



FROM FAITH TO ACTION

Inter-religious regional conference to protect
the rights of children affected by migration

Promising Practice Case Study #1: Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, Serbia

1. The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization's work with children and women on the move in Serbia

The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (EHO) is a development organization guided by Christian ethical values. A member of Act Alliance,¹ it was founded in 1993 in Novi Sad, Serbia, on the initiative of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The founding churches are the Slovak Evangelical A.B. church in Serbia, the Serbian Reformed Christian church, the Apostolic Exarchate for Greek Catholics in Serbia and Montenegro and the Evangelic Christian A.B. church in Serbia-Vojvodina. The ecumenical nature of the organization is unique in Serbia. It contributes to the expansion of its engagement, both in terms of areas and type of intervention as well as in geographical terms within Serbia. For EHO, respect for human rights and the dignity of all people is a core value.

EHO's work in Serbia is multifaceted. It ranges from fostering the inclusion and empowerment of marginalised groups such as the Roma community² and supporting children and the elderly³ to peacebuilding work with young people from different ethnic and faith communities.⁴ Since 2015, EHO has been assisting migrants and refugees in transit through Serbia.⁵ Part of this engagement focused on children on the move and access to education in particular. A previous project⁶ on social inclusion, now concluded, specifically addressed the needs of children on the move by supporting their inclusion in local schools through training local teachers in intercultural work to promote

¹ Act Alliance, available at <https://actalliance.org/>

² "Civil Society," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/civil-society>

³ "Social Welfare Protection," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/social-welfare-protection>

⁴ "Interfaith and interethnic work," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/interfaith-and-interethnic-work>

⁵ "Humanitarian Aid for Refugees and Migrants in Serbia," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/finished-projects-archive/70/2020/09/17/humanitarian-aid-for-refugees-and-migrants-in-serbia.html>

⁶ Ibid.

welcoming approaches and counter prejudice and discrimination. This previous project focussing on inclusion was financially supported by Swiss Church Aid (HEKS/EPER)⁷ and implemented in partnership with the local government. Building on it, EHO started a new project in 2019 called “Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children,” financially supported by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is the main focus of his case study.

2. The context: Children and youth on the move in Serbia

UNHCR data on Serbia reflecting mixed migration movements from January until 27 September 2020 shows that, after a sharp drop in arrivals between April and the beginning of June, the number of arrivals rose considerably. During the whole period, 1,129 unaccompanied minors—around 84% of which were male—entered the territory.⁸ According to the latest data (September 2020) from UNHCR and the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (hereinafter Commissariat),⁹ Serbia currently hosts almost 26,000 refugees, 197,000 IDPs, and around 1,900 people at risk of statelessness. The number of people living in some of the Asylum Centres (AC) and Reception and Transit Centres (RTC) around the country has been growing in the last months. For example, a UNHCR assessment of the sites from August 2020 reported that the Sombor RTC was operating at full capacity with 753 people (of which 10% were children).¹⁰ The numbers rose to 854 by the end of August and to 1,141 at the end of September. ¹¹

Serbia is one of the countries in the Balkan region where the effects of restrictive policies on border crossings are more visible. In September 2020, the number of migrants and refugees who were pushed back from neighbouring states (3,115) was more significant than the number of arrivals, and the highest since UNHCR started monitoring them in 2016.¹² In September, the total number of migrants and refugees hosted in RTCs or ACs in the country was 5,064—526 were children, including 174 unaccompanied minors.¹³ Numerous sources have identified a significant increase in violent border enforcement practices and pushback operations in the areas close to the borders to Hungary and Croatia, where EHO operates.¹⁴

⁷ HEKS, available at <https://en.heks.ch/>

⁸ “UNHCR - South Eastern Europe - New Arrivals Tracking,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/103>

⁹ “UNHCR Serbia Fact Sheet September 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/79357>

¹⁰ “Serbia - Site Profiles, August 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/55034>

¹¹ “Serbia Statistical Snapshot September 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/82605>

¹² “Serbia Update September 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/79389>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Shots Fired, Arrests and Violent Push Back Reported at the Serbian Hungarian Border,” European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), available at <https://www.ecre.org/shots-fired-arrests-and-violent-push-back-reported-at-the-serbian-hungarian-border/>; “Reports about Pushbacks and Violence against Children at the Western Balkans Borders in 2019 and 2018,” Save the Children,

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic until the beginning of November, Serbia had 55,676 confirmed cases and 861 deaths.¹⁵ The COVID-19 crisis worsened the situation for many refugees and migrants. A 2020 report by Save the Children highlighted how physical distancing is virtually impossible in often overcrowded transit centres in the Western Balkans.¹⁶ Due to further restrictions on freedom of movement, only a few NGOs were allowed to keep working inside RTCs and ACs.¹⁷ New rules on sanitization and the use of masks were introduced in all centres.¹⁸

Children on the move, and especially unaccompanied minors, have faced and continue to face several obstacles to their right to education—from language barriers and lack of documents necessary for enrolment to adequately trained teachers.¹⁹ However, in the last years, several efforts have been made to ensure access to education for children in RTCs and ACs centres in Serbia.²⁰ For instance, a transportation service for children living in a reception centre and attending a local school was organised by IOM Serbia in collaboration with the Commissariat and funded by the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis and the MADAD Fund.²¹ Moreover, before the second lockdown began, several children living in RTCs and ACs—with the support of UNCHR Serbia—had either started going to school or received vouchers for the purchase of books and other school materials.²²

3. EHO’s “Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children” Program

Building on the social inclusion project described in Section 1, the program “Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children”²³ is currently implemented by EHO in the RTCs of Šid, near the border to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Sombor, near the border to Hungary.

available at <https://nwb.savethechildren.net/news/reports-about-pushbacks-and-violence-against-children-western-balkans-borders-2019-and-2018>

¹⁵ “Serbia: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard,” World Health Organization (World Health Organization), available at <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/rs> [accessed on 6 November 2020]

¹⁶ Save the Children, “Protection beyond reach: State of play of refugee and migrant children’s rights in Europe,” (2020) https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18172/pdf/report_5_years_migration_1.pdf, 9.

¹⁷ Gard, O, (2020), “COVID-19 and Refugees in Serbia: Assessing the Challenges Faced by Refugees and the NGOs that Work to Support Them,” available at <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/07/covid-19-and>

¹⁸ “UNHCR Serbia Special Weekly Update 23-29 March 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74979>

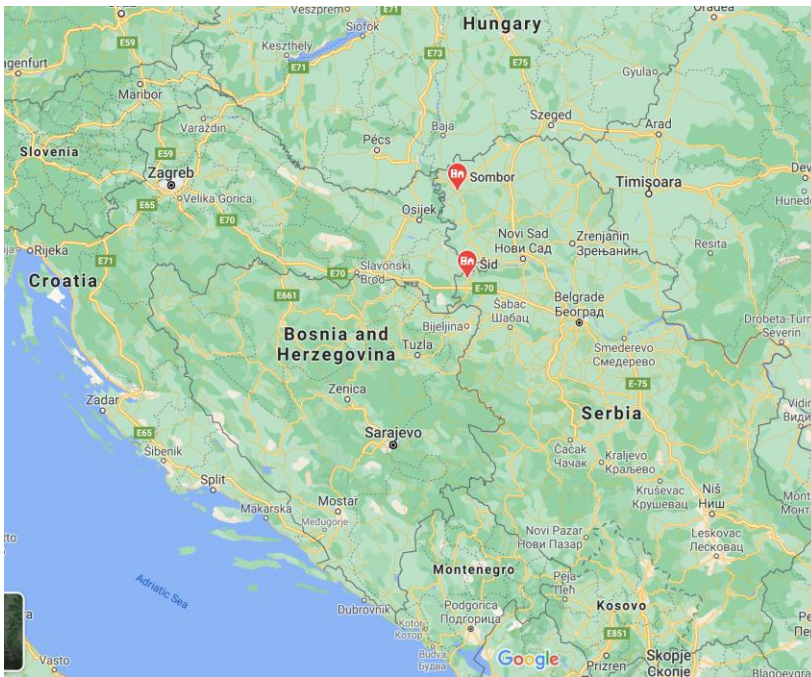
¹⁹ “Migrants, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons,” Right to Education Initiative, available at <https://www.right-to-education.org/migrants-refugees-IDP>

²⁰ Save the Children, “Protection beyond reach: State of play of refugee and migrant children’s rights in Europe,” (2020) available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18172/pdf/report_5_years_migration_1.pdf, 10.

²¹ “Transportation of children to primary schools in Serbia,” International Organization for Migration, available at <https://serbia.iom.int/node/336>

²² “Serbia Update September 2020,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/79389>

²³ “Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children,” Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/humanitarian-work/69/2020/09/17/empowerment-of-refugee-women-and-children.html>



Source: Google Maps

The geographical position of both camps plays an important role in terms of the number of people they host. For instance, currently, Hungary only allows five people per day to cross the border. While the RTC in Sombor only hosts male adults and male children who are related (the adults are either their fathers or uncles), Šid is a family centre hosting men, women and children. The amount of time that people spend in Šid and Sombor varies considerably depending on the possibilities of crossing into other countries, but mostly does not exceed four months.

The program's objective—which targets women and children refugees living in Šid and Sombor—is to provide support and help build life skills, and accompany them in their transition from one place to another. In particular, the work with children includes non-formal education (e.g., English, geography) and workshops through which they can narrate stories of their migration experiences. The children (currently around 90) aged 4-16 years, come mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran, as well as (in smaller numbers) from Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Algeria, Somalia, India, Morocco, Egypt, and Yemen.

The EHO team is composed of a psychologist working with women and three teachers (pedagogues) working with children in Šid, and one teacher working with children in Sombor. The

program coordinator, Vedrana Bjelajac,²⁴ is an education expert who has been involved in the work of the organization since 2013 and also works on another EHO project with street children.²⁵

3.1. Objectives of the Program

The main objectives of EHO's program "Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children" are to provide these target groups living in the Šid and Sombor camps with opportunities to build life skills and develop awareness to prepare for their future, including the next steps in the migratory journey. In particular, the activities focus on:

1. Empowering women through psychological support and through enhancing their working skills
2. Empowering children by addressing the tensions arising from the migratory experience and by providing them with support in education and creative expression.

3.2. Strategies

As mentioned in Section 2, EHO's program, "Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children," targets women and children in Šid and male children in Sombor.

Educational work with children

In Šid, children attend regular local schools, thanks to the social inclusion program that EHO ran in previous years in collaboration with the local teachers and government (see Section 1). This program was not possible in Sombor due to opposition from local parents. As a result, differences are reflected in the educational activities targeting children in the two centres: in Šid, they focus on homework, as well as on workshops on different subjects, while in Sombor they are structured more as informal schooling. Educational activities include English, mathematics and geography classes, as well as a focus on journeys through cities that they visited during migration, and cities they plan to go. Drawing is also an important part of children's activities, as well as acting and other creative workshops, which are led by professional educational experts.

²⁴ "Vedrana Bjelajac," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/project-coordinators/88/2020/09/17/vedrana-bjelajac.html>

²⁵ "Field Work With Children Involved in Life and / or Work on Street," Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, available at <https://ehons.org/en/civil-society/65/2020/09/17/field-work-with-children-involved-in-life-and--or-work-on-street.html>



Source: EHO

Practical activities with women in Šid include making objects such as candles for the new year or scarfs for the winter. A female professional psychologist leads them. Both educational activities and workshops with children and women transcend their more obvious purpose in that they are also intended as an opportunity for participants to share their stories (if they wish to do so). They also enable children and women to develop awareness on their past experiences, current situation and future plans. Conversations are held in groups and often start with the questions: “Who am I? What do I want to do? Where do I want to go?” Conversations mostly take place in English. In every group of women or children, one or two can speak the language and translate for the others.

Here is a personal story in the words of one of the children participating in EHO’s program:

“I am 12 years’ old. I grow up with 5 sisters and 3 brothers. I am from Syria and came in Serbia through Albania. My dream is to go to Germany. I’m very happy and like the camp in Sombor. My best friend is also with me here in Sombor. Before all this situation related with migration, in Syria I went to school in the 4th grade, but I left school and I miss school, school misses me a lot. My wishes are to back to school and continue my learning. Because of that I like to go in Safe Corner at the RTCRs in Sombor and work with a teacher. At the Safe Corner me and other children have opportunity to learn math, language English, Serbia. Also we can play there and talked with teacher about our dreams. My dream is to become football player, because I like sport and football a lot.”

The teachers and psychologist leading these activities are trained to take the aspect of participation and sharing of personal experiences into account—one of the requirements is, they can demonstrate particular empathy and understanding of a wide range of possible stories that

children and women might share. The planning for monthly activities is a result of the outcomes of these conversations, i.e. focusing either on specific themes or on plans that came up in the participants' contributions.

3.3. The role of faith

The majority of children and women who take part in the program are Muslim. Faith is not explicitly a key focus (no religious texts are used), and the program does not offer direct spiritual support. However, EHO staff members are deeply aware of differences and requirements connected to religious beliefs and practices, for example, Ramadan, regular dietary requirements etc. In the words of Vedrana, the program coordinator:

We don't want to tell them "in Serbia we do like this, we respect this..." no, it is important to respect and understand each other and not have walls between us. [...] It's important to have good communication. If we don't have that we can't work. We need our beneficiaries to know that we respect them like human beings. That's the most important thing in our work.

While being inspired by Christian values, the work of EHO—be it with migrants and children, elderly, Roma or other communities—in general, is centred around the belief that every human being has equal rights and dignity and should be respected regardless of their religious affiliation.

3.4. Partnerships

The Commissariat is the authority in charge of managing Serbian RTCs in which the program is implemented. The Commissariat and EHO have a long-standing collaboration, since the beginning of the so-called “migration crisis” in 2015. ELCA is an established partner of EHO and is the only donor (since its inception) which supports the program “Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children.” Their main concern is to make sure that educational and psychosocial assistance is provided to people on the move, and children in particular, no matter what the circumstances are. Every month, five personal stories are collected, and some of them are shared with the donor organization as part of the documentation about the program.

3.5. Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has impacted the program in the following ways:

- All staff and people hosted in the centres have to wear masks, including children above age 6. When there is a positive case (or suspected) in the centre, the person is placed in isolation and a doctor checks on their situation regularly. During such situations, teachers have shorter working hours and meet with a smaller group of children. For example, this applies when a family arrives through Bosnia and is awaiting the result of the test.

- During the summer, workshops were conducted outdoors. Now, the Commissariat has identified rooms indoors where small groups of women and children (maximum of only five people) can meet and work with the EHO staff, always wearing masks (including children).
- Since schools are closed, children in Šid are given homework from their schoolteachers and supported by EHO staff.
- Some of the women's activities have been COVID-19-related, for example, making soaps and masks. The Commissariat has identified activities such as these as a "good practice example," featuring them on their official website.²⁶

4. Challenges and lessons learned

In EHO's experience, advocacy activities are only possible at the local level and for specific projects. For instance, they are part of a program (in collaboration with other partners) involving street children in Novi Sad. However, advocacy is not part of the "Empowerment of Refugee Women and Children" program, since it does not reflect the donor's priorities.

The partnership with the Commissariat has become almost exclusive following the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, this means that there is a relationship of trust between the Commissariat and the EHO, which allows migrants and refugees to be supported even in these difficult conditions. On the other hand, since the Commissariat currently only collaborates with very few numbers of organizations, especially NGOs, it has been criticised as possibly lacking transparency about the situation in the centres.²⁷

Initially, the program was to be implemented in Sombor and Subotica. However, the Commissariat changed the distribution of migrants and refugees in the different centres following the onset of the COVID-19 crisis so that now there are only male adults in Subotica. This adjustment meant that EHO had to alter their plans and implement the program in Šid and Sombor instead.

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²⁶ http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-news-more.php?id_category=4&id=1204

²⁷ "COVID-19 and Refugees in Serbia: Assessing the Challenges Faced by Refugees and the NGOs That Work to Support Them," Oxford Law Faculty, available at <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/07/covid-19-and>