

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Selected Main Issues and Recommendations from Studies on the Children on the Move

From the North African Mixed Migration task Force (NAMMTF)* to the Tripartite Thematic Meeting on Trafficking and Smuggling of People, focusing on Unaccompanied Minors

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Background

The increase in the numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers traveling in mixed migratory movements constitutes a major political and humanitarian challenge. North Africa is affected by such movements as a region of origin, transit and destination for those who have left their homes fleeing war, conflict, discrimination, and those seeking to improve their opportunities and a better future.

North Africa is a complex migratory hub characterized by major inter-regional movements which in the last several years has witnessed a large increase in numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers looking to reach Europe.

The “Central Mediterranean Route” (CMR) and the “Western Mediterranean Route” (WMR), which are two of the main routes transiting through Northern Africa and the Mediterranean into Europe, have become political and humanitarian touchstones. Since 2015, 492,901 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have made their way to Europe using these two routes. By the third week of October 2017, 111,166 and 13,977 arrivals to Italy and Spain were recorded through the CMR and the WMR, respectively.¹

One of the more concerning aspects of these movements is the rise in the number of children, especially those who are unaccompanied and separated wayfaring on such often-dangerous journeys.

It is estimated that 50 million children are on the move globally, with an estimated 28 million of those children fleeing their home countries due to violence and insecurity.² Currently, children make up approximately 17.9% of all travelers arriving to Italy via the CMR. In 2016, unaccompanied and separated children accounted for 92% of children arriving along the CMR.³

An estimated 15,190 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have lost their lives in the Mediterranean since 2014. The Central Mediterranean Route has long been recognized as the most dangerous route across the Mediterranean and continues to claim many lives. Thus far in 2017, 93% of all deaths recorded in the Mediterranean have occurred along the CMR.⁴

*The Mixed Migration Hub (MHUB) is the Secretariat and Knowledge Hub of the North Africa Mixed Migration Task Force (NAMMTF). It serves the NAMMTF as a knowledge management, research, information collection and dissemination hub. The NAMMTF is currently made up of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) and Save the Children’s Regional Office for the Middle East and Eurasia. The NAMMTF promotes a human rights-based approach to ensuring the protection of people moving in mixed and complex flows to, through and from North Africa. For more information visit: www.mixedmigrationhub.org

The journey is more dangerous now than ever. While the number of total recorded deaths has shown a decrease in 2017, the rate of death in the Mediterranean has increased significantly with 1 in 269 losing their lives in 2015, 1 in 71 in 2016 and 1 in 52 in 2017.⁵

Regional consultative processes, such as the Rabat and Khartoum Processes and the AU- Horn of Africa Initiative are indicators of the global acknowledgement to the challenges of mixed migration for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and countries affected. These processes underline the need for multi-sectoral, transnational and multi – actor responses involving all affected countries.

The need for collaboration and coordination is even more pertinent as the humanitarian conditions under which mixed migration movements take place continue to worsen. There is evidence that increased restrictions and border control measures drive smugglers to send migrants, refugees and asylum seekers along ever more dangerous and perilous paths.

Increasing risks and vulnerabilities for children on the move

The reasons behind why children decide to move are often multi-faceted and intertwined. Children, as part of a group, family unit or alone, may travel, among many reasons, to escape violence, armed conflict, gender-based violence or to avoid the prospect of unwanted child marriage and other harmful practices and to seek a better future.⁶

The irregular nature of their journeys makes these children more vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of abuse, including trafficking. Studies have shown that up to 91% of children surveyed travelling to Italy through the Central Mediterranean Route reported being subjected to some form of trafficking or other exploitative practices.⁷

Factors, such as the length and duration of their journey also contribute to worsening the condition of those children on the move.⁸ As children travel greater distances and over longer periods of time, dwindling resources and separation from their social networks of support not only put them at increased risk of suffering psychological distress but also heightens risks of being exposed to exploitation, violence and trafficking. Smugglers have also been known to detain and abuse those on the move for ransom or to otherwise coerce relatives into making additional payments.

In addition to the threat of trafficking while in transit, children on the move face the continuous threat of detention by both state and non-state actors. Detention is especially dangerous to a child's physical and mental health wellbeing, especially if the child is placed in cells and detention facilities with adult detainees.

Gaps and challenges in protection and service-provision (legal and policy, service provision)

It is difficult to determine the exact number of children traveling in mixed migratory movements. As children on the move might not always register with relevant authorities, it is also quite challenging to identify and assess needs of such a population that is not always within the preview of protection mechanisms. In addition, existing mechanisms, such as best interest assessment and determination mechanisms are often weak, lacking standardized criteria for the identification and assessment of needs and service provision for children on the move.

Children on the move regularly struggle to access information, including information on how to access support, existing procedures and documents required. This is especially difficult for unaccompanied and separated children who may have access to fewer formal channels of communication.

In cases where identification is possible, receiving states often struggle to process arrivals due to mechanisms that have not been adapted to the needs and number of arrivals. As a result, children on the move may endure lengthy processes and delays for registration, and in applicable cases, making asylum-claim applications.

Lengthy procedures for appointing a guardian, determining a child's legal status or facilitating family reunification result in children on the move being stuck in a state of legal limbo or irregular status, which can heighten their vulnerability.

Services for the protection and care of children on the move are often only available in reception or accommodation facilities. This means that the full burden of responsibility for the care and protection of children on the move is put on the limited number of existing reception or accommodation facilities. Due to their inability to accommodate large numbers, these reception facilities become overwhelmed and insufficient in responding to the specialized needs of children on the move.



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Policy recommendations

Children need to be recognized as children first and foremost

Children should be recognized and protected as children first, regardless of their immigration status. The best interests of the child⁹ should be central to all decisions undertaken on behalf of the child in origin, transit and destination countries and their agency and resilience should be acknowledged in such decisions. Such determination should follow the guidelines set under Comment No 14 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration.

Address root causes that drive children to leave their homes

Governments and other stakeholders need to address root causes that lead children to leave their homes and to reduce their vulnerability to irregular movement through, but not limited to, enhanced access to education, social services, and safe and regular jobs they could seek when adults.

Family unity needs to be respected and ensured

Implement stronger policies to prevent children from being separated from their parents and families while in transit and expedite procedures to reunite unaccompanied and separated children with their families when it is in their best interests.

Child-friendly services

Mainstream child rights-based approaches into national legislation, programs, policies and practices. This would mean that national legislation, programs, policies and practices need to take the best interests of the child into account as a primary consideration and substantive right.¹⁰ Develop robust initiatives around migratory routes and transit hubs such as the “Blue Dots”¹¹ initiatives that focus on children on the move and respond to their needs and contribute to the reduction of abuse, exploitation and trafficking of children.

Available services should identify clear pathways to comprehensive solutions for children on the move. It is essential that any long term arrangement for children on the move, especially unaccompanied and separated children, identifies a durable solution that addresses all their protection needs, takes into account the child’s view and, wherever possible, leads to the overcoming the child being unaccompanied or separated. Efforts to find durable solutions for unaccompanied or separated children should be initiated and implemented without undue delay and, wherever possible, immediately upon the assessment of a child being unaccompanied or separated.¹²

Institutionalize alternatives to detention

Ensure that children on the move are not prosecuted for involvement in irregular movement and end all forms of child detention in relation to migration. Explore and institutionalize alternatives to detention such as non-custodial, community based placements, particularly for all children on the move.

Gather and produce child-focused data

Build an evidence base on the situation and needs of children on the move to inform effective strategies to protect them. Research should focus on the specific vulnerabilities of children, how they may become unaccompanied and separated from their families, the resources they seek and rely on during their journeys, and the common sources of information accessible for unaccompanied children.

Endnotes



1 Arrivals data is based on data collected by IOM Italy from respective governments and IOM field offices

2 Concept note on the Global Conference on Children on the Move, Berlin, 12-13 June 2017 Available from <http://www.childrenonthemove.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Concept-Note-Global-Conference-on-Children-on-the-Move.pdf>

3 International Organization for Migration, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Refugee and Migrant Children- Including Unaccompanied and Separated Children - in Europe Overview of Trends in 2016". (October, 2017) Available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/55971.pdf>

4 International Organization for Migration. Missing Migrants Project. Available from <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> Accessed November 4 2017

5 MHub calculations based on data gathered by IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre and the UNHCR Mediterranean Portal

6 United Nations Children's Fund. *A child is a child Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation*. (May, 2017) Available from: https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf

7 Ibid

8 REACH Mixed Migration Platform, Mixed Migration Hub. *Youth on the Move: Investigating decision-making, migration trajectories and expectations of young people on the way to Italy*. (August 2017) Available from: http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/REACH_ITA_Report_MMP_MHub_Youth-on-the-move_Final.pdf

9 General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para. 1)

10 Bhaba, Jacqueline and Dottridge, Mike. *Children's Rights in the Global Compact*. (April, 2017) Available from: <http://www.childrenonthemove.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Working-document-29-June-2017.pdf>

11 United Nations Children's Fund. "Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe Humanitarian Situation Report # 19". (January 2017). Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/SitRep19.pdf>

12 Bhaba, Jacqueline and Dottridge, Mike. *Children's Rights in the Global Compact*. (April, 2017) Available from: <http://www.childrenonthemove.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Working-document-29-June-2017.pdf>

Additional references

[A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Route](#), United Nations Children's Fund

[Harrowing Journeys: Children and youth on the move across the Mediterranean Sea, at risk of trafficking and exploitation](#), United Nations Children's Fund and International Organization for Migration

[Italy – Unaccompanied and Separated Children \(UASC\) Dashboard: August 2017](#), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

[Keeping Children at the Centre: Time for EU solidarity in protecting migrant and refugee children's rights](#), Save the Children

[Mediterranean Situation](#), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

[Migration Flows – Europe](#), International Organization for Migration.

[Refugee and Migrant Children – including Unaccompanied and Separated Children – in Europe](#), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund and International Organization for Migration

[Uprooted: The Growing Crises for Refugee and Migrant Children](#), United Nations Children's Fund

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