

### Background

Tens of millions of children are on the move around the world. In 2020, there were an estimated 35.5 million international child migrants globally. Over the past 10 years, the number of children forcibly displaced- both within their countries and across borders- has doubled.<sup>1</sup> The causes of movements are often complex and fall along a spectrum from forced to voluntary, ranging from displacement due to conflict or natural disasters, to migration as a strategy to access rights and opportunities. Such movement can prove essential in providing children and families the chance not only of immediate safety but of improved quality of life and freedoms that they are unable to access in their communities of origin. However, it can also place children at increased risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, and without adequate support, can compromise their health, education and overall wellbeing. For unaccompanied children separated from their families, these risks are particularly high.

### Current and future challenges

**COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic and international response from states has had a major impact on children and families on the move, whether that be through mobility restrictions, increased time spent in camps or detention facilities, restricted or non-existent access to essential services, protracted family separation and asylum procedures, or unsafe and undignified returns.<sup>2</sup> The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic and future responses are likely to have long term impacts on migration and mobility.<sup>3</sup>

**Climate change:** An annual average of over 20 million people having been internally displaced by weather related events since 2008,<sup>4</sup> and sudden onset climate events such as storms, hurricanes and floods are increasingly acting as direct drivers of mass displacement events, as global temperatures increase. Slow-onset climate hazards, such as land degradation, loss of biodiversity and desertification are interacting with and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, land insecurity and violence, to create indirect drivers of migration. Increasing global temperatures and inadequate action for mitigation and adaptation will only increase the likelihood of children and families going on the move in the future.

**Conflict:** Conflict and violence are taking place at an unprecedented rate. Instability created by conflict, combined with the climate crisis and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, is leading to

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<sup>1</sup> International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, “Missing from the Story: The Urgent Need for Better Data to Protect Children on the Move” (2021).

<sup>2</sup> [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl416/files/resources\\_files/sgs\\_report\\_english.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl416/files/resources_files/sgs_report_english.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022-chapter-5>

<sup>4</sup> IPCC WGII Sixth Assessment Report, Technical Summary

record humanitarian needs for children and families, and will increase drivers of displacement and children and families on the move in the future.<sup>5</sup>

## International legal frameworks and standards

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out standards for the treatment of all children, and those particularly pertinent to children in migration are the right to protection from harmful and exploitative work (Article 32), sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34), physical or mental violence (Article 19), separation from families against their will (Article 9) and family reunification (Article 10). More recently, the 2019 UN Resolution on the Rights of the Child focused specifically on children without parental care, and gives focus to children who are moving unaccompanied and separated from parents or primary caregivers, calling on states to prevent family separation and provide a range of alternative care options for children. The Global Compacts on Refugees and Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, agreed in 2018, outlined specific provisions which, if implemented adequately, ensure that the rights of children are realised in the context of migration. This includes principles of best interest, protection, non-discrimination, participation, health and education, and a call to end the practice of child detention. These compacts provide tools to ensure that all children on the move are protected and empowered, regardless of their status in any country in which they are moving. However, while such frameworks are still relatively new, their non-binding nature means that there are varying levels of implementation of the commitments, which are often subject to shifting political, socio-economic and security agendas. As a result, children on the move are still facing significant barriers to accessing their fundamental rights.

## Family for Every Child's position on appropriate responses to children on the move

### **Children should be protected from family separation and separated families given assistance to reunify wherever possible**

Family separation has an extremely damaging and traumatic impact on children, and for children on the move, not only increases their exposure to physical and psychological harm but can also threaten their right to identity and culture.

- At the outset, investment is needed to identify children and families at risk of separation and family strengthening efforts should be made priority within all national contexts to avoid separation as far as possible, regardless of the legal status of families when on the move.
- Measures should be taken to improve and expand access to social protection for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in transit and destination countries, in order to prevent families from falling into hardship and risking separation.
- Where children on the move have been separated, states should ensure efficient family reunification procedures, implementing all measures to trace and reunite separated children with their families, and taking into consideration the best interests of the child (including when reunification may not be in the child's best interest).

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<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, *Prospects for Children in 2022: A Global Outlook* (2022).

- Access to legal identity for those that do not have it should be prioritised as this is essential in enabling children to access other rights, including family reunification.

Children on the move are often reliant upon informal networks, which include extended family members based within host countries. Relatives and communities from children's countries of origin can be integral to their protection, wellbeing and maintenance of identity. However, these networks are often not taken into account during reunification procedures.

- States should prioritise reunification with relatives- including siblings and extended family members- and reduce the bureaucratic obstacles which in some cases can lead to risky secondary movement by children seeking out relatives themselves.
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**All unaccompanied children on the move, regardless of legal status, should be treated first and foremost as children and be given access to all rights attached to this status, at all stages of their movement.**

- All essential services should be provided to children on the move, including education, health care, shelter, social protection and access to information on legal processes and their rights.
  - Focus should be on ensuring that the best interests of the child are prioritised during all stages of the migratory process and not only at destination, and every response must respond to the specific needs of that child.
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### **Children on the move in humanitarian settings**

Children are at high risk of being separated from their family and primary caregivers during emergencies and humanitarian crises. All efforts must be made to ensure that appropriate and targeted interim care is provided for children on the move within the emergency response. This may include interim temporary shelters specific to unaccompanied minors and emergency foster care with families, and should not involve placement in detention or orphanages.

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**Appropriate and sustained care should be provided to support the integration of children and young people into host communities**

Where returning to countries and communities of origin is against a child's wishes or best interests, it is essential that children are given the support to grow and flourish in new communities. However, there are often many significant barriers to this. For example, research in Europe has found that long and complex legal procedures around asylum and right to remain create feelings of extended

precarity and psychological distress, and the abrupt loss of key support structures that often occurs when a child turns 18 can be detrimental to their integration process.<sup>6</sup>

- According to young people, key responses that are needed to ensure successful integration in host countries include: strengthening anti-discrimination initiatives, ensuring the protection of children and young people from risk, and supporting them to reach their true potential as active and equal members of society.
- Appropriate care arrangements must be found in host countries for children, including foster care, or single-independent living arrangements, and transition into independence must be facilitated, supported and adequately funded so that sustainable care is provided to children and young people.

**Example:**

METAdrasi's Supported Independent Living (SIL) programme provides a community environment to support the growth of unaccompanied children's independence, prepare them for adulthood and facilitate their integration into local society. This is done through education services, legal and medical support, interpretation, recreational activities and job orientation or introduction to the labour market. Targets are set for children's progress relating to their integration into society, which look at the building of self-esteem and improvement of life skills.

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**Maximum efforts should be made to effectively reintegrate separated children back into families and communities**

Despite the importance of family reintegration to a child's wellbeing and development, a lack of guidance and investment in the process often results in ineffective or even unsafe reintegration. This is especially the case in complex cases where unaccompanied children have been affected by sexual violence or armed conflict.

- Reintegration back into families and communities is a complex process of preparation, planning, support and follow up in which children should be engaged at every step and which should always take into consideration the best interest of the child. Efforts should involve an understanding of the capacity of the family to support the child, as well as ways of assessing the risk of and preventing further abuse or re-separation.
- Successful reintegration of children affected by sexual exploitation and abuse requires a specific and holistic approach to ensure that their needs are met. Family reintegration for children affected by armed conflict presents particular challenges and significant work is needed to ensure that children can work through trauma before being reintegrated back into families and communities.

The [Guidelines on Children's Reintegration](#) provide practical guidance for effective reintegration that can help organisations to design high quality programmes, measure impact, train practitioners and pursue national level systemic change in support of reintegration.

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<sup>6</sup> Forthcoming

**Examples:**

In some cases it may not be possible or in their best interests for children to be reintegrated back into their families, or such efforts may fail. Several of our members, including FSCE, ENDA JA, and Voice of Children work closely and over prolonged periods with children to determine if reintegration back into families of origin-including kinship care placement- is appropriate, and where it is not, alternative care programmes are used.

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**The opinions, experiences and recommendations of children and young people must always be taken into account when responding to children on the move**

As well as responding to their vulnerabilities, the agency and resilience of children on the move must also be recognised. Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to have their opinions on matters that affect them taken into account, and any response to the needs of children on the move can only be effective if their perspectives are part of that response. Family for Every Child utilises participatory methodologies to enable young people to share their experiences and recommendations for policy and practice change in relation to migration. Photovoice projects carried out in multiple countries by children and young people are providing a space for young people to be heard and their recommendations are determining Family's advocacy priorities in relation to safer movement and improved integration and reintegration for children on the move. Digital Storytelling has been used by members of Family, such as in Colombia, where children have been able to share their experiences of the impacts of conflict directly to policy makers through the method.

**Example:**

In a participatory [Photovoice research](#) project carried out in 2020, young people who had migrated unaccompanied from Central America to the USA provided recommendations to policymakers to ensure safer movement in transit. These included ensuring that families are kept together, that immigration authorities are educated on the rights of children, and that relevant information is given to young migrants along the route.

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**The support provided to children on the move should always respond to individual needs, and the specific needs of marginalised communities**

Protection responses that are based on narrow categories such as 'street child' or 'trafficked' often fall short of fully addressing the needs of children on the move, and do not account for the fact that children often move between several categories throughout their movement. Different categories of children are channelled into different protection routes and services, which are often inconsistent and subject to varying political priorities, and the specific needs of marginalised communities are often unacknowledged.

- Attention must be given to the specific needs of children and families from marginalised communities, such as LGBTQ+, indigenous or those with disabilities, who may not only be at higher risk of separation from families, but at higher risk of facing violence, discrimination and other hardships during movement. For children who are stateless or born to families affected by statelessness, states should ensure that they have full and equal access to their rights and services and take measures to reduce their heightened risk of family separation.
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### **Psychosocial support is an essential to children and families on the move**

The migration experience can place children under significant psychosocial distress, caused by the many factors of separation, experience or witnessing violence, being away from loved ones or facing discrimination and precarity in transit and destination areas.

- Psychosocial interventions are essential for children on the move who often suffer trauma from the disruption and events that led to movement or during their movement.

#### **Example:**

In Colombia, many children recruited by armed groups have come from violent homes, and after witnessing and being forced to commit violence themselves in the context of armed conflict, these children need specialised reintegration support. [Taller de Vida](#) provides psychosocial support using art-based therapies to help support children to heal traumas and improve their ability to transition back into communities after being affected by armed conflict.