for peace, belonging, and real security for everyone."*

- Elisha Byalungwe, Inclusion Specialist at REC



*"As a refugee student, I've seen how hard education can be to access — but for children and youth with disabilities, the struggle is even greater. I remember a boy in our camp named Musa. He used a wheelchair and dreamed of being a teacher, but every school nearby had stairs and no support. He used to sit outside our classroom just to listen..."*

*Education must see ability, not disability."*  
- Survey respondent and 19 year old Iraqi refugee living in Jordan

## Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development is when peace, security, and a foundation of learning begin. From birth to the age of eight, children develop cognitive, emotional, social, and physical capacities, making this a crucial period of growth, nurturing, and education. However, with child migration increasing globally and 85 million children affected by crises out of school, according to the new Education Cannot Wait (ECW) report, the scale of disruption to children's education and well-being is profound<sup>4</sup>. Among REC's survey respondents, 94 percent experience displacement, and 56 percent are either unaccompanied minors or separated youth, highlighting them as the most vulnerable population, as referred to in the Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children<sup>5</sup>.

This striking data indicates that in the absence of parental care and protection, children are highly exposed to heightened risks such as being forced to join armed groups, human trafficking, or experiencing severe violence. This severe violence can have long-lasting effects on their mental and physical health, further exacerbating their vulnerable situation. Therefore, early childhood development initiatives, particularly in conflict and emergency settings, mitigate the risk and ensure children access to immediate relief and holistic support while promoting their well-being. But it also creates sanctuaries for compassion, empathy, and resilience, which are essential for transforming and protecting the leaders and peacebuilders of tomorrow.

*"Access to education has played a crucial role in my journey as a refugee. When I first arrived in the Dadaab camp, I was an unaccompanied child with no clear path ahead. At first, the lack of education left me feeling lost and uncertain about my future. I faced many challenges, including not knowing how to cope with the trauma of leaving my home and the struggle of survival in a refugee camp. However, when I was able to attend the refugee schools managed by UNHCR, things began to change. Education gave me structure, purpose, and hope. It helped me heal from the pain of displacement and provided me with new skills and knowledge. Learning not only gave me something to focus on but also opened up opportunities I never thought possible. Without education, my journey as a refugee would have been much harder, and I wouldn't have had the tools to navigate life or build a better future. Education became a lifeline, and it continues to shape who I am today, offering me hope for a brighter tomorrow despite the challenges I face."*

- Survey respondent and 25 year old Somali Refugee living in Kenya



## Gender Equality

Gender equality remains a cornerstone of achieving just and lasting peace, especially in the context of displacement and crisis. Of the 234 million school-aged children and adolescents affected by crises globally, **50 percent are girls**, and they face even greater barriers to education. Around 85 million of these children are out of school, with girls making up **52 percent of that number**<sup>6</sup>. Girls and gender-diverse youth continue to be disproportionately affected in crisis contexts, facing higher risks of early marriage, violence, and school dropout. Yet, as young refugee leaders remind us, education can turn barriers into bridges, equipping all children with the tools to lead, heal, and rebuild their communities. **Advancing gender equality is not only a matter of rights, but a smart and sustainable strategy for peacebuilding and resilience in the most fragile contexts.**

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*"In emergencies, education is disrupted for everyone, but girls often face extra challenges like early marriage, household responsibilities, and safety concerns on the way to school. I've seen girls drop out of school to take care of siblings or because their families didn't think it was safe for them to attend classes. Some are forced into marriage at a young age, ending their education completely."*

- Survey respondent and 19 year old Iraqi refugee living in Jordan

*"I was born in Mamfe, a small town in the minority part of Cameroon to a young teenage mother who never completed her primary education due to her pregnancy. Being born outside wedlock and growing up as a bastard child, education became my sanctuary and my weapon against oppression. I pursued a law degree with relentless passion because I wanted to equip myself with the knowledge necessary to advocate effectively for women like my mother, women who often feel voiceless in their struggles."*

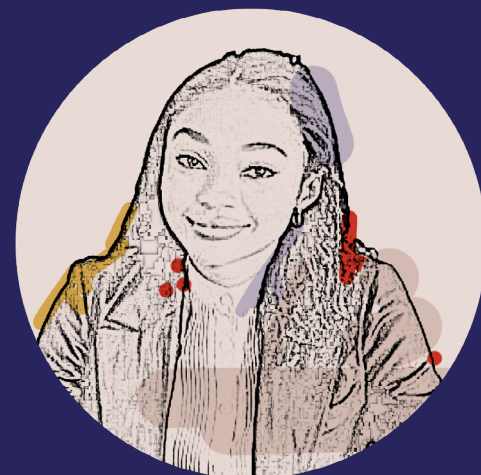
*Immediately after my university, a civil war broke out in my country and I was forced to flee my home.*

*It seemed as though my dreams of becoming a lawyer and advocating for marginalised people were shattered. It was amidst those thoughts that my education played yet another great role.*

*I started volunteering for organisations like the UNHCR that advocate for refugee education and inclusion. Advocating for refugee education felt like telling my own story not for myself alone, but for the thousands of Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria.*

*This has landed me into a scholarship to further my education in Peace and Conflict Resolutions. Educating girls is powerful. When educated, girls like me become capable of leading their own lives and paying it forward."*

- Nyenty Obi Stephanie, Gender Equality Specialist at REC



## Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

Refugee children and youth often carry invisible wounds from trauma, loss, and displacement, which can severely impact their ability to learn, connect, and heal. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), **refugees and migrants exposed to adversity are more likely than host populations to experience mental health conditions** such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide, and psychoses<sup>7</sup>. Without proper support, these challenges can lead to high dropout rates at schools, isolation, and long-term emotional harm. Investing in MHPSS within education by integrating mental health services, training educators about mental health, collaborating with mental health experts and fostering a supportive environment is therefore not just about individual well-being but a vital step for building peaceful and resilient communities where every learner has the chance to thrive.

*"Children and youth can not be expected to learn while carrying the weight of trauma alone. Investing in refugee mental health is investing in peaceful, thriving communities."*

- Survey respondent and young Congolese refugee living in Kenya

*"My school had some clubs like environmental clubs, peace building clubs, drama clubs. and all these clubs were designed to make students engaged in the school activities hence improving their social interaction."*

- Survey respondent and young Burundian refugee living in Rwanda

## Climate Change

Climate change has escalated into a pressing crisis of our time. It is transforming the planet in various ways, significantly impacting those forced to relocate. Increased intensity and frequency of floods, droughts, and storms drive many people to leave their homes, disrupting education, reducing income and livelihood options, and heightening psychological distress. Since 2020, climate disasters have disrupted the education of **62 million children** and triggered **13 million displacements** of school-aged children<sup>8</sup>. Nearly **one-third** of the 224 million crisis-affected children in need of education face the repercussions of climate disasters, and **31 million are in countries least equipped to cope**<sup>9</sup>. Of the 83.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs) globally, **9.8 million were displaced by disasters alone**, illustrating the growing weight of climate-related displacement alongside the 73.5 million uprooted by conflict and violence<sup>10</sup>.

*“Changes in weather patterns have affected agriculture and water resources, which in turn have increased tensions over land and resources. This insecurity makes it harder for students to focus on their education and limits opportunities for jobs, especially in rural or high-risk regions.”*

- Survey respondent and young Sudanese refugee living in Kenya

Young people, especially girls and children, face the compounded effects of climate shocks. Displacement caused by climate-related hazards deepens existing inequalities; girls are more likely to drop out, take on caregiving responsibilities, or be forced into early marriages because climate change disproportionately affects women.

Experiencing homelessness and living in temporary shelters creates feelings of isolation and a heightened sense of vulnerability. As the climate crisis increasingly intersects with conflict, it is clear that education must be part of climate resilience strategies. Investing in inclusive, climate-resilient education systems is not only urgent, but it is essential for peace, protection, and long-term recovery.

*“I’ve seen classmates drop out due to displacement or financial hardship caused by weather-related damages... These challenges highlight how climate change is more than just an environmental issue — it directly affects our education, safety, and future opportunities.”*

- Survey respondent and young Afghan refugee living in Pakistan

## Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is not just about employment, it is about dignity, safety, and peace. In displacement contexts where traditional pathways to education and work are disrupted, TVET offers refugee youth the tools to reclaim agency over their futures. By equipping young people with practical, demand-driven, and future-ready skills, from tailoring and electrical work to cloud computing, digital freelancing, and entrepreneurship, TVET builds resilience, reduces vulnerability to exploitation, and fosters social cohesion.

Yet access to TVET remains deeply unequal. According to a 2023 survey by UNHCR in 123 countries, **only 57 percent of refugees, around 18 million people**, live in countries where they have unrestricted access to TVET<sup>11</sup>. The remaining **42 percent face restricted or no access** at all, leaving millions without a crucial lifeline to opportunity and stability. In crisis settings, where youth are at heightened risk of marginalization, TVET becomes a powerful peacebuilding instrument, turning survival into self-reliance and instability into opportunity. By opening doors to meaningful livelihoods and community participation, TVET lays the foundation for more inclusive, just, and peaceful societies.

*“I have experience with TVET through my skills in carpentry, masonry, motor vehicle and motorcycle mechanics. It helped me explore different career opportunities, gain financial independence, and contribute to my community.”*

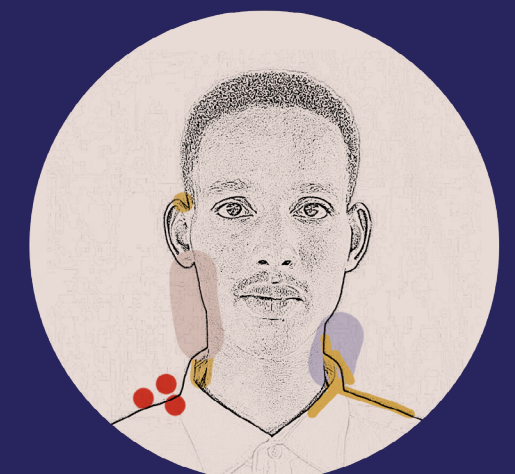
- Survey respondent and 24 year old Somali refugee living in Kenya

*“I anticipated being employed after completing high school at Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya. Unfortunately, like many of my classmates, those jobs did not exist. My family, like many others in the region, was already living on a tight budget and making do with whatever little they could. Because of imposed movement restrictions, none of us could travel within the country of asylum to search for work. With few options, many of my classmates decided to return to Somalia which, although insecure and dangerous, seemed better than staying idle.”*

After going back, many were recruited into armed groups. Some were caught in crossfire, while others fell victim to bomb attacks.

But those who chose to stay and enroll at the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centre run by Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) took a different path. They trained in tailoring, computing, electrical installation, digital freelancing, and other vocational trades. Today, some work for NGOs, while others have started their own freelance agencies and small businesses. Many are now earning, supporting their families, and living lives of dignity.”

- Farah Ibrahim, Child and Community Engagement Lead (Africa) at REC living in Kenya





# REC's Call to Action

We call upon donor governments, including the Government of Canada, education ministers, multilateral and non-governmental organizations, to do their part to prioritize the education of refugee and displaced youth in emergencies for more inclusive and peaceful futures.

## MORE SPECIFICALLY:

**We call on the Government of Canada and its G7 partners** to launch and champion a global commitment that positions education as a core pillar of peace, conflict prevention, and inclusion in all crisis-affected settings. This commitment must integrate and finance disability-inclusive, gender-responsive, climate-adaptive, and trauma-informed education systems that support children from early childhood through to technical and vocational training. By embedding mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), supporting frontline educators, and expanding access to resilient and inclusive learning opportunities, including for girls, youth with disabilities, and displaced learners, Canada can build on the Charlevoix legacy and the Feminist International Assistance Policy to deliver on its global promise.

## Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the youth and youth networks who participated in the REC's global survey and shared their stories, insights, and hopes for a better future. We are grateful to Global Affairs Canada for their continued support and leadership, and to the Canadian International Education Policy Working Group (CIEPWG) and World Vision Canada for their partnership with the REC.

Signed:

The Refugee Education Council

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Waves to Home

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