



The Emerging Role of Corporate Actors as Policymakers in Education in Emergencies: Evidence from the Syria Refugee Crisis

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (March 2020), pp. 40-70

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/61010>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/pcbg-2fu2>

## REFERENCES:

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Zakharia, Zeena, and Francine Menashy. 2020. "The Emerging Role of Corporate Actors as Policymakers in Education in Emergencies: Evidence from the Syria Refugee Crisis." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 5 (2): 40-70. <https://doi.org/10.33682/pcbg-2fu2>.

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# THE EMERGING ROLE OF CORPORATE ACTORS AS POLICYMAKERS IN EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SYRIA REFUGEE CRISIS

ZEENA ZAKHARIA AND FRANCINE MENASHY

## ABSTRACT

*Following calls for their greater engagement in refugee education, corporate actors have become increasingly involved in the funding and provision of education in humanitarian contexts. Their involvement has been particularly prominent in the Syria crisis, which has raised questions about the emerging role of corporate actors as global education policymakers in both emergency and protracted crisis situations. Based on case study research on the education of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, this paper examines the nature of and rationales for corporate involvement in refugee education and how this involvement might point to the emergence of corporate actors as global education policymakers. We draw from the interrelated concepts of market humanitarianism, philanthrocapitalism, and private authority, along with data we collected in 2016 and 2017 from 44 key informant interviews and a mapping of activities in the education sector. Taking a sociocultural approach to policy studies, we argue that a surge in corporate support of refugee education has increased the private authority of corporate actors in global policy circles, which has enabled them to occupy new and potentially significant roles in education in emergencies policy spaces.*

Received December 20, 2018; revised June 5, 2019, and November 21, 2019; accepted January 22, 2020; electronically published March 2020.

*Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 5, No. 2

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ISSN 2518-6833

## INTRODUCTION

The private sector has become increasingly involved in education in emergencies (EiE) in recent years. In response to calls for their greater engagement in refugee education, corporate actors have taken a more prominent role in the funding and provision of education in humanitarian crises through direct profit-seeking activities, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, and corporate philanthropies, also known as corporate foundations (Menashy and Zakharia 2017).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, hastened by the nature and scale of the Syria crisis, a number of high-level meetings and events in recent years have spurred attention to the potential role businesses and foundations can play in emergency and protracted crisis situations.<sup>2</sup> For example, during the 2016 annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, corporate members of the Global Business Coalition for Education (GBC-E) pledged \$75 million to support the education of Syria refugees (S. Brown 2016). At the same time, a US State Department forum held in California at Stanford University called on corporate actors to respond to the refugee crisis via education. These calls to action were echoed later that year at the World Humanitarian Summit (2016b) and at the White House Summit on Refugees, where President Barack Obama presented a challenge to “the US private sector to draw on its unique expertise, resources, and entrepreneurial spirit to help refugees regain control over their lives and integrate into their new communities” (White House 2016). Obama cited education as the first of three “impact areas” and detailed his aim of addressing refugee education through a private-sector response. A range of high-profile businesses and corporate philanthropies were actively involved in these various initiatives, including Bridge International Academies, the Discovery Learning Alliance, Goldman Sachs, Google, Hewlett Packard, the IKEA Foundation, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Pearson Education, and RAND. These various meetings laid the groundwork for a number of private funding commitments and partnership arrangements to advance the cause of educating refugee children, including the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) initiative—the first global fund to bring public and private stakeholders together to support EiE. Their activities have been particularly evident in the context of

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1 “Private sector” is a broad term that encompasses all nonstate entities, both for-profit and nonprofit. We employ the term “corporate actors” to refer more specifically to those affiliated with corporations or companies, such as direct profit-seeking activities and CSR programs. We also use the term to apply to corporate philanthropies, which, although they ostensibly do not seek direct profits, arguably contribute indirectly to a company’s economic success.

2 Although both usages appear in scholarly and practitioner circles, we deliberately use “Syria crisis” (rather than “Syrian crisis”) and refer to “Syria refugees” (not “Syrian refugees”) to acknowledge that the crisis associated with Syria’s armed conflict extends beyond its borders, and that the refugees it has produced may self-identify with differing conceptions of nationality, citizenship status, ethnolinguistic community, and other designations.

the Syria crisis (Zakharia and Menashy 2018), which has raised questions about the emerging role of corporate actors as global education policymakers in the field of humanitarianism.

Since 2011, the Syria crisis has led to mass displacement on an unprecedented scale, with more than 5.6 million Syria refugees worldwide and 6.6 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2018a). In prewar Syria, 94 percent of children were enrolled in primary and lower secondary education. At the time of our study, just five years later, enrollment figures for Syria refugee children in formal and nonformal education were estimated to be 52 percent of registered, school-age (5-17) Syria refugees across the countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt (UNHCR 2016a).<sup>3</sup> An estimated 900,000 Syria refugee children and youth, or 48 percent of registered school-age Syria children and youth, were not enrolled in school or other educational programs in 2016 (UNHCR 2016b). This situation has been a catalyst for the involvement of business in refugee education worldwide (Menashy and Zakharia 2017).

Neighboring countries have struggled to absorb Syria students into their school systems. During the 2017-2018 school year, more than half of the 488,000 school-age children and youth (ages 3-18) in Lebanon were not in school (UNHCR 2018b). In Jordan, despite taking considerable measures to address the refugee crisis, the government is struggling to accommodate more than 660,000 Syria refugees, 226,000 of whom are of school age (Human Rights Watch 2016). As host to the largest school-age Syria refugee population, Turkey has also faced considerable obstacles in addressing the crisis; this has left more than 500,000 school-age Syria children without access to education (Ackerman 2015; Al Rifai 2015; Heyse 2016).

While Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have dramatically shifted their education policies to accommodate the surge in school-age refugees, their public education systems still face tremendous challenges, thus the role of the private sector, and of corporate actors in particular, has become increasingly salient. At the time of our study, all three national contexts allowed private actors to provide parallel education to refugees, making Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey important case studies for understanding corporate engagement in refugee education. The rise in business

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3 The term “registered” refers to those refugees who have been identified through a process of registration with UN agencies, notably the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Refugee registration is affected by host country conditions and measures. For example, the Government of Lebanon suspended UNHCR’s registration of Syria refugees in 2015, which makes the current refugee population figures approximate. In Turkey, the UNHCR registration process was transferred to Turkey’s Directorate General of Migration Management, which decentralized the process to 81 provinces as of 2018. In Jordan, UNHCR introduced iris-scanning biometrics for refugee registration in 2013. These various arrangements likely influence population estimates.

engagement in these three host countries, together with the vast and unprecedented scale of the Syria refugee crisis and the nearly insurmountable challenges these countries are facing in educating these young people, provided an added rationale for our focus on Syria refugee education in the selected country cases.

Since 2011, various partnership arrangements between organizations have been established to respond to the Syria refugee crisis in education. These partnerships combine the funds and technical expertise of multilateral agencies, bilateral donors, civil society organizations, companies, philanthropies, governments, and local implementers. Notably, private-sector actors—including businesses and their associated foundations, religious entities, and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—have taken an increasingly visible role, especially since 2015. The participation of businesses and foundations at the global, national, and local levels has expanded and is part of a transnational proliferation of private-actor engagement in the education of Syria refugees (Menashy and Zakharia 2017). In light of recent pronouncements made at high-level forums and events, many well-known and influential corporate actors clearly envisage playing a key role in ameliorating this crisis, including at the policy level. This research examines the as yet unexplored nature of such involvement. In light of what we describe as a surge in business response and the active participation of corporate actors in policy spaces more generally, our study raises questions about the roles and implications of corporate actors acting as global policymakers in refugee education.

Based on case study research conducted in 2016 and 2017 that more broadly examined the participation of private-sector actors in the education of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, this paper examines the more specific nature of and rationales for business and foundation engagement. Three interrelated questions guide the research: (1) What is the nature of corporate involvement in Syria refugee education? (2) What are the rationales for this involvement from the perspective of corporate actors and those who partner with them? (3) What might corporate involvement in Syria refugee education suggest about the emerging role of business actors as global education policymakers in humanitarian crises? The paper draws from a subset of data derived from 44 interviews we conducted with corporate actors and their partners, along with a mapping of activities in the EiE sector. We employ the interrelated concepts of market humanitarianism (Chimni 2009), philanthrocapitalism (McGoey 2012), and private authority (Hall and Biersteker 2002) to understand the presence of corporate actors in the EiE sector, and refugee education in particular. Taking a sociocultural approach to policy studies that views education policy as practice (Shore and Wright 1997; Sutton and Levinson 2001) and policymaking as a practice of power embedded

in social relations and discourse production (Bacchi 2000; Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009), we examine the merging of interests, assumptions, and ideologies associated with business and foundation interventions in refugee education. We argue that a surge in corporate-supported provision of education “downstream” has increased the private authority of corporate actors “upstream” in global education policy circles. As a result, these actors occupy new roles within policy spaces and now have the potential to alter the technocratic landscape of EiE.

### **SITUATING CORPORATE ACTORS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION POLICY**

Nonstate actors have long engaged in education and international development. However, only in recent years has the for-profit business sector participated directly in the global education policy arena. Corporate involvement in education in the Global South has largely manifested in business activities comprising (1) direct profit-seeking interventions, (2) corporate social responsibility programs, and (3) corporate philanthropic engagement.

Direct profit-seeking business activities include the design and implementation of education programs and products, such as curricula, textbooks, and instructional technologies, with a stated intention of making a profit. Though not directly profit-seeking, CSR programs are integral to a company’s functions, and they operate through a corporate branch or department that is tasked with developing and implementing projects in the social sector. CSR programs are generally financed through a company’s general operating budget and they promote a range of activities, such as in-kind contributions or cash contributions to support a specific cause, or direct support to schools (Bhanji 2016; van Fleet 2012). Business actors have recently begun to promote their corporate social responsibility through policy engagement, including participating in education forums or advocating for educational causes (Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2016).

While CSR programs are commonly presented as separate from standard business practice and driven by social or moral impetus, they nonetheless aim to generate profit (Bhanji 2016; van Fleet 2012). Furthermore, businesses consider CSR and profitmaking goals complementary, thereby “legitimizing the strategic action in education politics of a range of companies” (Bhanji 2016, 430) and making CSR a “new global norm” that validates the growing presence of businesses in global education networks (Verger et al. 2016, 150).

Corporate philanthropies, also called corporate foundations, ostensibly operate autonomously and often are portrayed as distinct from their associated corporations, the only commonality being a shared name or executive leadership (Colvin 2005). For instance, the CEO of a corporation is often the head of its foundation board (Bhanji 2008). Several corporate foundations are now prominent actors in global education, such as the Hewlett Foundation and IKEA Foundation (Menashy 2019). Although considered nonprofit entities, corporate foundations are established using business profits and, as we later discuss in reference to the concepts of philanthrocapitalism and shared value, they contribute indirectly to their companies' fiscal success through positive brand association, marketing, links to business activities, and policy-level engagement (McGoey 2012).

In this study, we use the term “corporate actors” to denote those who engage in education in the ways described above, including through direct profitmaking activities, CSR programs, and corporate philanthropy. Although different in terms of funding streams and stated goals, each contributes directly or indirectly to a company's profits. In this study, we therefore attend to all three forms under the umbrella construct of corporate actors.

At the policy level, corporate leaders engage in dialogues concerning global education and have contributed to sometimes contentious and normative debates on major issues. For example, actors from corporations and foundations are common faces at events on school provision in the Global South (Edwards 2017); a range of business actors participate in the World Economic Forum's Global Education Initiative (World Economic Forum 2012); and Pearson Education publishes cross-national data on student and school performance, school choice, and accountability (Pearson 2012). Moreover, the participation of corporate actors is widely viewed as central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promises inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promotes lifelong learning opportunities. According to the SDG Compass (2017), which provides guidance on how to align company strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals, “strong leadership by business can help unlock the necessary investments to ensure quality learning opportunities for all children and adults.”

Multilateral state-funded actors have embraced corporate actors as policy-level contributors to global education. For example, “The Smartest Investment: A Framework for Business Engagement in Education,” a 2013 report jointly authored by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Global Compact, and the UN Special

Envoy for Global Education, included an introduction by then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who urged increased business involvement in global education: “We need more companies to think about how their business policies and practices can impact education priorities. You understand investment. You focus on the bottom-line. You know the dividends of education for all” (Ban, cited in UNESCO et al. 2013, 4). Moreover, the Global Partnership for Education, the largest multistakeholder partnership in education, includes constituency seats for companies and foundations directly at the global governance policy table (Menashy 2019).

The involvement of business leaders in the specific area of EiE reflects an even more recent occurrence. Corporate actors have been prominent participants at high-level events on education in contexts of humanitarian crisis and have begun to play significant roles in education policymaking and EiE funding (World Humanitarian Summit 2016a). We explore these roles through the case of the Syria refugee crisis.

The literature on corporate engagement in education is most robust in the US context. For example, Au and Ferrare (2015) investigate the influence of philanthropists and multinational corporations on US education policy reform, and Au and Lubienski (2016) examine private-sector engagement in education governance in several US settings. Bulkley and Burch’s (2011) research explores the roles of both for-profit and nonprofit actors in education reform, while Reckhow’s (2013) work investigates the specific roles foundations play in reform initiatives in New York and Los Angeles.

Scholarship on corporate activities in international education is less prominent. Research on global CSR engagement includes an analysis of the education-related corporate social investments of Fortune 500 companies (van Fleet 2012) and Microsoft’s Partners in Learning initiative (Bhanji 2008). Studies that examine business and CSR involvement in international education policymaking and governance have targeted, for instance, the World Economic Forum’s Global Education Initiative and its joint program with UNESCO, Partnerships for Education (Cassidy and Paksima 2007). Comparative and international education scholars have also examined the operations of individual businesses. For example, Hogan, Sellar, and Lingard (2016) offer a critical policy analysis and network ethnography of Pearson’s *The Learning Curve* that exposes the company’s widespread influence. Others have researched the roles of for-profit actors in establishing school chains in South Asia (Nambissan and Ball 2010) and South



America (Martins and Krawczyk 2016), and recent studies have explored corporate participation in multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank's International Financial Corporation and Global Partnership for Education (Menashy 2019; Mundy and Menashy 2014). However, few have examined the ways corporate actors have engaged in the particular area of education in humanitarian crisis contexts. One exception is Verger et al. (2016), who offer a systematic literature review of privatization that describes a particular "pathway" of privatization via catastrophe, citing the examples of New Orleans, El Salvador, Haiti, and Iraq. The specific roles corporate actors play as EiE policymakers, in refugee education in particular, remains unexplored.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING CORPORATE ACTORS IN THE HUMANITARIAN MARKETPLACE**

We apply the interrelated concepts of market humanitarianism, philanthrocapitalism, and private authority to explain the context and influence of neoliberalism in the refugee education arena and the growing involvement of corporate actors in this policy space. Critical scholars in the field of refugee studies have noted that humanitarian agencies have become implicated in a neoliberal vision of humanitarianism since the Cold War (Chimni 2009; Currion 2018). The term "market humanitarianism" describes how agencies "[vie] for funds and influence in a competitive humanitarian environment" (Chimni 2009, 22). According to Agier (2011), "one piece of evidence of the growing importance of the 'market' in emergency and catastrophe currently being consolidated in world politics is the attraction it now exerts on private business, which is starting to compete with NGOs and UN agencies on their own ground" (205). Agencies increasingly align their practices with the interests and agendas of dominant Western states and international institutions (Barnett 2005; Chimni 2009; Donini, Minear, and Walker 2004), which include a neoliberal conception of postconflict societies (Chimni 2009). As Chimni notes, while a variety of humanitarian agencies are committed in this arena and advance diverse practices, "it would not be wrong to contend that northern discourse and practices . . . [have prevailed] amidst this diversity of discourses and agencies" (2003, cited in Chimni 2009, 23). Market-based assumptions—including competition, treating aid recipients as consumers, donors focusing on value for money, and privatization—now largely drive humanitarian response. Moreover, "the assumption that the private sector should be more involved in humanitarian response can also be seen as a result of the assumptions of neoliberalism: how better to succeed in this marketplace

than to partner with organisations that have already succeeded in another marketplace?” (Currion 2018, 5).

While the construct of market humanitarianism captures the neoliberal context in which market mechanisms have extended into humanitarian governance structures and practices, the concept of philanthrocapitalism refers to the tandem extension of business-actor engagement in global social causes (Bishop and Green 2008; McGoey 2012). Philanthrocapitalism represents “the tendency for a new breed of donors to conflate business aims with charitable endeavors, making philanthropy more cost-effective, impact-oriented, and financially profitable” (McGoey 2012, 185). A key element of philanthrocapitalism is “the increased visibility of individual philanthropists as policy drivers” (McGoey 2012, 110), where corporate actors have taken up positions of authority that allow them to steer policy dialogue and decisionmaking within the public sectors, including education. Philanthrocapitalism also embraces the notion that both philanthropic and CSR efforts can be profitable. Through strategic investing, businesses can create “shared value,” where their activities generate “economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges,” and where investment in social causes results in “a new way to achieve economic success” (Porter and Kramer 2011, 4). Under a shared-value umbrella, social and profit-based aims are viewed as compatible and desirable for all involved.

In humanitarian crisis contexts, the twin processes of market humanitarianism and philanthrocapitalism have led to corporate actors occupying new roles in policy spaces. Including the corporate sector in public policy decisionmaking reflects private actors’ increased embracing of what international relations scholars describe as private authority. Assuming that governments were the only legitimate form of authority in global affairs, researchers of international relations and governance once focused solely on the actions of state-based actors. However, over the past two decades, the private sector, and corporate actors in particular, have been considered prominent players and, more significantly, they represent a new form of authority (Cutler, Haufler, and Porter 1999). As Hall and Biersteker (2002) describe, private actors

perform the role of authorship over some important issue or domain . . . They set agendas, they establish boundaries or limits for action, they certify, they offer salvation, they guarantee contracts, and they provide order and security. In short, they do many of the things traditionally, and exclusively, associated with the state. They act simultaneously both in the domestic

and in the international arenas. What is most significant, however, is that they appear to have been accorded a form of legitimate authority. (4)

In global policy arenas, corporate actors now wield a degree of legitimacy and influence previously only accorded governments: “New voices and interests are represented in the policy process, and new nodes of power and influence are constructed or invigorated” (Ball 2010, 155).

Our analysis—conceptually situated in a framework of market humanitarianism, philanthrocapitalism, and private authority—is informed by sociocultural approaches to the study of policy, which conceptualize education policy as practice (Shore and Wright 1997; Sutton and Levinson 2001) and, by association, policymaking as the practice of power (Levinson et al. 2009). This includes the production of discourse (Bacchi 2000). Through this lens, policymaking comprises a dynamic set of interdependent social practices and discourse production that has the potential to change the technocratic landscape. This view of policymaking extends beyond the more commonly held construct of direct public policy advisement and design. Through an interdependent set of multiply situated discourses and practices, policymakers are granted the legitimacy and authority to exert their influence—or, more concretely, their conditionalities—which together advance the uptake of particular global education policies. As these discourses and practices become more and more integrated into the global education policymaking fabric, they become normalized and unquestioned. They also enter into a logic of irreversibility.

By taking a dynamic view of policy that treats policy production as embedded in social relations, we present a more nuanced picture of the rise of private authority in refugee education—one that takes into account a merging of interests, social practices, assumptions, and ideologies that underpin the policymaking process and determine who is considered a legitimate policy actor. Our application of this broader concept of policy as practice helps us articulate how business practices downstream, such as supporting education interventions within countries, contribute to the increased legitimacy and the private authority of corporate actors in policy spaces upstream. These practices also alter the education landscape, thereby constituting policy or policy-as-practice in themselves.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This inquiry obtains from a larger research project conducted in 2016 and 2017 that examined the growing role of private actors in EiE through a case study of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Menashy and Zakharia 2017). The case study indicated an upsurge in corporate involvement in K-12 refugee education, which warranted closer independent analysis. To this end, this paper examines a subset of data that attends to businesses, their CSR programs, and corporate foundations. We draw from three main data sources: a global mapping, which involves tracing and coding actor activities in the sector in the selected countries (Ball 2012); key informant interviews; and an analysis of organizational documents and websites.

As part of the mapping of private-sector engagement in K-12 education for Syria refugees, a systematic internet search in late 2016 identified nonstate entities participating in the sector. This produced a dataset of more than 140 organizations operating in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. These countries were selected because, as neighbors to Syria, they host the largest Syria refugee population in the world and, when the study began, all three allowed nonstate actors to provide parallel education services. Identifying nonstate entities in the three-country region entailed conducting iterative searches of preselected terms relating to Syria refugee education, the geographic focus, and different types of nonstate actors, as well as associated search terms that emerged from the research. Key informant interviews (see below) also contributed to this dataset by directly referring us to corporate activities and drawing our attention to events or meetings focused on refugee education that featured corporate actors' involvement. These references were investigated further through online documentation and organizational reports made available to us.

Nonstate actors included both for-profit and nonprofit organizations involved in refugee education. The resulting dataset was coded for type of actor (e.g., corporate foundation, business, research institute, religious organization), type of engagement (e.g., advocacy, financing, training, feeding, supplies, teacher salaries, technology), location of engagement (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey), location of headquarters, and organizational mandate (e.g., education as the primary mandate, or not). Coding was based on information from webpages, organizational documents, and social media from each organization. We then narrowed our focus to consider only activities related to businesses and corporate philanthropies. While the dataset is not exhaustive, given that some private actors have since changed their activities and new actors have become engaged since data

collection ended, it provides an important snapshot of private actors in refugee education five years into the crisis.

To gain in-depth understanding of corporate involvement in refugee education and the rationales for this involvement, we conducted 44 key informant interviews between May 2016 and July 2017 with international and country-based representatives from the corporate sector and those who partnered with them. This included respondents from businesses, foundations, UN organizations, local and international NGOs, and bilateral donor agencies. All those interviewed were selected through purposive sampling, based on established experience, professional seniority, and two to five years of engagement in some capacity with Syria refugee education in the three-country region. Of the 44 interviewed, 31 respondents were able to address observations in all three country contexts. Interviews lasted one hour on average and were conducted in the interviewee's preferred language, either English or Arabic. We recorded and transcribed all key informant interviews.

Finally, we collected data from organizational websites and documents of key events on refugee education that involved business actors during the period of study. This included a content analysis of more than 75 publicly available reports, event agendas, and participant lists that were selected for their focus on the Syria crisis, and a discussion or description of private-sector actors' engagement therein.

We conducted systematic iterative coding on the entire dataset using both deductive and inductive codes, which allowed us to triangulate our findings from each source and identify overarching themes and areas for further investigation. Deductive or a priori codes included broad categories related to the types of interventions by corporate actors, the means of engagement, their stated intentions for their engagement, and perceptions of their engagement. Inductive codes emerged from the data and were subsequently applied to the whole dataset in multiple rounds. This included terms that emerged from various actors' reference to tensions about the engagement of corporate actors; specific perceptions about corporate actors' participation, including particular concerns, benefits, or hopes; and specific rationales for corporate involvement, as articulated by a range of business-affiliated and humanitarian actors. A final round of analysis involved applying the concepts of market humanitarianism, philanthrocapitalism, and private authority to amplify the context and processes by which corporate actors have established their presence in EiE.

We conducted data collection involving human subjects only after receiving approval from our university's institutional review board, which they based on a rigorous ethical review process. All interview respondents gave their informed consent to participate and to have their interview audio recorded; all identifying information has been kept confidential.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study, which represents a snapshot in time, given the rapidly evolving nature of the Syria crisis and the educational response in the three host countries. It also was difficult to differentiate whether some activities were supported by a company's direct for-profit arm or the CSR branch. For this reason, we discuss these downstream interventions in an aggregated way, making distinctions between businesses and corporate foundations where possible. Furthermore, smaller businesses that do not have an online presence may have been overlooked, despite our having filled information gaps by conducting document analysis and interviews. Another limitation stems from the possibility that key informants may have been reluctant to critique corporate involvement, due to concerns related to competition for resources and future funding. However, the findings we present are substantiated by various sources and types of data, which enables us to draw reliable conclusions.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section, we describe the nature of and rationales for corporate involvement in the education of Syria refugees. Our findings draw attention to an upward trend in various forms of both upstream and downstream private engagement and rationales for that involvement, including both humanitarian and profit-oriented motivations. We draw primarily from interview data to organize our findings and support them with data from other sources, such as organizational documents, websites, and a mapping of private actors engaged in the education of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

### **THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA REFUGEE EDUCATION**

Our findings demonstrate a surge in corporate involvement in the education of Syria refugees since 2015, reflecting the twin processes of market humanitarianism and philanthrocapitalism. Corporate involvement accounts for 42 percent of the 144

nonstate organizations engaged in education across Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.<sup>4</sup> These include 46 prominent businesses, including Accenture, Bridge International Academies, Goldman Sachs, Hewlett Packard, IBM, McKinsey and Co., Microsoft, and Pearson Education, as well as 15 global philanthropies, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IKEA Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Vitol Foundation. Seventy-six percent of these entities are headquartered in the Global North, and education is not the primary mandate for 61 percent of them. Sixty-four percent of these businesses and corporate foundations (n=39 and n=9, respectively) were involved in all three country contexts, and the three countries had a relatively equal share of business involvement: 85 percent in Jordan (n=39), 83 percent in Lebanon (n=38), and 74 percent in Turkey (n=34).<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the mass proliferation of corporate actors, one UN agency representative stated that “we have this unprecedented case of so many countries, so many partners, of traditional [and] nontraditional [donors] involved in quite a complex, protracted response” (interview, UN agency, July 2016). The sense that a surge of diverse corporate actors is entering the refugee education arena was echoed by many of our interviewees, who noted that these businesses range from global corporations and foundations to small family-run entities, including local and regional foundations. According to one business representative, “from things like consulting companies to small start-ups to large multinationals, everyone seems to be involved” (interview, business, July 2016).

Based on our findings, the nature of corporate involvement may be described as having four interconnected forms: (1) corporate actors implementing educational initiatives or programs, most commonly related to educational technology; (2) corporate actors building influential coalitions and partnerships; (3) corporate actors financing education; and (4) corporate actors engaging in global policy forums. We thus observe that corporate engagement in education provision, in tandem with corporate partnerships with both state and nonstate actors and their financing commitments, has served a legitimizing function that has enabled

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4 The remaining 58 percent of nonstate engagement reflects the participation of noncorporate actors, mainly NGOs, faith-based organizations, and research institutes (Menashy and Zakharia 2017).

5 Interestingly, foundations were most involved in Jordan (n=15), followed by Lebanon (n=12) and Turkey (n=9), with all three countries allowing for parallel education provision by nonstate actors. Our study did not explore the reasons for these differences, and a comparison of economic data does not provide a ready answer. For example, the 2016 Index for Economic Freedom (<https://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>) suggests that, at the time of our study, Jordan enjoyed the greatest economic freedom of the three countries, with an overall index of 68.3, followed by Turkey (62.1) and Lebanon (59.5). One might therefore expect Jordan, followed by Turkey, to have greater corporate involvement. However, our data do not reflect this, which suggests that factors such as the degree of regulatory efficiency and open markets alone do not account for differences in the corporate presence in refugee education across the three countries.

corporate actors to be increasingly engaged in global policy spaces. We describe these four major forms of involvement below.

First, corporate actors have been engaged in a range of education initiatives or programs—what might be described as the most downstream involvement—with many contributing to more than one type of activity. The most prominent form of engagement is the implementation of educational technology; 49 percent of the businesses and foundations we identified were developing or distributing some form of technological innovation to support the education of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. This included support for online learning platforms; distribution of tablets; online educational games; mobile phone programs, such as apps with educational content; portable wi-fi hubs in schools; and the development of new operating systems specifically targeting refugee students. As one interview participant noted,

the big entry point has been for technology companies. I see a lot of smaller start-ups, gadgety companies coming into the [humanitarian] space, and part of that is that we've really invited it . . . We've seen a lot of tablet makers and online software producers come into the education space in hopes to deliver content, teaching and learning materials, and that sort of thing. (interview, UN agency, July 2016)

Educational technology has been a major entry point for corporate involvement in education. This is due in part to an enabling environment that has included many innovation challenges to promote engagement (Menashy and Zakharia 2019). One such example is UNICEF's Humanitarian Education Accelerator, which invites companies to develop technologies that support refugee education.

Other major areas of activity have included the provision of professional development to various segments of the education sector, including teachers, administrators, and education ministry representatives (33% of businesses); school construction and infrastructure (31% of businesses); and the provision of school supplies and materials, such as books, furniture, and stationery (31%). Corporate involvement also has included ancillary services, such as health care, feeding programs, gender equity, and extracurricular activities.



Second, businesses and foundations have been engaged in building influential coalitions and partnerships to support the education of Syria refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, both downstream and upstream in the policy arena. Indeed, partnerships that bring together a range of businesses, foundations, governmental entities, NGOs, and UN agencies characterize many of the forms of engagement mentioned earlier in downstream implementation. For example, Pearson Education and Save the Children UK have jointly launched Every Child Learning, a partnership that aims “to identify and develop solutions for delivering education in emergencies, drawing on the expertise and assets of both organisations” (Pearson 2015). In Jordan, Microsoft is working with the Norwegian Refugee Council to support vocational education for refugees (Meseck 2016). IKEA Foundation has partnered with War Child to support an e-learning math and literacy program (IKEA Foundation 2016). As one business representative explained,

a lot of companies, they don't want to get into the mess of figuring out “What program do I support?” because they acknowledge they're not experts in these areas at all. They really rely on finding the right providers and the right experts to work with, to guide where their investments should go. (interview, business, June 2016)

These partnerships are the basis for coalition-building further upstream, where corporate actors have been brought together by conveners such as the GBC-E and have gathered at key events such as the World Economic Forum in Davos and the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference in London: “By leveraging existing partnerships which have demonstrated success, GBC-Education member companies are showcasing the strength of collaboration by leading these efforts” (GBC-E 2016).

Third, corporate involvement in the education of Syria refugees has entailed financing education; 49 percent of the businesses and foundations in our study provide funding to the education sector in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Corporate actors generally channel funds for downstream activities via NGOs or UN agencies. For example, businesses in our study provided financing for areas as varied as classroom materials, teacher salaries, youth entrepreneurship and vocational programs, teacher professional development, tuition fees, transportation, and instructional technologies. Large, multistakeholder global funds have also solicited the resources of businesses and foundations, along with their policy engagement.

We posit that these downstream activities—namely, direct education interventions, partnerships, and country-level financing—together have served to legitimize corporate actors' participation in the EiE policy arena. A growing recognition of the need for education in contexts of humanitarian crisis, and the Syria refugee crisis in particular, has attracted business actors to intervene upstream, beyond country-level classroom supports and programs, where corporate leaders are now participating in high-level coalition-building and policy forums on refugee education. The GBC-E has been a key convener of business actors on issues related to Syria refugee education. Acting as an umbrella organization for businesses involved in global education, the GBC-E serves as a conduit for “companies to become part of a global movement of businesses committed to changing children’s lives through education” (GBC-E 2016).

In addition to coordinating, communicating, showcasing the added value of business initiatives in education, and facilitating research into global education, the GBC-E has hosted a series of convening sessions on education in contexts of conflict, including sessions held in Dubai and at the World Economic Forum in Davos. At a special session of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, the GBC-E and others hosted a breakfast meeting that brought corporate leaders together with then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, heads of UN agencies, and high-level political actors to discuss global initiatives to support education in crisis contexts (World Humanitarian Summit 2016b).

In recent years, corporate actors have engaged in a range of global policy forums focused on education in crisis settings, adding their voices and perspectives to those of humanitarian agencies engaged in EiE. For example, corporate actors have had an active presence at the World Economic Forum and meetings centered around the development of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2017 and 2018, corporate actors were keynote speakers at UN General Assembly events on refugee education, including two forums, Promising Practices in Refugee Education in 2017 and Action for Refugee Education in 2018. The Syria crisis has been a central feature of these discussions.

Reflecting on the emerging high-profile visibility of businesses in these forums, one NGO representative involved in refugee education described a room “packed with people lined up” to attend, and said, “I [thought], ‘This is really interesting,’ . . . hearing these really senior-level [actors] from the UN side and so forth, and then the CEOs of these major corporations talking about education in emergencies” (interview, NGO, June 2016). With the importance of education in humanitarian

crises well established at the global level through the high-level advocacy of organizations such as the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, the involvement of businesses and foundations in global forums on refugee education has become an appealing humanitarian imperative (interview, bilateral donor, January 2017) and a means for corporate actors to become “thought leader[s] in this space” (interview, business, June 2016).

In recent years, many high-level meetings have focused on developing a global fund to support education in humanitarian crises. Reflecting the impetus of a humanitarian marketplace, Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education, argued that, “inside the humanitarian tent, we need charities, philanthropists, businesses and social enterprises as well as governments and international agencies” (G. Brown 2016). The ECW fund is a landmark initiative described as “the first global fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises designed to address the obstacles that have prevented humanitarian and development actors from delivering quality education in humanitarian crises” (ECW 2018a). While Brown was a core initiator and advocate for the establishment of ECW (G. Brown 2016; UN 2016), businesses under the GBC-E platform, along with governments and aid agencies, also strongly supported ECW from the outset and took an active role in developing the fund (interview, NGO, July 2016).

Although ECW is designed to address education in crisis contexts in general, the Syria refugee crisis “gave urgency for the need for this fund” (interview, business, June 2016). According to a business respondent, “many business leaders were saying, ‘It’s one of the worst humanitarian crises that we have ever faced, and no one has done anything . . . It’s time for business leaders to really step up and say we can change this. We must do something. We absolutely need this fund’” (interview, business, June 2016). In the ECW context, business actors are seen as potential nontraditional funders and necessary contributors to refugee education. According to one interviewee, “there’s just been this uptick with the response to the Syrian crisis and the growing recognition that, with all these emergencies, there’s just not enough funding and there never will be if you’re just looking at traditional donors” (interview, bilateral donor, July 2016).

ECW’s 2018-2021 strategic plan stresses the need to leverage additional financing for EiE, including from “private sector organizations and foundations” (ECW 2018a, 5). At this time, however, no businesses and only one foundation have committed fiscal resources to ECW; therefore, corporate funding might be primarily aspirational. Some respondents did indeed voice concern about

aspirations for corporate funding of ECW and questioned whether these actors are willing to coordinate with state actors and commit to making a significant, tangible contribution. One donor agency representative described feeling “cautiously optimistic” about corporate engagement and the nascent ECW fund:

Sometimes I feel like, are we being really naïve? How much money could the private sector possibly even have for something like this? . . . The scale is never going to tilt such that there’s more money for corporate social responsibility than for actually running a business. (interview, bilateral donor, July 2016)

At the same time, the role of corporate actors as policymakers has been solidified through involvement in ECW. Businesses and foundations occupy 2 of the 17 seats of ECW’s high-level steering group—the same number representing beneficiary countries (ECW 2018b). According to respondents, corporate actors’ participation in ECW was largely spurred by the Syria crisis and it suggests the growing legitimacy of businesses and foundations in major global education policy spaces.

#### **RATIONALES FOR CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT IN REFUGEE EDUCATION**

Corporate actors conveyed a range of rationales for engaging in the education of Syria refugees, which might be broadly characterized as humanitarian driven or profit driven. Together these rationales provide insight into the workings of philanthrocapitalism and the interests being served by corporate actors’ engagement as policymakers in humanitarian contexts.

Several interviewees noted that humanitarian-driven rationales center on the scale and urgency of the refugee crisis, as reflected in the following:

The level of displacement is so big, I think that has really profound impacts on people in terms of really wanting to better understand what’s going on, but also [to] invest resources and put in resources to help—specifically knowing that education can really be this life-saving lever for a lot of children. (interview, NGO, July 2016)

Business respondents described how media coverage of the crisis led many to feel that contributing resources was simply ethically right, as one explained: “They weren’t doing it out of any reason other than they think it’s the right thing to do and there is something they can do to help” (interview, business, July 2016). As

another respondent put it, “I think there’s the obvious pulling at the heart strings of CEOs” (interview, business, June 2016).

Several corporate actors used the rhetoric of “education as a right” to frame their work with Syria refugees, echoing the approach of humanitarian actors. For example, one foundation respondent stated that they aim to contribute to “a healthy start in life, access to good education, and a family income for children and their families. Education is crucial for every child to be able to develop . . . for societies to be able to develop and to be peaceful” (interview, foundation, September 2016). A business respondent said, “We believe that education is a right and it’s the role of the private sector to support the government in the delivery of education” (interview, business, June 2016). We note the conflation of this discourse with humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR, which take a rights-based approach to education (see, e.g., UNHCR 2018c; UNICEF and UNESCO 2007).

However, the more prevalent rationales for corporate engagement were explicitly profit driven and often expressed in terms of making a “business case” for investing in a crisis. As one respondent explained, “companies want to be affiliated with good causes, or they see some sort of strategic alignment between what their brand means and what the cause is about” (interview, business, June 2016). Other respondents concurred that corporate actors “are looking to elevate their brand and to create markets” (interview, NGO, July 2016), and that “it’s something where they can have a photo op” (interview, NGO, June 2016).

The idea of creating markets for business products emerged in a number of interviews as a salient motivation. According to respondents, the Middle East is a big, diverse, largely untapped market, and “there’s definitely a huge interest by some companies to create markets” (interview, UN agency, July 2016) there or to “create brand loyalty” (interview, bilateral donor, January 2017). This is particularly appealing because the region has a large youth population: “There’s a lot of philanthropic interest in the Middle East, so it can be a lucrative opportunity for smart business people to build relationships with the philanthropic side to advance their private side” (interview, UN agency, July 2016).

Business respondents also noted that involvement in education was a means to ensure operational continuity by addressing either particular “operational risks” through their engagement with states in social sectors or capacity-building in areas where they “see themselves having a long-term presence” (interview, business, June 2016). Some businesses have been working in the Middle East for a while,

and their engagement in refugee education builds on their regional expertise while cementing relationships and profit-driven operations beyond the Syria crisis.

Some business actors noted that a crisis context may be considered an apt setting to test new innovations, as it enables companies to work in a less regulated environment with a large youth population. As one business respondent noted, “When they’re innovating new things, sometimes an area in conflict might be the right environment to test out a product or service. It might lead to new innovation” (interview, business, June 2016).

Respondents also cited employee engagement as a motivation for getting involved, because connecting to a good cause has been shown to be good for employee productivity. Businesses that have corporate social responsibility programs for Syria refugee education explain that employees feel good about working at a company with programs they can be proud of, which contributes to “employee engagement” (interview, business, June 2016). A business actor explained:

On the one hand you create something that hopefully is relevant for people’s lives you want to touch and improve, and at the same time you also create an environment inside the group where people get excited . . . [and] see themselves in a place of work that they actually want to be a part of. (interview, business, July 2016)

Moreover, companies with branches or production centers in the Middle East are directly affected by the crisis, thus they “recognized the impact that [the crisis] has on their employees” (interview, business, June 2016).

The rationales for corporate engagement in Syria refugee education illuminate the processes of philanthrocapitalism and market humanitarianism in which business aims are conflated with social causes by claiming to achieve humanitarian aims via market strategies. Furthermore, by taking up the discourse of education as a right, corporate actors demonstrate discursive alignment with the aims of the wider humanitarian community. This alignment is instrumental in advancing a notion of shared value while endowing these actors with private authority in the global education policy space. In the process, corporate actors emerge in their roles as policymakers, thereby consolidating their interests, ideologies, and practices in the policy arena of the humanitarian marketplace.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In contexts of humanitarian crisis, the twin processes of market humanitarianism and philanthrocapitalism have led to corporate actors embodying new roles in education policy spaces and have legitimized their presence therein. Corporate actors are not only implementing education initiatives or programs downstream, they also are engaged in influential coalitions and partnerships upstream, contributing to global policy production and shaping discourse through high-level policy forums, events, and the governance of global funds. From the sociocultural perspective of policy as practice and discourse production, this downstream engagement consolidates the interests and influence of business actors further upstream in the policy arena, thus endowing them with private authority and a seat at the policy table. Our findings therefore suggest that corporate elites are indeed emerging as global policymakers in the context of refugee education and EiE.

The nature, scale, and rationales for business and foundation involvement suggest that corporate actors are shaping policy discourse by inserting their voices into global education policy forums concerned with refugee education, which in turn raises their visibility as policy drivers (McGoey 2012) and produces new nodes of power and influence (Ball 2010). They are simultaneously shaping policy through practice (Sutton and Levinson 2001), in particular through the implementation of regional interventions and development of partnerships, coalitions, and global funds. Their emergent role as policymakers, together with the stated rationales for involvement, is likely to influence the landscape of refugee education as these actors create greater alignment between corporate interests and humanitarian discourse and practice in education. As such, corporate actors' involvement in refugee education, as illustrated by this case study of the Syria refugee crisis, represents increased private authority in refugee education and mirrors more general trends in global education policy.

Within the context of declining aid to education (see UNESCO 2016) and the rise of market humanitarianism, this alignment between business interests and the rationales for philanthrocapitalism has created a situation where corporate actors are positioned to steer policy dialogue and decisionmaking, thereby legitimating their authority in a sector traditionally governed by the state. Corporate actors thus exert their influence while advancing the uptake of particular global education policies. As these discourses and practices become ever more integrated into the global education policymaking fabric, they are normalized, unquestioned, and rendered irreversible.

Corporate engagement in humanitarianism may have some potential for positive outcomes, most notably including increased funding to a sector in dire need of additional financing (Menashy 2019; UNESCO 2019). High-profile private actors might also increase visibility around the crisis and raise public awareness by convening other actors to collaborate on efforts (GBC-E 2016). Yet, our interviews raise concerns about the emergent role of corporate actors as policymakers, most notably relating to potential conflicts of interest between private authority and humanitarian aims. Furthermore, businesses and foundations are increasingly partnering with other nonstate and state-based actors in crisis settings, and several respondents voiced their reluctance regarding these relationships, including about actors' roles, responsibilities, and potential power hierarchies. Moreover, corporate partners are rarely vetted by the humanitarian agencies engaged in education in the way NGO partners commonly are, such as meeting a checklist of minimum requirements, having specific expertise, and going through background checks (interview, NGO, July 2017). The absence of such requirements for partnerships runs counter to the humanitarian principle of "do no harm" (interview, UN agency, July 2017; interview, bilateral donor, July 2017). For example, while providing critical funding to refugee education, businesses might be engaged elsewhere in problematic hiring policies, workplace safety practices, or environmental issues (interview, NGO, July 2017). Thus, several participants in this study reflected on the need for greater guidance around corporate partnerships with the humanitarian sector. While UN agencies, bilateral donors, and the GBC-E were working to develop a set of guidelines at the time of this writing, these guidance documents are not yet well established (e.g., UN Global Compact 2015). Our findings draw attention to the urgent need for concrete guidelines on corporate engagement and partnership practices in EiE.

While our study indicates that corporate actors are taking an emerging role as policymakers, it does not address actual policy outcomes, as the corporate presence in EiE is recent and its role in the policy space is nascent. However, the profit-based rationales for involvement give us pause as we consider other scholars' concerns about the rise in private authority in humanitarian issues (e.g., Ball 2010; Cutler et al. 1999; Hall and Biersteker 2002). Furthermore, our findings raise concerns about market humanitarianism, as the neoliberal cooption of humanitarian activity has been shown to treat disaster settings as a marketplace for humanitarian goods and services and aid recipients as consumers (Fiori et al. 2016). This effectively shuts out local voices as agencies seek to elicit support and resources by aligning themselves with centers of power occupied increasingly by corporate actors in the Global North, rather than by state or localized institutions (Chimni 2009;



Currión 2018). Indeed, Syrians who provide education to refugees in Lebanon noted that companies based in the Global North regularly approach them with solutions to refugee education without soliciting their input on needs, capacities, and relevance. This leads to the imposition of decontextualized interventions wherein teachers have not been consulted (Zakharia and Menashy 2018). The potential for excluding local voices and community participation in favor of global corporate interests directly counters agreed-upon best practices in the EiE sector. It also underscores concerns raised by policy scholars about processes that structure inclusion and exclusion within policy production (Howarth and Griggs 2012). While our study cautions against potential further exclusion of local voices, research is needed that looks at the actual impact of the rise in private authority on policy outcomes, including shifts in policy discourse and humanitarian practice, which will surface in the coming years.

Moreover, the concepts of market humanitarianism and philanthrocapitalism have not previously been applied to research on EiE. In doing so, this study pushes us to reflect on their intersection within this particular field and their implications for the augmenting of private authority. Future research might extend the utility of these complementary constructs for understanding corporate engagement in this fast-changing area of educational policy and governance.

As this study demonstrates, the rise of private authority in EiE in particular reflects a growing embracing of corporate actors who—as our interview respondents note—often approach refugee education through a profit-oriented lens, which raises concerns about the exploitation of vulnerable populations (see also Zakharia and Menashy 2018). The surging downstream participation described above, including profit-generating initiatives through partnerships with governments, UN agencies, and NGOs, serves to legitimate corporate actors more broadly, which enables increased participation upstream in policy spaces. The upstream and downstream forms of engagement simultaneously elevate and reinscribe the power of business actors, who occupy their positions largely due to their ability to wield funds. The implications of our study therefore extend to both education policy and practice in contexts of crisis. By exposing these concerns, our study questions how EiE practitioners might harness the expertise and funds of the private sector in a way that is mindful of the potential power asymmetries that arise from the augmenting of private authority.

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