

Statement on Children and the Global Compact for Migration on behalf of 42 members of the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs

Co-Facilitators,

Bulgaria has the honour of delivering this statement on behalf of 42¹ members of the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs.

Let me start with a brief reflection: we are at a critical juncture in the negotiation process. The time has come now to build bridges across regions, to be pragmatic and forward-looking, and to demonstrate that our commitment to the rights of children is real – in political and operational terms.

The Global Compact for Migration is meant to lay the groundwork for turning the words of the New York Declaration from paper to practice; from intent to action, from pilot to scale. Thanks to the Co-Facilitators, we have in front of us a detailed ‘operating manual’ showing us how to accelerate solutions and good practices that unlock the talent and potential of migrant children, a vulnerable group in our societies.

When it comes to children – it’s not words on paper that matter. Children do not care if our commitments are in Objective 7 or 13, in the Preamble or the follow-up arrangements. What children expect from us is the following:

- more effective protection from ruthless smugglers or traffickers
- a continuum of care and protection as they cross countries and regions
- robust and comprehensive procedures to identify, refer, care for and protect them if they are alone, without parents
- border police, consular authorities, immigration officers, guardians and social workers that are trained and empowered to protect their rights

¹ Andorra; Antigua and Barbuda; Armenia; Belarus; Benin; Bulgaria; Chile; Croatia; Ecuador; Ethiopia; Egypt; Estonia; Ghana; Guatemala; Guyana; Honduras; India; Indonesia; Ireland; Jamaica; Japan; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Kenya; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Lesotho; Malta; Mexico; Nigeria; Pakistan; Panama; Peru; Romania; Senegal South Africa; Trinidad and Tobago; Tunisia; Turkey; United Arab Emirates; Uganda; Uruguay

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- access to safe migration options, including fast and flexible family reunification pathways, family visas or child-sensitive labour migration schemes
- tailored pathways that offer secure status and a life outside the shadows for children in irregular situations
- safe access to schools, hospitals or police stations, without fear of detection or deportation
- access to identity documents and nationality for every child, starting at birth
- support to help them and their families integrate – in host countries or back home after return - including training and skills; language classes; access to early childhood education; and psychosocial support.

The solutions are right here in front of us: in objective 4, measures to register births, prevent statelessness and provide effective access to basic services; in objective 5, measures to remove barriers to family reunification; in objective 9, measures to strengthen cross-border cooperation to protect children from smugglers; in objective 13, actionable commitments to move towards ending child immigration detention; in objective 15, measures to address practical barriers - such as identification requirements, data sharing or immigration enforcement practices - that keep children away from education, healthcare or justice. And, of course, in objective 7: measures to address acute protection needs, especially for unaccompanied and separated children, AND offer pathways out of irregular status. There simply is no better protection for a child than secure status, a loving family and a welcoming community.

Let me now turn briefly to the main topics of this round. Regarding returns, we welcome the reference in objective 21 (g) to the best interests of the child, but would like the Compact to clearly state that children should *only* be returned when this has been determined to be in their best interests. Child-sensitive and well-managed, returns *can* and *should* provide a sustainable solution for children and families. Reintegration measures need to be more tailored to

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children's needs and ensure access to documentation, quality education and training, language support, healthcare and protection. The return and reintegration of children is a shared responsibility and, we believe, common guidelines on the return and reintegration of children could be a useful tool to promote bilateral and regional cooperation and clarify accountabilities between returning and receiving States.

Regarding implementation, follow-up and review, any capacity building mechanism created to implement the GCM should also prioritize investments to strengthen national and cross-border child protection, to train law enforcement agents, frontline workers and consular officers in child rights and child-sensitive procedures, and to develop the capacities of local authorities, schools and health systems to integrate and support migrant children. Furthermore, children and young people need to be actively involved in the Compact's implementation. Children are not the object of migration policies – they are subjects. And as States, we need their energy, ideas and unique experiences.

Co-Facilitators,

Let us not miss the historic chance that the Compact represents for a whole generation of migrant children and young people. Let us stay true to the bold vision of the 2030 Agenda and the New York Declaration. Let us put aside short-term domestic concerns. *All* of the actions proposed in the current draft are *doable*. Most of the solutions *already exist*. Many national and local authorities already *implement* what is being proposed. The Group of Friends of Children will continue to work with all delegations in the room to achieve the best possible outcome – *for* children and *for* our shared future.