

Child Specific considerations for addressing drivers of migration, including adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters and human-made crises, through protection and assistance, sustainable development, poverty eradication, conflict prevention and resolution

Background

“Around the world, almost one in 10 children live in countries and areas affected by armed conflicts, and more than 400 million live in extreme poverty. Unless these drivers of migration are addressed as a global priority, they will lead to a never-ending movement of children in search of a better life. Investing in children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable, must be a priority in order to tackle the cycle of poverty and conflict that is driving so many to flee their homes.”¹ (UNICEF, 2016)

With the adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, Member States reaffirmed their commitment to protect the rights of refugees and migrants on a global scale - recognizing the special needs and vulnerabilities of children among large movements of refugees and migrants. The declaration also calls for the development of two migration compacts to be adopted in 2018 - the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. It is crucial that the special needs and vulnerabilities of children on the move will be prominently present within both compacts.

UNICEF provided significant input to the ‘New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants’ and developed six policy asks to advocate for the principle of the best interest of the child to be at the center of the two 2018 Compacts. To press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants was identified as one priority among the six policy asks.

Framing the issue

“Tackling the negative forces that drive people to leave their homes is essential for addressing a wide range of human rights, economic, environmental and political problems. They should be addressed for those reasons, rather than as a strategy for migration control.”² (UNICEF, 2016)

Every year, children and young people around the globe make the decision to migrate, “...sometimes freely and sometimes under duress (...). These decisions are influenced by a wide range of factors about both their present conditions as well as their future aspirations.”³ Children and young people might be driven by conflict, poverty, violence, natural disasters, under or unemployment or discrimination in countries of origin or/and they might be motivated by brighter futures in countries of destination, including security, family reunification, education, employment or higher standards of living. Children and young people might migrate with their family or the decision is made to migrate alone.

The report by the International Labour Organization ‘**World Employment and Social Outlook 2016: Trends for Youth**’, UNICEF’s ‘**Uprooted – the growing crisis for refugee and migrant children**’ and the report produced by the Global Migration Group (GMG) ‘**Migration and Youth – Challenges and opportunities**’ all analyze the choices and factors motivating young people to migrate. These identify high un-/ under- employment rates, poor economic prospects and an absence of decent working conditions as among the key factors that shape young people’s decision to migrate. According

¹ UNICEF, 2016, *Danger every step of the way- A harrowing journey to Europe for refugee and migrant children. Child Alert.*

² UNICEF, 2016, *Uprooted: The growing crisis for refugee and migrant children,*

³ *ibid.*

to the UNICEF report, youth migration – including also for the purpose of accessing higher quality education - is on the rise, with the trend to grow further due to increasing urbanization and climate change.

Both the **New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants** and the recent **Report by the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration**⁴ urge the international community to address the root causes and drivers of migration and note that young people in particular choose to migrate due to a lack of quality educational opportunities. With the adoption of the New York Declaration Member States committed themselves to take action in order to “...*reduce vulnerability, combat poverty, improve self-reliance and resilience, ensure a strengthened humanitarian-development nexus, and improve coordination with peacebuilding efforts...*”⁵ and to improve employment opportunities and invest in educational institutions with regard to young people.

Denial of human rights such as access to schooling, health and psycho-social wellbeing were also highlighted as a main ‘push’ factor of migration in the 2016 **Report of the Secretary General on the Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child** as well as during the 2012 **Day of General Discussions of the Committee on the Rights of the Child**. The Secretary General further stresses that statelessness among children – which often results in restrictions in accessing services and in the fulfilment of basic human rights in countries of origin – can be an important push factor for stateless children and families to move.⁶

Special considerations

We would urge states to consider the following points:

Benefits of migration: Moving for better opportunities has always been a reality of the human experience and occurs naturally and on a significant scale in a number of places. While forced displacement has hugely detrimental impacts on children, UNICEF recognizes that migration has a largely positive impact on children and their families, as well as host and sending communities: Migrants who move from countries with a low Human Development Index (HDI) value to a country with a higher HDI value experience, on average, a doubling in education enrolment rates and a 16-fold reduction in child mortality.⁷ As such, when formulating policies to address the drivers of migration, the aim should be to make migration a choice, rather than a necessity, and to ensure that it can be undertaken through a variety of safe, regular and orderly channels, but not to curb movement per se, as it is a right to migrate.⁸

Re-establishing family unity: Increasing numbers of children are on the move on their own, many to reunite with family members who have moved before them. Family unity is a major motivating factor for children’s movement, raising specific issues/concerns and necessitating particular actions and protection measures. The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children are not to be separated from their parents against their will, except when competent authorities determine, according to the law, that such separation is in the best interests of the child,⁹ and specifically recognizes the right to enter and remain in a territory so that children can be reunified with their parents. This does not imply a State duty to approve every application for family reunification, but it does suggest that States’ laws and policies should be positively inclined towards facilitating reunification and must provide a procedure to this end.¹⁰ Despite these strong norms, even where family reunification procedures exist, they are often over-burdensome, fraught with practical

⁴ Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration, *Globalization and Interdependence*, A/71/728, New York, February 2017

⁵ New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, 13 September 2016, A/71/L.1

⁶ Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Report of the Secretary General, A/71/413 New York September 2016

⁷ See United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming barriers – Human mobility and development*, UNDP, New York, 2009 -

⁸ Global Migration Group, 2014, *Migration and Youth – Challenges and Opportunities*

⁹ UNICEF Europe, 2016, *The Right of the Child to Family Reunification*, Advocacy Brief

¹⁰ Migration Policy Institute, 2003, *Family Unity: The New Geography of Family Life*

obstacles and lengthy, leaving families apart for extended periods of time, making children increasingly vulnerable to being trafficking, exploited and abused.

Demographic pressures: Current demographic trends point to a steep increase in the under 18 and youth population, putting significant pressures on labour markets. If current demographic trends continue, around 520-560 million people, mostly young women and men, will join the global labour force by 2030. 75 to 90 per cent of this growth will be in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ Migration will continue to be one of the strategies to offset the youth population pressures, as well as to satisfy demands for high- and low-skilled labour in developed economies.¹² Policies need to be informed by such realities.

Relative poverty: Inclusive and sustainable development that leaves no one behind will make countries and communities more resilient to many of the slow- and sudden-onset causes that drive migration, and allow individuals to live safely and securely at home. Although enhanced development can lead to higher levels of emigration in the short term as people are better able to access migration opportunities,¹³ their journeys also become less unsafe and irregular as emigration gradually becomes one of many viable livelihood options and is not driven by desperation

Fleeing Conflict, Violence and Discrimination:¹⁴ Children move in response to general level of conflict and violence in their communities, many as part of refugee movements. More general level of violence are not always covered under the 1951 Refugee Convention. A particular phenomena is children from the 'Northern Triangle' countries in Central America migrating to flee gang recruitment and violence. Weak social and child protection services, as well as unsafe schools, are not well placed to respond to the vulnerabilities of these children at home. Ethnic discrimination, as well as statelessness can be another core driver of out-migration, with not all qualifying as refugees.

Climate Change: Climate Change will continue to affect children disproportionately, with 500 Million children living in areas with very high risk of flooding; and nearly 160 million living in areas of extreme or high risk of drought: they are particularly affected by the spread of vector-spread diseases, exacerbated rural poverty and food insecurity.¹⁵ There will be increased displacement due to quick onset effects of Climate Change, and gradual movement from areas affected by its slow-onset effects. Climate change will hit the poorest children the most, and thus increase existing inequalities in communities – this will be exacerbated by the fact that fewer safe and regular migration options tend to be available for poor families. Children will be at acute risk of exploitation and abuse during unsafe journeys, including by being trafficked.-¹⁶ However, despite the enormous risks they face, children have been almost entirely overlooked in the emerging debate, research and policies on climate-driven migration and displacement.

Recommendations

Re-establishing family unity: States may review existing barriers to family reunification in light of their compatibility with the principle of the best interests of the child. In order to facilitate the reunification of children with their families, States could consider prioritizing visa applications for family reunification in cases involving children and investing in accelerated procedures. States might also consider expanding the definition of family so that children can be reunited with members of their extended family in countries of destination- such as adult siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. To avoid undue

¹¹ ILO World Employment Social Outlook Trends 2017; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015) *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*.

¹² UNICEF, 2014, *Generation 2030 Africa*; World Bank, 2016, *Migration and Development*

¹³ Hein de Haas, 2010, *Migration transitions: a theoretical and empirical inquiry into the development drivers of migration*, University of Oxford International Migration Institute Working Paper

¹⁴ UNICEF, 2016, *Central American children's dangerous journey to the United States*

¹⁵ UNICEF, 2015, *Unless we act now: The impact of climate change on children*

¹⁶ IPCC, 2014, *Climate Change 2014 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Regional Aspects*

waiting, and stranding children alone, States may make flexible use of existing family reunification mechanisms to respond to humanitarian situations, including by easing the procedures and conditions required.¹⁷

Demographic pressures: On the one hand, beyond providing opportunities for high skilled young migrants, States can expand opportunities for safe, orderly and regular migration channels for lower skilled young migrants, in line with the realities of labour market demands. On the other hand, as outlined under SDG 8, states may provide dedicated funding into programmes for youth job creation, as well as livelihood and skill development for young people. With most countries being or becoming countries of destination and origin, the inclusion of both host and migrant communities in these programmes can also aid integration and community acceptance as well as expand the range of options available to national youth.

Relative poverty: States need to more effectively target their investments and allocations to increase children's access to quality education, strengthen health systems and social safety nets, and expand opportunities for family income and youth employment.

Fleeing Conflict, Violence and Discrimination: Conflict as a key driver of mixed migration movements needs to be addressed through prevention of conflict, peace-building and stabilizing ongoing situations. In addition, Governments in countries of origin and a wide range of partners, including UNICEF, need to continue working to address violence at family and community level, so that no one feels forced to migrate. This includes the strengthening of social and child protection services that strengthen families and reduce the vulnerability of children to violence, crime and other threats, and to make them inclusive and accessible to all children regardless of their nationality, statelessness, gender, ethnicity or religion. All governments are urged to keep children in quality schools, make schools safe, strengthen community centers and collaborate with local government, community partners and faith-based organizations to provide psychosocial support to children affected by violence. Childhood statelessness needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Climate Change: Climate change needs to be addressed to avoid climate change-induced forced displacement, including through maintaining the commitment to the Paris Agreement and through reflecting child specific concern in National Climate Policies.¹⁸ At the same time, migration can be a form of climate change adaptation, particularly in providing youth with opportunities to diversify skills and harness economic opportunities, and in enabling them to make a positive contribution at their destination. Incorporating child rights and displacement and migration issues in national climate and disaster risk reduction strategies and processes can address climate-related migration. Processes such as the Nansen Initiative¹⁹ have demonstrated how states can pro-actively foster coherence between migration and climate change policies in order to prevent and minimize displacement, enhance resilience, and facilitate safe and legal routes.²⁰

¹⁷ UNICEF Europe, 2016, *The Right of the Child to Family Reunification*, Advocacy Brief

¹⁸ Currently, only one third of national climate put forward by countries under the Paris Agreement refer to children – the vast majority in passing. See: UNICEF UK, 2017, *No Place to call home: Protecting Children's Rights when the changing climate forces them to flee*, p.25

¹⁹ <https://www.nanseninitiative.org/>

²⁰ UNICEF UK, 2017, *No Place to call home: Protecting Children's Rights when the changing climate forces them to flee*